



## I Will Relate to You

An artistic ode to the general stores that sustained a family and the unlikely Jewish communities of northern Ontario

Toronto-based artist Meichen Waxer has been recuperating a relationship to the place where her family traces its roots in this country—the small Jewish community of Kirkland Lake located 600 kilometres from here. After finding journals written by her late grandmother, she has been uncovering the little known story of how, beginning in the early 20th century, Jewish immigrants settled in pockets across northern Ontario and Quebec. They arrived fleeing eastern Europe and the Russian Pale of Settlement where Jews faced increasing restrictions on their livelihoods, legal discrimination, and persistent pogrom attacks.

Written retrospectively with lively descriptions, Jessie Waxer's journals relay her own beloved grandmother Betsy's accounts of the Jewish community in the Temiskaming region. By the time Betsy and her daughters arrived in the area from Romania in 1907, her husband and son (who had set out years earlier) had tragically drowned in a canoeing accident. For the widowed newcomer, opening a general store with modest start-up needs enabled her family to sustain itself. Perkus Limited, in turn, became central to the northern communities' existence.

This installation came together much like the original store itself: pulling in friends, repurposing and borrowing objects that relate to provisional life in the north. Waxer found a description in her Bubbie's journals of old clothes stuffed under the shop's floorboards as insulation. In response, the artist creates a landscape beneath the floorboards composed of the kind of garments once found at the Jewish-run stores, from sports wear to formal suits. Jessie describes preparations for a wedding celebration: "Like bright butterflies, women with covered dishes [...] hovered above the tables seeking the most advantageous spot for their treasured recipes." The artist invited friends from her Jewish community to embroider colourful butterflies onto the sort of canvas sold at Perkus' alongside tools, corned beef, and canoes.

**The Jewish Community** around Kirkland Lake

In 1902, Simon Henerofsky, David Korman, Samuel Levy, and Aaron Gurevitch left Montreal and established themselves in an area that would become Krugerdorf. Within several years, they constructed a synagogue and school house, shared with German-Prussian immigrants. By 1912, most Jews followed mining rushes in surrounding townships, including Kirkland Lake. The region experienced significant population growth through the 1920s and 30s. At the community's height in 1939, there were roughly 125 Jewish families in nearby Kirkland Lake with a robust Jewish social and organizational network. Circumstances changed during the Second World War. Many left for military service or war-related jobs in the south. Younger members of the Jewish communities moved to larger city centres to pursue higher education and careers, with parents often trailing along. By the 1960s, northern Jewish life had significantly diminished from its pre-war prominence. A decade later, buildings that once housed synagogues were sold, with the contents donated to Jewish institutions in the south.



## Creating Connection, **Continuing Tradition**

As the communities grew, Jewish spiritual and cultural life in the north flourished. Despite great distances, communities shared resources and stayed connected. The Jews of Kirkland Lake travelled to Englehart for High Holiday services or created makeshift spaces in back rooms of local businesses, before establishing their own synagogue in 1929. Children attended Hebrew afternoon schools. Local chapters of B'nai Brith, Hadassah, and the Young Judaea youth group were established across the north. Regional conventions created a strong feeling of cohesion, bringing the disparate pockets of Jews together.



Dubinsky family seder, Kirkland Lake, 21 April 1932. Ontario Jewish Archives, item 2521

"The 'north' was a place of my imagination"

Until first visiting in her 30s and exploring her lineage, Waxer had little conception of the remote place where her grandmother and father grew up. Thanks to community photographer Eddie Duke, Waxer gained a picture of the Kirkland Lake Jewish community and her own family history. Her great-great-grandmother appears here posed before a formal painted backdrop of the era. To honour both what she has gleaned from Duke's photos and what can never be recaptured, Waxer commissioned local scenic painter, Paul Boddum, to recreate the part of the backdrop visible in this photo. The absence and presence of her ancestor's community is simultaneously represented.



Dubinsky family with Betsy Perkus (second from the right in the first row), Kirkland Lake, ca. 1930 Ontario Jewish Archives, item 2383. Photo by Eddie Duke

The subterranean textiles merge with family photos—a reminder that despite their isolation, hardships and loss, there was closeness born out of adversity and proximity. There was new love and life, outdoor adventures and simple pleasures before the community experienced the inevitable emptying out for big cities. The exhibition title truncates Jessie's dedication to her descendants: "I will relate to you as it was told to me." The excerpted words highlight how we make meaning out of our closest relations, our personal and collective histories, our inherited memories, and the places we call home.



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April 25 - September 23, 2024

vitch with family, Krugerdorf, ca. 1912. Ontario Jewish Archives, item 921.

## Keeping Kirkland Lake in Business

General, clothing and hardware stores, tailors and theatres lined main streets across the north. At the Jewish community's peak in Kirkland Lake, roughly one third of all stores were Jewish-owned, enabling the Jewish community to grow and provide essential merchandise to locals. Started by Waxer's great-great grandmother, Perkus Limited carried clothing, hardware, groceries and sporting goods, including canoes. "Everything to fulfil the inner and outer needs of men was packed into that store," writes the artist's grandmother. Perkus expanded to Kirkland Lake, Kapuskasing, and Iroquois Falls.



"OFF THE KITCHENS WERE LARGE PANTRIES WITH ICE BOXES AND CUPBOARDS, IN WHICH was stored dishes and food that changes WITH THE SEASONS AND JEWISH FESTIVALS."

~ JESSIE'S JOURNALS



Mont engagement party at Adath Israel Congregation, Kirkland Lake, between 1930 and 1935. Ontario Jewish Archives, item 843. Photo by Eddie Duke.







Bessie and Faige (Fanny), Russia, [189-?]. Ontario Jewish Archives, item 1609.

hoto courtesy of the Waxer fami

"THE JEWISH NEW YEAR WAS A TIME FOR THE YEARLY VISIT TO THE GRAVES OF LOVED ONES. IT WAS EASIER IN THE FALL. THE GROUND AT KRUGERDORF WOULD BE FIRM UNDERFOOT." ~ JESSIE'S JOURNALS

The first Jewish cemetery was established in 1904 following the accidental deaths of three members of the artist's family. Today, the Krugerdorf Cemetery is one of the last active remnants of the Jewish communities of northeastern Ontario.



**Curatorial Team:** Donna Bernardo-Ceriz, Na'ama Freeman, Evelyn Tauben

**Installation & Fabrication:** Paul Boddum, Sal Lovink McKinnell, David Waldman

Presented by FENTSTER and the Ontario Jewish Archives with the support of the Kultura Collective

The artist thanks Helen Winkler for loaning the flour hoosier and the many people who supported her research and contributed to creating this installation.





**UJA FEDERATION** | ONTARIO JEWISH ARCHIVES of Greater Toronto | BLANKENSTEIN FAMILY HERITAGE CENTRE

Top image: Kideckel family and staff inside Kideckel Grocery, Ansonville, ca. 1920. Ontario Jewish Archives, item 4740.

J. Perkus & Co. General Merchants, Cochrane, ca. 1910. Ontario Jewish Archives, item 1608.

This exhibition explores lesser known stories of how Jewish

newcomers to this country shaped a sense of community

and maintained their Jewishness after fleeing persecution

of townships in northern Ontario was facilitated by

government initiatives to encourage the settlement of

of the local Indigenous communities. The area in and

around Kirkland Lake is the traditional territory of the

Anishinaabe (Ojibwe and Algonquin) and Cree Nations.

The construction of the railroad and roadways, the mining,

agriculture and forestry industries, and the influx of settlers

Jewish experience through art and the archives, we are also

had a significant impact on Indigenous land rights in the

region. Connected to our ongoing work of exploring the

committed to honouring and understanding the stories,

culture and knowledge of the diverse First Nations, Inuit

and Metis peoples of Turtle Island.

the region as part of a broader strategy of displacement

in eastern Europe. We acknowledge that the establishment

Acknowledging

Indigenous Lands

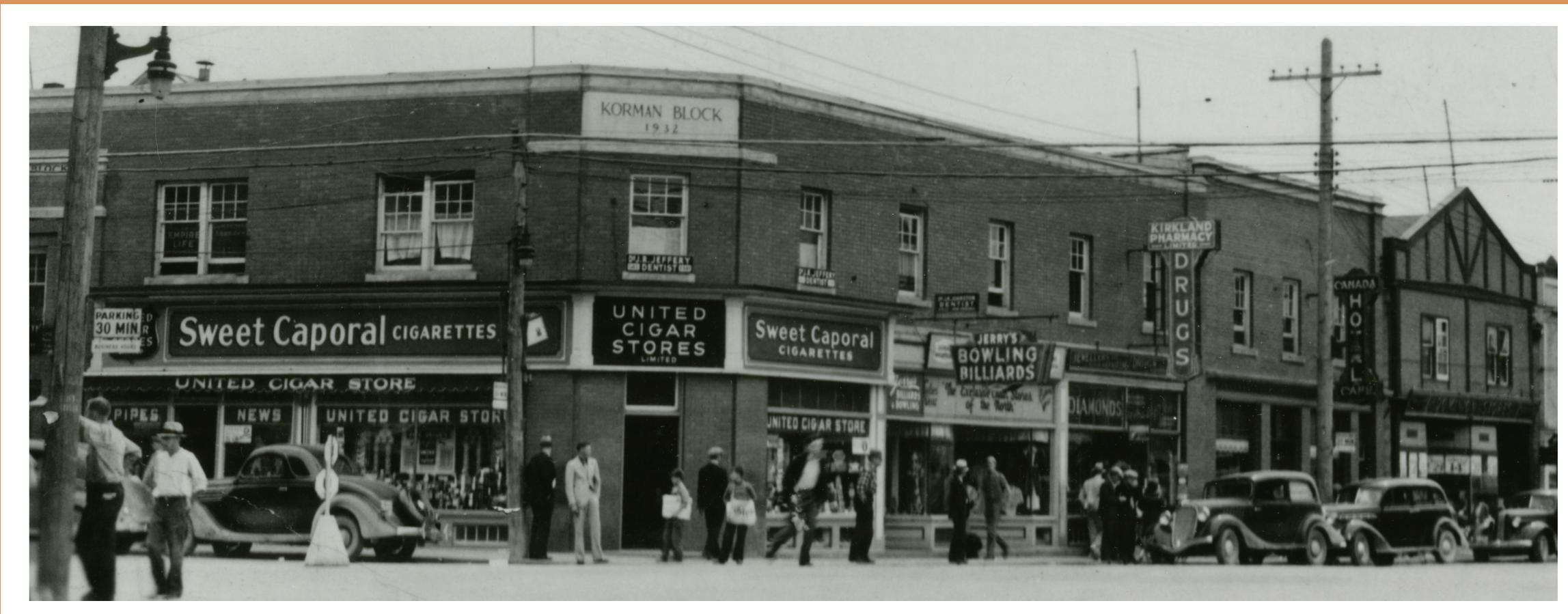
## Echlaced habe

B'nai B'rith sponsored Free Swimming Bus, Kirkland Lake, 1944. Ontario Jewish Archives, fonds 69, file 12.

Northern Chevra Kadisha Cemetery, Krugerdorf, 2022. Photo by Meichen Waxer.

"SOMEONE - IT MAY HAVE BEEN THE SHOICHET - SAID: THERE ARE CERTAIN NEEDS THAT MUST BE MET IN THIS COMMUNITY IF WE ARE TO GROW. THEY ARE VERY BASIC - WE NEED A BUTCHER, A BAKER, A HARDWARE STORE"

~ JESSIE'S JOURNALS



Korman Block, Government Road, Kirkland Lake, ca. 1932. Ontario Jewish Archives, item 930.