



Modest but Mighty

PJ Library in Small Communities

BY **MARY HORROCKS**

PJ LIBRARY PROGRAM OFFICER

THE WIND BLOWS RIPPLES ACROSS THE HALIFAX HARBOUR

as I look out from Pier 21. Jewish immigrants once sailed here in droves from Eastern and Central Europe. They arrived year-round, as the water's so deep it never freezes over. While some of those arriving would travel on west to Montreal, Toronto, Calgary, and Vancouver or south to the States, others remained in Nova Scotia. In more recent decades, Jewish immigrants have come from former Soviet Union countries, the Middle East, and North Africa via the less scenic route through Halifax Stanfield International Airport.

This diverse Jewish population surprises many. In my role at PJ Library I have the privilege of supporting modest but mighty Jewish towns. I wish I had a nickel for every time someone incredulously exclaims, "There are Jews in Halifax?" Yes! And in Omaha, Tulsa, Greenville, Grand Rapids, and beyond. I hope this issue of PROOF is being read at kitchen tables in each of these vibrant cities right now.

In fact, Jews have been in Halifax since 1750, and today the Jewish population is estimated at 1,500. Over the past ten years alone, roughly 400 Russian-born Jews have relocated from Israel to Nova Scotia with the help of a campaign by the Atlantic Jewish Council. This population might make different choices than other strands of the Atlantic Jewish community – they may choose the Russian immersion program for their kids instead of Hebrew school each Tuesday evening – but their desire to raise young Jewish families is just as real and pressing as that of Canadian-born parents. Thankfully, PJ Library is here.

It's February, and I'm in town to attend a PJ Library engagement event, a parents-only program at the Clay Café in Halifax's North End. Many of the participants have grown friendly over the course of the event series, but this is the first program without their children playing underfoot. There's a mix of Hebrew, Russian, and English heard at each table, where the parents sit hunched over ceramic Kiddush cups, plates, and trivets. Some paint flowers, geometric shapes, or Stars of David. Others decorate their Shabbat pottery with the names of their children. Each piece is a reflection of this diverse Jewish group gathered together on a windy night in Nova Scotia.

The conversation flows through jobs, politics, whiskey, and recipes.

A mom describes how her young child brings PJ Library books to a secular preschool classroom, wanting to share Jewish holiday stories with classmates. Some discuss the happenings at their synagogue. Others reminisce about a shared old neighborhood in Israel. Two moms describe scouring Pinterest for Hanukkah decorating ideas that will allay kids' Christmas tree envy – a challenge they didn't have in Israel.

Like the Halifax Harbour, PJ Library's small communities may look unassuming from a macro-view of North America. But beneath the surface, there's a different story unfolding: In a small community in the Pacific Northwest, PJ Library is a pipeline bringing new energy to faded Jewish communal stalwarts. In a tiny community in the Rust Belt, PJ Library shines brightly even after the nearest synagogue has faded away. PJ Library glows at a pajama party in a home furnishings store in Dayton, OH. A picnic lunch on a working farm in Meridian, ID. A *Tu B'Shevat* scavenger hunt at a mall in Knoxville, TN. A home-hosted Shabbat dinner in Athens, GA.

And PJ Library thrives among parents sitting at the Clay Café with rolled up sleeves, painting a platter for next Friday's challah. Beneath the rippling surface, beneath the unassuming spot on the map, the water runs wonderfully, startlingly deep.