



**March 14, 2010**

**It would be impossible to relate every accomplishment and activity in which Lillian Freiman (1885-1940) was involved. I will therefore attempt to highlight some of her major achievements and share some of the stories. She was a “doer” and her forte, was oral rather than written communication. The text left behind by Lillian Freiman was a life rather than a document.**

**“Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all”. This verse from Proverbs fittingly describes Lillian Freiman. She possessed a quality that our sages thought the most precious in the world, goodness of heart. She loved all her fellowmen, regardless of race, creed or colour, but especially the unfortunate who were distressed and in need of help.**

**Born to Pauline Reich and Moses Bilsky in 1885 in Mattawa, the fifth of eleven children, she was brought up in a religious home constantly full of people -- relatives, friends, newly arrived immigrants, or just those who needed food and shelter. While still a very young woman she organized the Hebrew Benevolent Society in Ottawa and personally made sure that the more fortunate provided for the less fortunate.**

**In 1903 Lillian met and married Archibald Jacob Freiman, who had come to Ottawa from Hamilton to open a house furnishing store on Rideau St. His business thrived and, together their two names soon became synonymous with Zionism and other important philanthropic causes.**

**In 1913, the year before the outbreak of World War 1, the family moved to 149 Somerset Street. Lillian herself was 28; my mother Dorothy was 7, Lawrence 4 and Queene a small baby. The imposing red brick house**

had been built in the late 1800's by one of Ottawa's lumber barons. It was magnificent and Lillian Freiman furnished it with love and warmth. It was here that she received all her committees and "clients" and conducted her daily work. It was in effect a social work clinic. Sir Wilfrid Laurier, then Prime Minister, lived around the corner and always tipped his silk hat and bowed to Mrs. Freiman when he took his daily walk. The house is now the Ottawa Army Officers Mess .

There was a second residence, much more modest, in Britannia, at the time a considerable excursion from the centre of Ottawa. During the summer the whole family piled into the limousine style car for a few weeks stay with my grandfather commuting on the weekends. This drive took the better part of a morning or afternoon. Lawrence Freiman, in his book, described Britannia in retrospect as "a combination of Coney Island, Capri and the Lido, all wrapped into one exciting entertainment package".

In latter years their summer home, Mitzvah, was the house at Meech Lake, later to be the birthplace of the Meech Lake Accord.

Motherhood did not hinder my grandmother's activities. During the war years she continued her work with the Juvenile Court, organized the Red Cross and the Great War Veterans Association, the predecessor of the Canadian Legion , convened a committee to supply milk for Belgian babies, and ensured protection for the sixty or so rag pickers of the city providing them with pushcarts, horses and licences. There is a story, about a man known as "Reb" Merle, although he was certainly no rabbi. He was a small man with a straggly greying beard, a crumpled black hat and a long worn black coat. He sat on the seat of his cart pulled by a horse almost as old and tired as himself. Lillian Freiman's service to Reb Merle was to provide him with a new horse each time one expired. This service was required frequently as Reb Merle apparently asked her to only purchase old horses as they were less expensive to maintain.

Another of her "cases" was that of a small anemic-looking man who wept that his wife, an extremely large woman beat him unmercifully. He showed Lillian Freiman his great black and blue bruises. The biggest policeman on the force was Bill Cowan, a 300 pound 6 foot 5 Irishman. Mrs. Freiman instructed the chauffeur to drive her and the

little man to the corner of Rideau and Sussex Streets where Officer Cowan was directing traffic. She explained the situation to the officer and invited him to join her in the car. They drove to the large lady's house where Officer Cowan warned her that if she ever beat up the little man again, the same fate would befall her. He also warned her that if she repeated the offense he would arrest her for assault and battery. The matter was settled.

According to Lawrence Freiman, one of his mother's most dramatic cases involved three young men who were enemy army deserters and had been interned in Canada since early in the First World War. She received a telephone call stating that these men were being returned to their country on a ship sailing from Quebec City at midnight. The caller appealed to Lillian Freiman to get them off the ship as they would be executed for desertion as soon as they returned to their country of origin.

Mrs. Freiman left for Quebec City on the 3 o'clock train. She was not well at the time but was adamant in her resolve. Reaching the dock about 11 p.m., and wearing her Great War Veterans' Badge, the soldier on duty recognized her as the only woman in Canada at that time who wore the badge. He called the senior ranking officer who informed Mrs. Freiman that if she could obtain an order from the Federal Minister of Justice the three men would be taken off the ship. By then it was 11:15 p.m.

Lillian Freiman was undaunted – she telephoned the Minister and all but threatened him by saying that if the men were not released she would hold the Canadian Government accountable for murder. She of course offered to accept all financial responsibility and promised to find them suitable employment. Minutes later the astonished men were removed from the ship and they accompanied her to catch the midnight train to Ottawa and 149 Somerset St.

Another story involved a very distraught woman who appeared at the door of Somerset St. She explained that her son had been sentenced to death for a murder he committed in the process of a robbery. The mother begged for help. Sure enough with her connections with the Justice Department, Lillian Freiman got the sentence commuted to life imprisonment. When she happily reported back to the mother, the

latter's question was ,” I have one more favour Mrs. Freiman, when will you get him out of jail?”

In 1917 the flu epidemic struck Ottawa with devastating force. Lillian Freiman, then 32 years old, was asked by the mayor to organize the immense effort needed to respond to the crisis. It was Friday night so she walked to City Hall and for the next five weeks virtually lived in an office there. She supervised 1500 volunteers and coordinated with the City Medical Officer and the media all the emergency services of the city. She in effect established a centralized information bank for the medical staff whereby volunteers and patients were registered and daily records were completed. Through the newspapers she launched a campaign disseminating not only progress reports but also information designed to help prevent the spread of the influenza. This innovative approach previewed our modern social service organizations. It was a monumental task for which she received national attention.

Zionism was always in her blood. She attended her first Convention as a delegate in 1903 at the age of 18. From then on she and her husband were instrumental in all Zionist endeavours until 1919 when A. J. Freiman was elected President of the Zionist Organization of Canada. At that time Lillian Freiman was asked to coordinate all women's groups into a national federation and to organize chapters throughout the country. As a result she was elected President of the Dominion Hadassah Organization.

At this time an urgent appeal for assistance came from the war-racked Jews in Palestine. Hadassah immediately organized the “Helping Hand Fund”. Lillian Freiman toured Canada visiting every centre where the Jewish population was sufficient to warrant an appeal. It was the greatest fundraising drive ever mounted by Canadian Jewry and set a new standard for charitable giving. The donors included many prominent Canadians, such as the Prime Minister and members of his cabinet.

Within one year of her presidency Hadassah was the strongest and best-led national organization on the Canadian Jewish scene. By 1925 it had a membership of 4,500 women in 68 chapters across the country.

**In the summer of 1920 reports were received by Canadian Jewry of the destitute condition of Jewish children of the Ukraine. 137,000 children in the area had been orphaned by war and were living in the villages and countryside with no means of obtaining food or shelter. Who better to raise awareness and funds than Lillian Freiman?**

**As National President of the Jewish War Orphans Committee of Canada, she, with her husband as Chairman of the Executive Committee, invited Mrs. Arthur Meighen, wife of the Prime Minister of Canada, to be Honorary President. Another cross country tour provided both money and housing for the soon to arrive immigrants. Every home was personally inspected by Lillian Freiman and Ida Seigler, editor of the Canadian Jewish Chronicle. Unfortunately the Canadian government limited the number of immigrants so the total was only 146. For many years she kept in touch with these children who continued to call her Mama Freiman, including Gladys who became a member of the family in 1921.**

**One of her greatest endeavours was on behalf of the returned soldiers. She was a founder of the Canadian Legion, the successor to the Great War Veterans' Association. Canada's first poppies were made in her home. She chaired the Canadian Legion Poppy Campaign until the year of her death, The Legion made her an honorary life member and as I mentioned previously, she was the only woman to be recognized in this manner.**

**She was always in a hurry and not perfect. I found this document which is a Summons from the Township of Cumberland in 1925 charging her" for driving or causing to be driven a motor car" at a speed over 40 miles an hour in 1925.**

**She was for ever crossing boundaries that existed between Jews and other ethnic groups. She raised funds for the Institut Jeanne d'Arc helping the sisters who had lost their convent in France during the war, and she was active in the Armenian and Polish relief work of the Ottawa Women's Canadian Club. She was also President of the Ottawa Girl Guides Association, President of the Ottawa Day Nursery, vice President of the Ottawa Branch of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, President of the Ladies Auxiliary of the Perley Home for the Incurables.– the list goes on.**

**But Zionism and Hadassah remained her true loves competing for attention even with her beloved family. Under her tutelage Hadassah in the early 1920's raised funds for the Jewish National Fund, as well as the Hebrew University whose opening was celebrated with a large reception of 400 in the Freiman home.**

**Under Lillian Freiman's initiative Hadassah Canada made a unique contribution to the establishment and maintenance of the first agricultural school for women founded in 1923 by Hanna Maisel on the kibbutz of Nahalal. Hanna Maissel believed that women must contribute to the Zionist cause in addition to their household responsibilities. Financing for the school was therefore made available for training pioneer women in this field. By giving women a chance to learn an important agricultural profession, the school also encouraged independence and enabled its graduates to take the first step towards equality in what was then a male oriented society. In fact, most of the founders of the Women's Workers Movement in Israel were graduates of Nahalal. In 1924 Hadassah delegates at the Canadian National Convention voted to call the school itself after my grandmother. Although she declined, a building was named for her. In addition, a kibbutz carries her name, Havatzelet Hasharon (Lily of Sharon). The neighbouring settlement of Bitan Aharon is named after A.J. Freiman, I visited both small towns last summer with my son and oldest grandson. The town councils welcomed us graciously and we heard many stories of the early days as most were children of the original settlers**

**In 1927 my grandparents accompanied by my mother visited Palestine for the first time. They travelled extensively and were honoured with a banquet at Nahalal. The students and staff were effusive in greeting "The Mother of the School" as they affectionately called Lillian Freiman. She planted the first fruit trees and looked over the first cows. She also promised white leghorn chickens to be sent to Nahalal from the Canadian Experimental Farm in Ottawa, a promise fulfilled immediately on her return**

**Again Lillian Freiman had travelled across Canada, this time with her daughter, Dorothy. The excitement and joy of the Jewish population especially in the small mid-western towns was unbelievable. Each stop was the occasion for a holiday; she was an old friend to everyone. The**

1930 publication “Women of Canada” aptly called her “Mother of the Jewish People of Canada”.

Canadian Hadassah dedicated the year of 1935 to Lillian Freiman as a tribute on her fiftieth birthday. By then her health was failing badly. Hadassah commemorated the occasion of by creating a fund of \$50,000 for their special projects in Palestine.

The Salvation Army expressed their appreciation for her support of their work over the years by donating the services of their band for this festive occasion. The huge white and blue birthday cake was decorated with golden shields on which were inscribed the names of the Hadassah Chapters contributing to the Fund. The first tier held 50 golden candles, each representing \$1,000.

The birthday celebrations did not end with dinner. The following day, Monday, June 3, Canada’s Jewish war dead were remembered by more than 500 members of Hadassah in the Peace Tower. Lillian Freiman laid a wreath of maple leaves and poppies in the form of a Mogen David on the Altar of Sacrifice in the Memorial Chamber. Boy Scouts and Girl Guides formed the Guard of Honour.

In 1934 His Majesty, King George V had conferred on Lillian Freiman the rank and decoration of the Order of the British Empire for “community work, service to returned soldiers, and leadership in Jewish charitable organizations”. She was the first Jew in Canada to receive the coveted O.B.E.

As the 1930’s drew to a close and the clouds of Nazism darkened the skies, Lillian Freiman’s health deteriorated drastically. However she was still at the helm and through her persuasiveness Haddasah became the sole agency in Canada to champion the cause of Youth Aliyah to help the children of Germany.

June 2, 1939 was my grandmother’s 54<sup>th</sup> birthday. The family gathered at the foot of the Peace Tower for a half hour carillon concert of Jewish music in her honour when many of her favourite Hebrew and Yiddish folk songs were played.

**1939 and war. Again Lillian Freiman ensured that Hadassah worked in cooperation with the Red Cross, raising funds for badly needed blankets and ambulances and a 30 bed hospital in England for Canadian soldiers. They also funded the construction of and the equipment for a base hospital in Nahalal for allied forces in the Near East.**

**Her life was coming to an end, but she had bequeathed her love for Hadassah and Zionism to her children. Uncle Lawrence served as President of the Zionist Organization of Canada from 1958 to 1962; Audrey Freiman was President of the Ottawa Council Of Hadassah, Aunt Queene was President in Toronto. My mother served several terms as National Vice President.**

**On the Sabbath, November 2, 1940, Lillian Freiman died at the age of 55. Mourners including the Prime Minister and representatives of every organization which she had served crowded the King Edward St. Synagogue. They had come to pay tribute to the woman , described by her husband , as “blessed with the spirit of service”.**

**Tributes poured in. The Canadian Legion unveiled a tablet in her memory in Trafalgar House; in St. Barnabas Anglican Church in Ottawa a brass plate bearing her name adorns a pew; the students of Nahalal planted the Lillian Freiman Grove, and here a beautiful stained glass window was unveiled above the Ark in Adath Jeshurun. The latter was later moved to Beth Shalom.**

**A good and noble woman had passed away. She was remembered by the variety of her interests and the scope of her public services. To all of her many endeavours she gave time, leadership and the benefit of her practical mind and long experience. Of course she was also fortunate in being able to give financial aid and in the early years to help the needy by picking clothes off the rack in the department store. She would choose a warm coat for someone, a blouse or mitts for another -- whatever she felt was needed the most. For the children she always had sweets from the candy counter.**

**A tribute from the Ottawa Citizen described her as one of the few Canadian women who qualified for a high position in the history of our nation. Modern and ahead of her time she was still a pious woman in**

**the old fashioned sense. She was characterized by simplicity, modesty and whole heartedness in her work, without a trace of self interest.**

**The noted Canadian poet A.M. Klein wrote in memoriam:**

**Princess of Israel, faring hence  
To brighter palaces, to shores  
More pleasant than on earth were yours  
To lands of greater opulence.**

**He finishes his poem with the words:**

**Only the light of these yours days  
Only the warmth of these your deeds  
Eternal sunshine from them speeds  
About them sunshine ever plays**