

## Coast to Coast

# Arab-Jewish dialogue group hopes to branch out

BY MYRON LOVE

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**WINNIPEG** — It began as a friendship between longtime Winnipeg Jewish community leader Harold Buchwald and Egyptian-born Winnipeg businessman Ab Freig.

"Harold and I were both on the board of the Arthur V. Mauro Centre for Peace and Justice," Freig recalled. "We were talking one day and decided that it might be a good idea to establish a group where Jews and Arabs could get together and begin a dialogue with each other."

Now, after more than three years of quiet dialogue between Jewish and Arab community leaders in Winnipeg, the Arab Jewish Dialogue — one of the last initiatives of the late Harold Buchwald, who died in April 2008 at age 80 — has matured to the point where the group members are ready to go public and entertain invitations to expand their dialogue between Canadian Jews and Arabs to other Canadian communities.

The newly declared Winnipeg chapter held its first public function — by invitation only — on Dec. 14 at Winnipeg's historic Fort Garry Hotel. About 50 to 60 attendees were treated to an overview of the history of European antisemitism by Catherine Chatterley, a postdoctoral fellow in the University of Manitoba's department of history and the director of the Canadian



Ab Freig, left, and Howard Morry, co-chairs of the Arab Jewish Dialogue

*[Myron Love photo]*

Institute for the Study of Antisemitism.

Although not Jewish herself, Chatterley said she was drawn to a study of antisemitism in part because her learning about the Holocaust occurred in a vacuum, and she was driven to study its origins.

In her presentation, she described in words, and in slides illustrating Christian art and sculpture, the evolution of the Christian demonization of "the Jew" through the centuries and, later, the racialization of Jews by 19th-century nationalists.

Among the highlights of her presenta-

tion:

- Jewish moneylenders in Christian Europe were only active in the 12th century. After that, Italians took over the role because it was too dangerous an occupation for Jews to be engaged in.
- While there are semitic languages, there's no such thing as a semitic race or semitic peoples.
- Goebbels, not Hitler, ordered Kristallnacht, much to Hitler's disapproval, because pogroms were for the lowly Slavs, he felt, not Germans.

• The Internet has been the major driving force in a new, worldwide and virulent outgrowth of antisemitism.

• European-style antisemitism is a relatively new phenomenon in the Arab and Muslim world, dating back less than 25 years.

• antisemitism is rebounding in Europe as the impact of the Holocaust wears off.

Chatterley is scheduled to be the first in a series of speakers that the Arab Jewish Dialogue plans to present. "It's important to foster dialogue to create understanding between peoples," Freig said. "If you get to know each other, it's much less likely that you will hate the other."

Mel Lazarek, president of the Jewish National Fund's prairie region (and recently appointed special representative from Manitoba to Israel), who is also a member of the Arab Jewish Dialogue, said the Jewish and Arab members of the group have gotten to know each other and their families very well and have taken several trips together — most recently a visit to Egypt.

"We're hoping that our example will inspire other Canadian Jews and Arabs to get to know each other," said Howard Morry, a past president of the Jewish Federation of Winnipeg and co-chair of the Arab Jewish Dialogue with Freig.

Morry said there has been interest in the Arab Jewish Dialogue from Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver. "We hope to go national some time next year," he added.