CANADA 150: THE JEWISH IMPRINT

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Imagine, if you can, a Canada without Jews.

No bagels. No Leonard Cohen. No Fannie 'Bobbie' Rosenfeld (Clue: Canada's Female Athlete of the First Half-Century, 1900-1950). No Yiddish words to express just the *bon mot* in either of our official languages (Clues: *chutzpah, klutz, shlock, schmooze, tchatschke*).

A diminished Canada it would be. Like every immigrant community in this country, Jews have their highlight reel of luminaries and legacies they have gifted to Canada. But of course, no individuals or peoples are exactly alike.

Perhaps what distinguishes Jews in Canada is what brought them here — and what they brought with them. Above all, Jewish immigrants came to Canada because they were unwanted in their country of birth. The largest waves of Jewish immigration to Canada occurred from the late 19th to mid-20th century. Their migration was prompted by discrimination, persecution, and at its worst – by mass murder.

Wherever their place of birth before moving here, Jews had been the perennial 'other': different from the dominant national culture by religion, by rituals, by language and by constructed racialization. Jews of course were the iconic people of migration and diaspora. Dispersed into exile two thousand years ago, by the 19th century there were flourishing Jewish communities in dozens of countries around the world.

Without a homeland of their own, Jews became perhaps the world's first transnationals and multiculturalists. They yearned for both belonging in their country of birth, and return to their ancestral homeland. They adapted to the dominant culture of their country of birth, without forsaking ancestral

culture and tradition.

Jews, in short, had the 'advantage' of arriving in Canada with two thousand years of experience as outsiders. This would serve them well on arrival in a Canada wary of whether these newcomers belonged in this country. The clichéd but not inaccurate characterization of "the wandering Jews" captures a people's collective experience, and nurtured among Jews a cultural disposition to both fit into a new society, and preserve the unique markers of their ancestral identity.

The most important contribution Jews made to Canada was precisely their commitment to be both Canadian and Jewish. This would not be an easy path to walk. Ultimately however, the journey would see both Canada and its Jewish community transformed.

Canada's Jewish population has grown from under 3,000 in 1867 to over 125,000 in 1921, to just over 390,000 in 2011. The major waves of Jewish migration to Canada were occasioned by intensified persecution or insecurity abroad. Yet Jews quickly discovered that anti-semitism could also thrive in the cold environs of the *naivelt* (new world). Indeed, reaching back to French colonial times, non-Catholics were prohibited from settling in New France. Few Jews would arrive during Canada's century as British North America (1760-1867), or the first 30 years following Confederation. Dire times for Eastern European Jews (pogroms, discriminatory laws, wars and deprivation) prompted mass migration to Canada from the late 1890s to 1914, and again in the 1920s.

The Canada these Jews encountered was not an entirely different world from the one they fled. Here too politicians railed against Jews as unwanted aliens. Jews were barred or restricted in professional, occupational and educational pursuits. They were effectively excluded from buying homes or using public space in some areas. They could even be set upon by anti-semitic gangs unleashing urban riot (Tulchinsky 2008).

The most dire consequence of Canada's unwelcoming attitude to Jews, of course, played out during the 1930s as Europe spiralled towards genocide of the Jews. As European Jews frantically sought haven abroad, and Canada's marginalized Jewish community pleaded with government for a humanitarian response, "None Is Too Many" came the reply. Canada had the worst Jewish refugee admission record of any western country. Prime Minister Mackenzie confided to his diary the fear that there would be riots in the streets of Canada if significant numbers of Jews were admitted. After the Second World War, when 90% of Europe's Jews had been murdered, Canadian public opinion and public officials remained opposed to admitting European Jewish refugees. Haltingly, the doors inched open in the late 1940s (Abella and Troper 1982).

Canada's attitude to Jews over the first hundred years of Confederation was certainly not an isolated example of racism and discrimination. Policies towards indigenous peoples as well as other racialized immigrant groups — Chinese, South Asian and Japanese — reflect a Canada that would take some time to outgrow its narrow white, Christian, Anglo/French founding nations, exclusionary self-definition.

Strikingly, Canada's refusal to be a haven from

Holocaust, would later serve as the country's inspiration to be more responsive to lives endangered abroad. In the late 1970s, as Vietnamese refugees fled their homeland in life-threatening search of new beginnings, Canada's immigration minister Ron Atkey was reading an early version of Irving Abella and Harold Troper's classic book *None Is Too Many*. Atkey resolved from this reading that his government would not repeat the humanitarian catastrophe of the 1930s. Sixty thousand Vietnamese 'boat people' refugees would be admitted to Canada. More recently, the Jewish and Vietnamese refugee experiences were again invoked to rally support for Syrian refugees (Goodspeed 2014).

The Jewish experience has also had a major impact on the place of minority identities within Canadian society. Along with other minorities, Jews fought back against discriminatory practices in employment, education, housing, and other spheres of everyday life. Indeed, James Walker has written of the "Jewish Phase" in the movement for racial equality in Canada (Walker 2002). From the mid-1940s to mid-1970s, Jewish organizations and voices actively challenged anti-semitism and other manifestations of racism. Jews allied with blacks to repeal discriminatory laws, and advance human rights legislation.

Jews were well positioned to be human rights advocates. Their religious tradition rang with prophetic calls for justice. Their lived experience abroad and in Canada was replete with injustice. They had established, in 1919, a national organization – the Canadian Jewish Congress — as a robust institutional voice for community advocacy. And Jews had another significant institutional platform — the Canadian labour movement, with Jews well represented in both membership and leadership ranks. From 1945 to 1975, Canadian Jews played a significant part in prompting a major turn in Canada's self-image, law and immigration policy. In transforming the Canada of Mackenzie King — British, Christian, wary of identities of religious, ethnic and racialized difference — into the Canada of Pierre Trudeau proclaiming universal human rights and multiculturalism (Troper 2010).

For two thousand years Jews had preserved and transplanted their distinct identity and culture in migration to dozens of different countries. Jews imprinted their identity on Canada as well — especially its urban landscapes. The St. Lawrence-Main neighbourhood of Montréal, the Ward in Toronto and Winnipeg's North End gave proof that Jewish newcomers had a culture they wished to preserve. As Jews moved to more affluent districts their synagogues, day schools, kosher eateries, and cultural centres relocated with them. Jews helped demonstrate that Canada could creatively contain different cultural codes.

Modern Canada has been exceptionally good for and to Jews. Comprising barely 1% of the country's population, Jews have made an over-sized contribution to many dimensions of Canadian life: the arts, sciences, professions, academia, economy, media, social movements, philanthropy and politics. Generally speaking, Jews have "made it" in Canada, and played a part in re-making Canada. They owe much, and have given much to this country.

Canadian Jews now constitute a highly diverse — even fragmented and fractious — community. Outsiders can too easily arrive at a simplified, even stereotyped impression of a minority community.

Canadian Jewry is a reminder there are multiple cultures within a so-called multicultural group. A host of factors differentiate Canadian Jews from each other. Five evident fault-lines are:

1. Religion (observant or secular);
2. Geographic and cultural ancestry (Ashkenazi — East European, or Sephardi — North African, or Mizrachi — Arab state origin);
3. Income (rich or poor);
4. Canadian politics (right-wing, centrist or left-wing); and
5. Israeli politics (hawk or dove).

Few Canadian groups have benefitted more from Canada's turn to inclusion and multiculturalism than Jews. As nativism and racism are on the rise again worldwide, Canadian Jews will be called upon to honour the national anthem's call to "stand on guard" for the country's values they helped to forge.

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