A PERSPECTIVE ON JEWISH REFUGEES IN CANADA

IRA ROBINSON

Ira Robinson is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Jewish Studies in the Department of Religions and Cultures at Concordia University. His most recent published book is *A Kabbalist in Montreal: The Life and Times of Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg*; his forthcoming book is *"A Link in the Great American Chain": Studies in the Evolution of the Orthodox Jewish Community in Cleveland, Ohio*.

To properly understand the impact of refugees on the Jewish communities of Canada, we must begin by understanding what the term signifies. The United Nations Refugee Agency defines refugees as "people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country." We begin, therefore, by observing that a decided majority of Jewish Canadians today, though they have not themselves immigrated to Canada, are descended from immigrants who were "pushed" out of their country of birth by combinations of religious, racial, and economic discrimination on the part of their home country, and were hoping to achieve legal and social equality, as well as economic opportunity, in Canada.

> **"It was this wave of Jewish immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century that gave the Canadian Jewish community its religious and cultural flavor as well as its historical memory."**

This was especially true for Jews originating in the pre-1917 Russian Empire, who faced legal discrimination, state-condoned violence, and much else. They were "refugees," though they were not described with this term at the time of their arrival in Canada. It was this wave of Jewish immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century that gave the Canadian Jewish community its religious and cultural flavor as well as its historical memory.

Refugees as we now understand them only became an issue facing Canada and the rest of the international community with the imposition of passport and visa regulations during World War I, followed by restrictions of immigration in the post-World War I period in the United States, Canada,

and elsewhere. All refugees from the upheavals of World War I and its chaotic aftermath in Eastern Europe seeking to come to Canada became a political problem for the Canadian government in several ways: French Canadian political leaders feared the diminution of their political power in the Dominion through increased immigration, which would only strengthen the demographic dominance of Anglo-Canada.

Canadian workers feared that immigrants would compete for their jobs. Jewish refugees wishing to settle in Canada faced, on top of the previous factors, endemic antisemitic prejudices in both French and English Canada that portrayed Jews as liable to utilize all means to destroy Canada's established (Christian) values and institutions through, for instance, their alleged prominence in the communist movement.

All these factors combined to make Canadian immigration authorities deaf, for the most part, to the incessant pleas of German Jews seeking to flee Nazi oppression in the 1930s to enter Canada. This governmental policy was summarized by the director of Canada's Immigration Branch, Frederick Blair, who, when asked how many Jews should be allowed to immigrate, responded "none is too many." This policy was strictly maintained despite intensive lobbying on the part of the Canadian Jewish community, represented by the Canadian Jewish Congress, seeking to open Canada's doors to increasingly desperate Jews.

These included hundreds of passengers on the German ship St. Louis, whose entry into Canada was denied, for which Prime Minister Justin Trudeau formally apologized on behalf of Canada in 2018. Ironically, however, during World War II large numbers of German-Jewish refugees in England were incarcerated as enemy aliens and transported to Canadian prison camps, from which many of them were ultimately freed to make their home in Canada.

In the immediate post-World War II period, immigration of Jewish refugee survivors of the Holocaust to Canada turned out to be almost as strictly regulated as in the pre-war period. Those Jewish survivors who would or could not repatriate to their prewar homes, as Allied refugee policy initially dictated, remained in limbo as "Displaced Persons" in the Allied zones of Germany and Austria, since no country was willing to receive them in large numbers. This "limbo" lasted until after 1948, which not coincidentally marked the establishment of the State of Israel that accorded all Jews free immigration rights.

Only at that point did the United States, Canada, and other countries begin to modify their immigration policies in order to allow a significant migration of Jews. At that point, Canada, which still hesitated to declare itself open in principle to the entry of European Jewish refugees, nonetheless began to admit significant numbers of Jews under programs like the "tailor project" which succeeded in bringing several thousand Jewish immigrant to Canada, ostensibly to fill job openings in the Canadian garment industry.

The reception of approximately 40,000 survivors of the Holocaust by a Canadian Jewish community that had not seen significant Jewish immigration for over two decades left much to be desired. Survivors quickly learned that there

was little effort to understand their experience among Jews who had not undergone that experience. On the other hand, the influx of thousands of Holocaust survivors in Canada in the postwar period necessarily spurred the development of the major Canadian Jewish communities, particularly Montreal. Survivors and their issues also challenged the agencies of the Jewish community in Canada, especially the Canadian Jewish Congress and the Jewish Immigrant Aid Society, to work with greater effectiveness. This stood the community in good stead when new waves of Jewish refugees sought immigration to Canada. Jewish community organizations learned to work with the Canadian government with great effectiveness in order to deal with extremely sensitive issues relative to Jewish refugees and their complex and vulnerable situations.

The several thousand Jewish refugees who came to Canada after the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956–57 marked the beginnings of a shift in the Canadian government's perspective on its refugee policy. The government ceased regulating immigration through orders-in-council, which had characterized the pre-World War II period. New parliamentary legislation, like the 1976 *Immigration Act* marked Canada's new openness to immigration on a wider scale and from non-European countries.

Beyond the Hungarian Jewish refugees, the late 1950s and 1960s also saw major cohorts of Jewish immigrants to Canada fleeing the Arab world because of its violent reaction to the establishment of the State of Israel. This reaction in the Arab world undermined the security and the confidence of Jewish communities in the Middle East and North Africa, and Jews began arriving in Canada from countries like Iraq and Morocco. While these Jews did not enter Canada as refugees in any formal sense, their experience was similar to that of other refugees of the era. Indeed, many of the Jewish immigrants from Arab countries to Canada came to consider themselves as refugees and the Canadian government, under Prime Minister Stephen Harper, ultimately granted them recognition as refugees in 2014. Social and political developments in South Africa contributed as well to the arrival of a significant number of South African Jews in Canada.

In 1982, scholars Irving Abella and Harold Troper published an influential book on Canada's treatment of Jews seeking to immigrate to Canada in the 1930s and 40s entitled None Is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933–1948. What is remarkable is that this was a scholarly book whose influence went far beyond the academic world and became a factor of some importance in Canadian discussions of policies toward refugees as well as in the actual formulation of government policy. The phrase "none is too many" became a symbol of a wrongheaded Canadian policy and, according to Abella, constituted "an ethical yardstick against which contemporaneous government policies are gauged."

Jews from the Former Soviet Union began arriving in Canada in large numbers in the 1990s. Their arrival in Canada was an extremely complicated process because the Soviet Union had formally agreed to the "repatriation" of these Jews to Israel, and not to other countries. Israel for its part was not happy with the reality that a significant number of Jewish emigrants from the Former Soviet

Union preferred living somewhere other than the State of Israel.

This Israeli sensitivity was further aroused by the fact that hundreds of Jews from the Former Soviet Union, who had lived in Israel for a time but were not considered "Jewish" according to Israeli law, claimed refugee status in Canada on the grounds of persecution in Israel as "non-Jews." Their argument before Canadian refugee tribunals was successful in a number of cases, particularly in Quebec, and was the subject of a diplomatic exchange between Israel and Canada, in which Israel objected to its designation as a "refugee-producing country."

"It is clear that immigration of Jewish refugees to Canada is an important part of the multifaceted Canadian Jewish story."

It is clear that immigration of Jewish refugees to Canada is an important part of the multifaceted Canadian Jewish story. This immigration reflects as well the evolution of Canadian immigration and refugee policy in the past century. Finally, we must understand that the arrival of multiple waves of Jewish refugees in Canada significantly influenced the way that the Jewish communities of Canada understand themselves and their world.

Note: This article was enriched through conversations with Rivka Augenfeld and Sean Remz. Any errors in this article remain my responsibility.