THE CANADIAN JEWISH DIASPORA: A TALE OF TWO CITIES

ABSTRACT

Canadian Jews form the third largest Jewish diaspora community in the world after the United States and France. Despite many people's belief that the Canadian Jewish experience is an extension of the U.S., Harold Troper argues that it's a uniquely Canadian product, a product that really remains a tale of two cities – Montreal and Toronto.

The Jewish diaspora has been described as the classic or "ideal type" diaspora, dispersed to the four corners of the world almost two thousand years ago but still retaining a sense of shared identity and communal memory.[1] Today, Canadian Jews form the third largest Jewish diaspora community in the world after the United States and France. Yet, in spite of the community's size, it remains largely unknown, perhaps even invisible among diaspora communities. In part this is because Canadian Jews are often thought to be little more than a subset of the much larger American Jewish community to the south, virtually indistinguishable in their own right. If there is a difference it is put down to generational lag. Simply stated, Canadian Jews are said to be just American Jews, only one generation behind. Since Canadian Jews tend to be a little closer in time to their immigrant roots, the argument goes, it will just take them that much longer to melt into the great homogenizing caldron that is North America. But be assured, where American Jews are today, Canadian Jews will be tomorrow or maybe the day after tomorrow. The timing may not be precise, but there is no denying that the direction Canadian Jews are heading is pre-ordained. America is destiny. And, given the options, is that so bad?

Bad or not, this determinist thesis is wrong. The Canadian Jewish experience is not a tardy branch plant of the American Jewish community. Far from it. The Canadian Jewish community is a uniquely Canadian product, rooted in Canadian experience. It has given rise to different identity assumptions, community priorities, forms of organization and expression of bonding with Jews elsewhere than is true of American Jews.[2]

Let us focus on but one distinguishing Canadian Jewish characteristic. The Canadian Jewish experience has been and remains today a tale of two cities. In the next decade the number of Jews in Canada will break the 350,000 mark. And while Jews can be found in every province and every major urban center, from the turn of the last century onward, approximately 80 percent of all Canadian Jews have lived in either Montreal or Toronto. Montreal is home to something less than 100,000 Jews. Toronto, or rather the Greater Toronto Area, will likely exceed 200,000 within the next few years securing Toronto's place as home to one of the 10 largest Jewish communities in the world outside of Israel.

What of the rest of Canada? Without prejudging what population size is necessary to sustain vibrant Jewish community life, in 2001 only four other Canadian cities had Jewish populations of more than 5,000 Jews: Vancouver (17,300), Winnipeg (12,800), Ottawa (11,200) and Calgary (6,500). The Jewish communities of Vancouver, Ottawa and Calgary are growing, but almost all other Jewish communities across Canada, including Winnipeg, are graying and hemorrhaging their young, many to Toronto.

While Toronto and Montreal remain home to the lion's share of Canadian Jews, there is a core difference between these two communities that is sometimes difficult for those living in either city to articulate. It bespeaks a historical cleavage in the Canadian body politic – French-English relations. Far more than Toronto, Montreal has been a city of boundaries, of separate English and French estates or solitudes in which the city's Jews have often self-identified as a 'Third Solitude'. The Jews of Montreal, overwhelmingly English speaking, have long regarded themselves and been regarded by others as distinct and at a distance from the rest of English speaking Montreal. And if Jews felt a separation between themselves and other English-speakers, they also felt just as distant, if not more so, from Francophone Montreal. This feeling persisted in Montreal even after the significant immigration of Francophone Jews from North Africa beginning in 1957.[3] The lines of separation were, and

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for many still are, so fixed in the Montreal Jewish mind that they could be laid out on a map. And in some ways they were. In his book about an earlier day, *The Main,* Mordecai Richler speaks of the Main, Saint Laurent Boulevard, the central artery of Montreal's old inner-city Jewish neighborhood, as a border between Jews and others. He explained:

If the Main was a poor man's street, it was also a dividing line. Below, the French Canadians. Above, some distance above, the dreaded WASP. On the main itself there were some Italians, Yugoslavs and Ukrainians, but they did not count as true gentiles. Even the French Canadian who were our enemies, were not entirely unloved. Like us, they were poor and coarse with large families and spoke English badly.[4]

Thus, in this earlier day the Main was a boundary and Jews need no map to tell them on which side of the boundary they belonged. In the decades after World War II, as Jews moved off the Main, boundaries remained. And these boundaries were more than just those of geography or neighborhood. For decades Jews knew boundaries, formal and informal, that differentiate them from others with regard to residential clustering, educational options, community organizations and political, business and, above all, social interaction. Of course, as a group Montreal Jews have prospered and their children have become increasingly well educated, but even those with money likely had fewer non-Jewish social, business and even school contacts than would have been true of Jews in Toronto. Only in the approaching shadow of Quebec's 1960s Quiet Revolution, which forever shifted the political and economic center of gravity in Quebec, did McGill University finally remove restrictive quotas limiting the admission of Jews.[5] Knowing McGill's past, many Jewish students still felt themselves on campus as much by sufferance as by ability. Still other public and private institutions remained separated along religious or linguistic lines, and often both.

Instead of a frontal assault against entrenched walls of exclusion, Jews in Montreal tended to acknowledge boundaries as a fact of Montreal life and got on with their lives. They did better than that. Living behind boundaries of separation, Montreal Jews over decades constructed a community at once diverse and close with an élan all its own. With little fear of assimilation into the larger surrounding society – English or French speaking – Montreal Jews found a deep sense of intra-group belonging, a sense that it didn't really matter what others were thinking because, for the most part, with limited non-Jewish interaction, Jews were left to their own devices. Thus, behind social, cultural, political and even economic walls of difference, Montreal Jews created a self-contained but spirited and energetic community, an institutionally complete and economically successful urban village full of *ta'am* and *savoir faire.*

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But no matter how internally complete, the community was not immune to convulsions in the surrounding world. And Montreal Jews, feeling themselves in Quebec but never really part of Quebec, were blindsided by the 1960s and 1970s Quiet Revolution. Convulsive debates over language, culture and identity and its street-level impact raised doubts about the long term plans of individual Quebec Jews. In his short 1998 book about Jewish Montreal, Mackay Smith argues that if Quebec ever ceded from Canada, "the Jewish community will disband in Montreal and move to Canada."[6] Right or wrong, through the 1970s and 1980s growing numbers of younger, more-mobile Jews, uneasy at the rapidity and direction of change, packed it in, many heading for Toronto. As a result of this youthful exodus, the in-place Montreal Jewish community is now proportionately smaller and graying – half the size of Toronto but with an equal number of those over 65. The overriding concerns of the current Montreal community are to assure high level services and infrastructure while, at the same time, instilling confidence that Jews enjoy a positive future in Montreal and that the next generation of Jews will have the skills and resources necessary to grasp that future.

And what of Toronto? If Montreal has been a community of boundaries, Toronto has been more a community of accommodation. Until after World War II, Toronto is remembered as a solid and stolid Anglo-Saxon city, an outpost of British conservative values in North America. The dominant community imagination was so overwhelmingly Anglo-centric that Toronto was commonly described as the "Ulster of the North", a municipality where Anglo-Protestant Victorian restraint, draconian liquor legislation and Sunday blue laws still dominated. It was certainly that way in 1923 when Ernest Hemingway was a reporter for the *Toronto Star.* At the time Hemingway maintained an active correspondence with Ezra Pound. In a letter to Hemingway, Pound asked about his friend's impressions of Toronto. Hemingway, seldom at a loss for words, replied, "It can't be worse. You can't imagine it. I'm not going to describe it." Others were less reluctant. In 1940, visiting English author Wyndham Lewis described Toronto as "a mournful Scottish version of an American city" and dismissed the rest of English Canada as "a sanctimonious icebox."[7] However, to a significant degree Toronto was less marked by the mindset of boundaries that characterized Montreal. While Toronto was marked by a deep stain of anti-Semitism, economic, social and political boundaries were somewhat more fluid or permeable.[8] As a result, into the postwar years, there were also more avenues open to Jewish participation in the

larger civic society. But this came at a price. In the name of accommodation, the Jewish community was expected to take the shape of the pan it was baked in – to outwardly at least demonstrate the self-imposed reserve of the surrounding community. As a result, the Toronto Jewish community seemed outwardly less spirited than that of Montreal. But reserved or not, the Jewish community of Toronto proved more aggressive than Montreal in challenging legally sanctioned and informal anti-Semitism.[9]

But did this combination of rights activism and accommodation work? Arguably yes. Impossible as it might be for Montreal Jews to imagine this in their city even today, by the time of the 1970s Jewish exodus from Montreal, there had already been two popular Jewish mayors in Toronto, Nathan Philips (1955-1962) and Philip Givens (1963-1966).

But like Montreal, during the past several decades Toronto has been subject to dramatic change. Even as the Jews of Montreal were caught up in the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, the Jews of Toronto were caught up in a revolution of another kind – a pluralist revolution. It is an urban legend that the United Nations has designated Toronto the most multicultural city in the world, but it is true that during the past several decades the political and economic force of large scale immigration from around the world deeply eroded Anglo-centric hegemony, opening the door wide to assertions of ethnic particularism. Anglo-accommodation of the past has been superseded by a new multi-ethnic urban paradigm.[10] Toronto is the world in a city and Jews remain very much part of that world. All this was taking place even as the Jewish community itself was becoming more internally diverse by origins, range of religious expression and political leanings. In addition to the presence of the highest proportion of Holocaust survivors of any western Jewish community outside of Israel, a distinction Toronto shared with Montreal, today almost 60 percent of Toronto Jews were born elsewhere – elsewhere in Canada and elsewhere in the world. Toronto is home to Jewish immigrants from Ukraine, Russia, South Africa, Iran, Argentina, Israel and the United States to name but a few. More than 20,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union arrived in Toronto since 1990. There is also a growing Sephardic presence in Toronto and even a tiny community of Jews from India. Importantly, the population growth rate among Jewish 15 to 24 year olds in the past decade or so was more than 20 percent, forecasting continued population growth into the future.

With such a diverse Jewish community it is dangerous to make any overarching generalizations. But several conclusions present themselves. Toronto, home to half of all Canadian Jews, has replaced Montreal as the Jewish capital of Canada. For all its diversity, the Jewish community of Toronto, educated, increasingly professional and middle class, is conspicuous by its engagement in all areas of community activity. Like Montreal, the Toronto Jewish community also remains more religiously traditional, affirming of Zionism and geographically contiguous than it true of most American centers today and, while intermarriage is on the rise, there is little fear of wholesale assimilation. Accommodation, however, is still very much the fact of Toronto urban life. But it is accommodation of a new order, accommodation to a publicly sanctioned pluralism that, respectful of the rule of law, finds no contradiction between assertions of ethnic particularism and access to public square. In this atmosphere of ethnic acceptance and with half of all Canadian Jews living in the Greater Toronto Area, the Toronto Jewish community stands out in its affirmation of identity, healthy institutional growth, and vibrancy of cultural expression. And with Toronto as its keystone, the larger Canadian diaspora is today also growing in numbers, organizationally active and affirming both as Jews and as Canadians.

Notes

1 William Safran, "The Jewish Diaspora in a Comparative and Theoretical Perspective" *Israel Studies* 10 (2005), 36-60.

2 For an examination of the myth of congruency between the American and Canadian diasporas see Gerald Tulchinsky, "The Canadian Jewish Experience: A Distinct Personality Emerges," in Ruth Klein and Frank Dimant (eds.), *From Immigration to Integration: The Canadian Jewish Experience* (Toronto. 2001), 19-30.

3 Jean-Claude Lasry, "A Francophone Diaspora in Quebec," in M. Weinfeld, W. Shaffir and I. Cotler (eds.) *The Canadian Jewish Mosaic* (Toronto. 1983), 221-240

4 Mordecai Richler, *The Main* (Toronto. Key Porter, 1987), 184.

5 Gerald Tuclchinsky, *Branching Out: The Transformation of the Canadian Jewish Community* (Toronto. 1998), 275-276; Michael R. Marrus, *Mr. Sam: The Life and Times of Samuel Bronfman* (Toronto. 1991), 298-299.

6 Mackay L. Smith, *Jews of Montreal and Their Judaisms: A Voyage of Discovery* (Montreal. 1998), 165. A more optimistic prognosis is offered in Morton Weinfeld, *Like Everyone Else But Different: The Paradoxical Success of Canadian Jews* (Toronto. 2001).

7 Hemingway as quoted in, James Lemon, *Toronto Since 1918. An Illustrated History* (Toronto. 1985), 57; Lewis as quoted in Robert Fulford, *Accidental City: The Transformation of Toronto* (Toronto. 1995), 2.

8 For an overview discussion of anti-Semitism in Ontario and Toronto in the interwar years see Stephen Speisman,"Antisemitism in Ontario: The Twentieth Century" in Alan Davies (ed.), *Antisemitism in Canada: History and Interpretation* (Waterloo. 1992), 113-133.

9 Carmela Patrias and Ruth A. Frager, "This Is Our Country, These Are Our Rights': Minorities and the Origins of Ontario's Human Rights Campaigns." *Canadian Historical Review* 82 (2001), 1-35.

10 Harold Troper, "Becoming an Immigrant City: A History of Immigration into Toronto Since the Second World War," in Paul Anisef and Michael Lanphier, *The World in a City* (Toronto. 2003), 19-62; Michael Doucet, "The Anatomy of an Urban Legend: Toronto's Multicultural Reputation," Working Paper Series No. 16 (CERIS, Toronto, 2001).