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The Canadian Jewish Community and the Politics of Quebec Independence

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The Jews of Canada

It has been mooted that the only two diaspora Jewish communities still growing in size are Canada and Germany. Canada's Jewish population, as of the 1991 national census, stood at over 365,000, with more than two-thirds concentrated in the major centres of Toronto and Montreal.¹ The balance are found in other cities and towns across the vast half-continent.²

A Canadian aphorism is that the country suffers from too much geography and not enough history, which is also true of Canada's Jewish community. Although strongly adhering to traditional Jewish values, mutual assistance, combatting anti-Semitism, and support for Israel, internally, Canada's Jews tend to be as riven by geographic divisions as are all Canadians. Thus, Jews living in western Canada will often reflect the same disaffection with the central federal government as their non-Jewish neighbours. Ottawa is seen as catering to the interests of eastern Canada generally, and Quebec in particular, to the detriment of the West with its new-found wealth based on oil, gas, and Pacific rim trading connections. These assets have generated a concomitant accretion in population and infrastructure, including pronounced growth in Canada's western Jewish communities, especially in Vancouver.

However, it is the tension between the province of Quebec and the rest of the country (sometimes referred to as ROC, i.e.,

the "rest of Canada") that exercises the most profound influence on the nearly one-third of Canada's Jews who live in the Montreal area, and indirectly on the future development of the entire national community.

The Saga of the Montreal Jewish Community

For two centuries, Montreal was unrivaled as Canada's premier city, and its Jewish community dominated Jewish life in the country. At its peak in the late 1960s, the city's Jewish population was estimated at over 120,000. Toronto, the second city, had a Jewish population of no more than 88,000.

However, in the three decades since then, the state of affairs has been reversed with a vengeance. After a precipitous decline, Montreal's number seems to have plateaued at an optimistic 100,000.³ This is certainly enough of a critical mass to justify the maintenance of the high standards of Jewish social, cultural, and welfare facilities to which Montrealers are accustomed. Indeed, the city is renowned in North America for its level of services and Jewish affiliation. Nevertheless, Montreal has lost its position of preeminence in the Canadian Jewish scene and, for a variety of important reasons, is unlikely to regain it.

Despite valiant efforts by Montreal-based Jewish organizations, especially the local federation, the Jewish population of the city and its environs faces a slow decline. Although the gross numbers seem to have steadied after the sharp drop in the 1970s and 1980s, the remaining residents tend to be older, and the brain drain of the community's best young minds in the professions, business, and technology to Toronto and other North American centres remains an issue. Emigration to Israel is also up slightly, and the number of Israelis returning after living in Montreal is rising as well, but these figures are negligible.

Undoubtedly, a variety of economic, demographic, geographic, and social trends played a part in and continue to influence Jewish migration from the province of Quebec's largest city. However, it is unquestionably external political factors which were and are the primary catalyst for profound change in the Montreal Jewish community.

Beginning in the 1960s with the so-called "Quiet Revolution," the French-speaking majority in the province of Quebec began a concerted program of self-assertion in virtually all areas of life. With many of the goals of the movement having been attained, including the establishment of the preeminence of the French language, French Canadian control over massive public and quasi-public utilities, pension funds and important government-owned

industries, and the unambivalent entrenchment of a remarkable and unique cultural identity in the North American context, many of the elements causing instability and threatening "social peace" (a political catch-phrase in Quebec) were neutralized. The feeling of inferiority felt by many "Québécois" of French expression was replaced by the self-confidence of being "maîtres chez nous," masters in our own house.

In the midst of this societal upheaval, the Jewish community of Quebec, located almost entirely in the Montreal region, adapted itself to the new realities. The Jewish educational system, to this day a bright spot, developed learning centres in three languages: English, French, and Hebrew. The Jewish day school network in Montreal has one of the highest levels of per capita enrollment on the continent, and its inculcation of basic education, trilingualism, and Jewish values and connections to Israel is a significant success.

The financial contribution of the provincial government in Quebec City to the general curriculum has contributed in no small measure to the continuing achievements of Jewish education in the province. The ability to access quality Jewish education at comparatively reasonable cost has been a vital factor in community development. Even supposedly progressive Ontario, the province which is home to the majority of

Canada's Jewish population (in the metropolis of Toronto, with a population of over 160,000;⁴ in Ottawa, the nation's capital; and in the smaller communities of southwestern Ontario), does not provide support for private Hebrew day schools. Indeed, the province recently successfully fought a challenge by Jewish parents to this policy all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada.⁵

It is ironic that Quebec stands out in the Canadian context as an example of progressive education for religious minority private school systems. The public schools of Quebec are divided along Catholic and Protestant confessional lines. There is no public funding for secular non-denominational primary and secondary schools. Thus, for generations, Jewish students in the public system attended Protestant schools where religious education was not a part of the formal curriculum.

However, there are clouds on the horizon. The Quebec government (as is the case with all Canadian provinces) has constitutional responsibility for education. It has recently been examining the feasibility of establishing school boards along linguistic rather than confessional lines. While this is a development that has the backing of the Jewish community of the province, it has been accompanied by trial balloons concerning changes to the current public financial underwriting for the general portion of the curriculum in private schools.

Ominously, the Quebec government intervened in support of the position of the government of Ontario in the recent court challenge to Ontario's refusal to extend funding to private confessional schools. The organized Jewish community in Montreal has made affordable Jewish education a top priority and points with justifiable pride to its achievements in that area. Any appreciable loss in this field would be a grave setback for the Montreal community, adding to the already great strain on community resources and removing a compelling reason for young Jews to maintain or establish roots in the city.

Canada's contiguity with the United States generates an unrelenting search on the part of the numerically inferior Canadians for uniquely Canadian phenomena that are distinct from the American experience. While it is true that continentalism is a prevalent theme in the Jewish federation movement, Canada's Jews, having as their neighbour the largest and most powerful diaspora community, also seek recognition for and affirmation of the unique aspects of Canadian Jewish life. The Jewish day school system in Canada is surely one such manifestation of uniqueness. American Jewish leaders would be puzzled, if not appalled, by the seemingly schizophrenic stance of the Canadian Jewish community, which in Quebec backs non-denominational school boards, while in Ontario makes common cause with Protestant evangelical

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congregations to argue for financial subsidies for the general curriculum at private religiously-based educational institutions. Canada's Jewish community will vehemently contest observance of religiosity in public institutions while supporting government assistance for parochial schools.

While it may be difficult for Americans raised with the anti-establishment constitutional philosophy, with strict separation of church and state, they might look north - not without some envy - at the comparatively high level of Jewish educational affiliation, at the wide availability of good quality traditional Jewish education, and at the relatively reasonable cost. This must be a factor in the lower rate in Canada than in the U.S. of what is commonly described as assimilation. This pragmatism in Canadian Jewish advocacy has yielded positive results without effectively compromising basic community values.

The Referendum Earthquake and the Aftershocks

Quebec's "Quiet Revolution" of the 1960s was not confined to economic, linguistic, and cultural spheres. It evolved quickly into a nationalist political movement embodied in a mainstream political party with the unambivalent appellation "Parti Québécois"

(PQ). Basically a social democratic organism, the PQ gained an electoral victory in 1976 and formed the government of the province with a view to holding a general referendum for a mandate to negotiate some form of political and economic independence from the rest of Canada. The referendum proposal was soundly quashed in 1980, but the next try in October 1995 was far closer. Although the "indépendantiste" effort was defeated, it lost by the narrowest of margins: Less than one percent of the votes separated the sides. The closeness of the election result was a stunning shock to federalist forces, but it was the words of the then PQ leader and premier of the province, Jacques Parizeau, blaming "money and the ethnic vote" for the PQ's defeat, that compounded the trauma among Jewish Quebecers.

This unprecedented public declaration by a provincial leader evoked some unease within the movement, but it was not simply an inadvertent and isolated expression of demagoguery. In a November 1996 interview, Parizeau, who announced his resignation the day after the referendum defeat, reiterated and clarified his position when asked if his comments were improvised. "I don't know if I knew I was going to say that, but I knew that I clearly thought it....I would never have thought we would have found ten or twelve polls in west-end Montreal [where many English-speaking Montrealers reside and where the

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overwhelming majority of Jewish Montreal residents are located] where there was zero Yes votes...a remarkable polarization."⁶ He then went on to note that 61 percent of French-speaking Quebecers, including 69 percent in Montreal, voted in support of sovereignty for Quebec.

If the message was not clear enough, that was certainly not the case when a former FLQ (Front de Libération du Québec - Quebec Liberation Front) terrorist made a Yom Kippur eve public declaration to the effect that English-speaking Ashkenazi Jews had assumed leadership roles in opposing Quebec independence and the francization programs of successive Quebec governments. The declaration described this as incomprehensible and inexplicable hostility to the Quebec francophone people which could one day result in violent reprisals.⁷

While described as "marginal" by some,⁸ these comments by the self-styled leader of the "Mouvement de Libération nationale du Québec" engaged three critical elements in the life of the Jewish community in contemporary Quebec. They are: 1) the ability of Jews to act freely as citizens on the federalist or, for that matter, on the separatist or indépendantiste side of the debate without their religious affiliation or ethnicity being an inhibiting factor; 2) the Ashkenazi-Sephardi dynamic; and 3) the possibility of violence.

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As to the first matter, the organized Jewish community in Quebec, as represented by its advocacy, welfare and cultural associations, has supported Canadian unity and federalism, albeit sometimes supporting Quebec's demands for a streamlined, modified, and even more decentralized federal structure. This reflects a community consensus that is strongly, indeed overwhelmingly, in favour of federalism and a united Canada. As polls in areas of large concentrations of Jewish voters showed during the 1995 referendum, Quebec's Jews voted in excess of 95 percent against Quebec independence. Nevertheless, mainstream Jewish organizations and institutions in the province have also followed a pragmatic course in their dealings with the provincial government, recognizing the need to act in both the immediate and future interests of the community. Although they are unreservedly federalist, Jewish community relations with independence-minded governments have been efficient, courteous, and usually fairly cordial. But in the charged political atmosphere in the Quebec of today, virtually no action in the public domain can escape analysis from separatist-federalist perspectives, and this has generated tensions within the Jewish collective, both in Quebec and elsewhere in the country.

Matzagate

A recent example is the so-called "Matzagate affair." Most kosher-for-Passover products in Canada are imported from the U.S. and to a lesser extent, but increasingly, from Israel. Imported food products are subject to both federal and provincial health and labeling standards. These include package size and weight, lists of ingredients, nutritional content, and language. For years the federal government has provided an exemption from their usual requirements, except where health and safety are concerned, for a period before, during and after the Passover holiday so as to allow Canadian importers and retailers to bring the foodstuffs into the country, marshal them in warehouses, display and sell them in supermarkets and smaller outlets, and remove and dispose of them after the holiday.

In Quebec, as part of the ongoing governmental initiatives to ensure the primacy of the French language, there are laws and regulations concerning the use of French and controls on the use of other languages, including English, in the public domain. Probably no other aspect of the ongoing political discourse in the province has caused more rancor and dissension as the language laws, which, in the eyes of Quebec nationalists, are necessary to protect the comparatively tiny French-speaking minority from the North American sea of English on every border.

However, to the English-speaking minority in

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Quebec, these statutes are perceived in many instances to be violations of their civil rights and are, at least in some aspects of their application, viewed as an egregious provocation. In order to ensure their application, the government maintains inspectors (derisively referred to as the "language police" by some). On Passover eve 1996, apparently acting on complaints, language inspectors advised one or more retailers that some of their Passover products were in violation of Quebec language laws. This resulted in some products in a few locations being removed from store shelves. It quickly became a very public issue, and the Jewish community of Montreal was thrown into a state of anger and consternation. Clearly, the timing of this initiative by the provincial body responsible for the application of the language legislation was, to say the least, unhelpful.

Seeking to prevent a repeat of the events which so unnerved the Montreal community, the main representative and advocacy body of Quebec's Jewish community, Canadian Jewish Congress, Quebec Region, in cooperation and coordination with the principal Sephardic community body and Montreal's *kashruth* council, undertook negotiations with the provincial language office and ultimately obtained an agreement with them not dissimilar to the one in existence with the federal authorities.

The very fact that such an agreement had

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been formally signed by major organizations on behalf of the community and particularly the provision which calls for Canadian Jewish Congress to employ its "moral authority" with food manufacturers, importers, wholesalers and retailers to make them aware of their obligations pursuant to the language legislation of the province with a view to compliance caused an uproar.

Characterized by various elements within the Montreal Jewish community as a sellout, the agreement was assailed and Congress was called everything from naive to a "*judenrat*," the latter being a particularly offensive reference to the tragedy of Jewish municipal councils during the World War II Nazi occupation. Although negotiated in good faith,⁹ with a view to ensuring security of supply of Passover kosher products and based on an existing federal government example, in the highly charged political atmosphere in Quebec generally and in Montreal in particular, this initiative was seen almost as a capitulation to a government body whose very existence is perceived by many as an affront.

While the organized communal structures in Quebec are unambiguously federalist in philosophy and in public policy, its structures strive for a *modus vivendi* with a society whose views they most certainly do not share, recognizing that the high standard of Jewish life in the province in the areas of education, culture, health and social

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services, immigration and religious practice depend to a certain extent on effective governmental relationships. This is not unique to Quebec's Jewish community, but the dynamics tend to be more intense there than elsewhere in the country.

Ethnic Affiliation and the National Unity Debate

On an individual level, several members of Montreal's Jewish community have assumed leadership positions in various federalist and English-language-rights bodies. This has even extended to taking founding roles in such organizations. A small political party, the Equality Party, which had held a few seats in the provincial legislature and advocated unabashed loyalty to a united Canada within a federal system and to English-language rights, was founded partly by Jews. Its first leader was Jewish, and it found deep support in some of the suburbs of the Montreal metropolitan area where the Jewish population is significant.

These are all unquestionably legitimate activities, well within the purview of citizens in a free and democratic society, which Quebec most certainly is. Yet in a province which is the last living vestige of New France on the North American continent (with the exception of a few pockets elsewhere in Canada, especially in the provinces of New

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Brunswick, Ontario and Manitoba, and the folkloric Cajuns of Louisiana in the U.S.), everything seems to be cast in some linguistic or ethnic mode. Despite decades of effort by nationalist leaders to portray the Quebec independence movement as based on geography and not ethnicity, they have had little success, as witnessed in the last referendum. The words quoted above of their former leader, Jacques Parizeau, after the hairsbreadth loss in 1995, although controversial even within the movement, seemed to let the cat out of the bag. Thus, if the majority of French-speaking voters cast their ballots in favour of independence, then it was the minority ethnic electors, including of course Jews, who are frustrating the will of the majority francophone population. All votes are equal, but some have less moral legitimacy, at least in the eyes of the former premier.

Subsequent to this event, it became more acceptable to challenge the legitimacy of nettlesome federalist or pro-English rights initiatives being orchestrated by individuals belonging to ethnic communities. Furthermore, pro-independence leadership have looked to community organizations to restrain the individual in his or her course of action. In a recent example, a public campaign asserting English-language rights led by an individual Jew residing in the Montreal area, prompted a personage no less than the former leader of the then official opposition in the federal parliament,¹⁰

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the indépendantiste Bloc Québécois, to call on the Canadian Jewish Congress to effect some sort of discipline on the individual, presumably on the basis of his religious affiliation.

The Jewish community has made common cause with two other major ethnic groups in Quebec, the Italians and the Greeks, in a formal coalition. Strongly federalist and vigilant in their efforts to defend their communal interests, the coalition has, at the same time, been active in trying to promote an enhanced level of understanding by Canadians outside Quebec of the need for adjusting the Canadian federal structure to better meet the needs of Quebec and other provinces in a changing world and for a clearer comprehension of the desires, fears, and goals of the francophone majority in the province. Nevertheless, the coalition and its member communities and their representative organizations have come in for criticism for their virtually monolithic opposition to Quebec separation. They have even been publicly branded as "racist" for their anti-independence voting patterns by some of the more vocal and doctrinaire elements within the nationalist camp.

The Partition Movement

In response to the possibility of Quebec's separation from Canada, the notion of

separating federalist municipal and regional enclaves from the putative new state has gained some currency. In November 1996, the council of the municipality of Côte St. Luc, a Montreal suburb with a large Jewish population, voted unanimously to hold its own referendum on remaining within Canada in the event of Quebec independence. The legal basis for the power of a town to enact such an initiative is dubious. Nevertheless, it constitutes a significant political statement in terms of what may be expected in the province should the separatist project be successful. The notion that if Canada is divisible then so is Quebec has not engendered much support among even those French-Canadian political leaders within the province who oppose separation, arguing that the present geopolitical boundaries of Quebec are inviolable. Nevertheless, it is a concept that is gaining some momentum.

Sephardi-Ashkenazi Relations and the Quebec Issue

More than 20 percent of the Jewish population in the Montreal area is of Sephardic heritage. Mostly French-speaking and largely from North Africa, principally Morocco, they immigrated in significant numbers in the 1950s and 1960s. Due to their native French, some in the nationalist camp saw them as a potential bridge to the

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largely anglophone, although increasingly bilingual, Ashkenazi Jews. This was generally perceived as patronizing, and the prevailing perception, likely correct in part, among the Jewish community is that the Quebec independence movement is cynically attempting to effect a schism within the community, putting Ashkenazim and Sephardim at odds. Although the separatists have made some slight inroads within Sephardic society, as they have on occasion with Hassidic sects in the region, by and large community solidarity on the delicate and complex issues facing them in the province has held. Although the political stress has produced disagreements on tactics within the Jewish community, the strains are no more likely to be along Sephardi-Ashkenazi lines than along organizational versus activist methods.

In conclusion, then, the current federalist-separatist debate in Quebec has generated significant strains within the community, prompting insecurity and unease in attempting to navigate a responsible course for the future continuity and well-being of Jews in Quebec.

The Chimera of Violence

From time to time in the course of debate and discussion around the Quebec independence issue, an outlandish

comparison or prognostication is uttered, likening aspects of the current situation to Germany in the 1930s or Bosnia and Sarajevo in the 1990s.¹¹ Such analogies are misguided and extremist. They needlessly inflame passion and fear among the Jewish and other communities and cloud hopes for rational discussion. They also do a great dishonour to the memory of the millions of victims of those conflicts by trivializing the monstrous situations they faced, quite unlike the democratic processes ongoing in the province of Quebec today. The current premier of the province, the charismatic Lucien Bouchard, has deplored, with justification, these similes as offensive and inimical to civilized discourse.¹²

The Quebec independence movement did flirt with urban violence in the late 1960s, when cells of the FLQ (Front de Libération du Québec) embarked on a spree of bombings and kidnappings which resulted in fatalities, injuries, rioting, and a form of martial law. It was and is clear that this group had very little support for its terror tactics. The cells were broken, their leaders arrested or exiled, and their legacy relegated to the status of an embarrassing aberration in Canadian history.

Today, while the potential of a physical threat to the Jewish community as a whole is not credible, the possibility of isolated violence against its institutions or individual members, spurred on by intemperate speech and actions, cannot be totally discounted.

However, in the unlikely event that isolated incidents did occur, they would be perceived by the overwhelming majority in the separatist camp as inimical to their goals and unacceptable in the context of Quebec society. Also, the pro-independence movement is extremely sensitive with regard to its international image. Any resort to force would invariably attract the most negative kind of attention in the world's capitals and in the media.

The process will, in all likelihood, evolve at the ballot box, in the federal parliament, in the Quebec National Assembly, and possibly before the courts, and not through violence. The use of violence to achieve political goals is alien to the Canadian ethos and is very unlikely to emerge as a factor in the Quebec debate.

The Canadian Jewish Response

The Jewish community of Canada, including Quebec, faces to a greater or a lesser degree many of the same problems that are being confronted by diaspora communities worldwide. The issue of maintaining Jewish continuity and connections to Israel, combatting racism and anti-Semitism, and the bringing to justice of suspected Nazi war criminals are the primary examples of the issues confronting the national community of Canada today. In particular, the pursuit of

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suspected Nazi war criminals in the country, although an issue from the 1950s onward, has recently been propelled to prominence. Given Canada's abysmal record regarding the exclusion of Jewish refugees during the Second World War,¹³ followed by its, at best, ineffective screening of Nazi war criminals seeking admission to Canada after the war, and at worst, its ambivalent policies regarding the admissibility of these criminals, the attempts to bring them to justice, either through prosecution or deportation, have now become something of a litmus test as to the federal government's intention to deal with an historic injustice.

The economic recession that has been dogging Canada for years now has had a negative effect on community fundraising campaigns, not only in Montreal, which has felt the recession in a particularly acute fashion, but generally throughout the country. This is now being compounded by severe provincial government cutbacks in funding for health care and social services, especially in the province of Ontario, which is home to the majority of Canada's Jews, and increasingly in Quebec as well.

While the Jewish community of Montreal plays its part in coping with all these issues, it is the national-unity debate which in the long term will have the most important effect on the community's future and is, therefore, the overriding question for it. The politics of Quebec independence undoubtedly has a profound influence on how the Montreal

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Jewish community and, indeed, the larger Canadian Jewish community, approaches certain questions. While some outside the province of Quebec have little patience with the problems generated by nationalist politics, generally speaking, the Quebec Jewish community gains a good degree of understanding and support for their complicated situation. Nevertheless, the distorting effect of Quebec politics on the rest of the Jewish agenda in Canada is significant.

Thus, decisions are sometimes taken, at least in part, based upon the perceived effect it will have on the sensitivity of the Montreal Jewish community. For example, a discussion as to whether to relocate the Canadian Jewish Congress head office, which has been in Montreal for more than seven decades, to the nation's capital in Ottawa, caused considerable consternation recently.¹⁴ The Jewish community of Quebec continues to effect efforts to explain its position both nationally and internationally in an attempt to portray its situation accurately by accentuating the positive without shrinking from the difficult realities.

The roots of the Quebec Jewish community run deep. Whether they will continue to flourish depends to a large extent on the politics of Quebec independence. Should the province succeed in its quest for separation from Canada, there would very likely be a significant and sudden decline in population.

However, it is also safe to assume that the Montreal Jewish community should remain an important North American Jewish centre into the future, irrespective of the independence issue. While Toronto and other communities will grow, often as a result of emigration from Quebec, the infrastructure of the Jewish community in Montreal will remain essentially intact, providing an enviable quality of Jewish life. However, whether that entity will be a vital and self-renewing community with an optimistic future or be a cultural remnant, important more for its history than for its prospects, remains to be seen.

* * *

Notes

1. The population of Canada as a whole is approaching 30 million.
2. For an excellent brief overview of the Canadian Jewish community, see David H. Goldberg, "Canadian Jewry: A Diaspora Community in Transition," *Jerusalem Letter*, No. 322, October 1, 1995. Despite some inevitable overlap, this current essay will delve into the thematic and existential issues facing Canadian and especially Quebec Jews today, attempting to avoid to the extent possible reproduction of the statistics so well presented in the 1995 article.

3. Out of a general population of around 2 million. This number varies depending on counting the urban community government and other suburbs.

4. Similarly, the general population is calculated to be in excess of 3 million people.

5. *Adler et al. v. Ontario et al.* , November 21, 1996, Supreme Court of Canada (as yet unreported).

6. "No regrets about blaming >money and ethnic vote' for referendum result, ex-premier says," *Toronto Globe and Mail*, November 5, 1996.

7. "Quebec separatist attacks Jews for supporting Canada," *Montreal Gazette*, September 23, 1996.

8. "Congress accuses separatist of inciting hatred," *Canadian Jewish News*, Montreal, October 3, 1996. This weekly, the CJN, which also publishes a national edition from Toronto, is an excellent source of news on the Canadian Jewish community.

9. In his professional capacity, the author was party to some of these negotiations.

10. In the June 2, 1997, federal election, the Bloc Québécois was replaced as the official opposition to the reelected Liberal government by the western-based Reform

Party.

11. "These are difficult times for Montreal's Jewish community," *Financial Post*, Toronto, October 2, 1996, is one example.

12. "CJC meets with Bouchard," *Canadian Jewish News*, November 3, 1994. The author participated in the meeting.

13. Irving Abella and Harold Troper, *None Is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe 1933-1948* (Toronto: Lester & Orpyn Dennys, 1983). This fascinating volume constitutes the definitive study on Canadian immigration policies vis-à-vis Jewish refugees before and during World War II.

14. "Canadian Jewish Congress rejects plan to leave Montreal: Moving office to Ottawa >would send wrong message' to Quebec Jews, president insists," *Montreal Gazette*, January 10, 1997.

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