

Changing Jewish Communities

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Canadian Jewry Today: Portrait of a Community in the Process of Change

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- *The Canadian Jewish community is now one of the more significant contemporary diaspora Jewish communities, numbering approximately 364,000. It is one of the few communities that is growing demographically.*
- *The most important trend in Canadian Jewry in the past decades is the rise of Toronto to preeminent status in terms of Jewish population and the concomitant decline of Montreal. Toronto now contains nearly half of all Canadian Jews and Montreal nearly a quarter of them.*
- *Thirty-five percent of Jewish school-age children in Montreal attend day schools. Twenty-five percent attend day schools in Toronto. These are, respectively, the highest and second highest averages for day school attendance reported in North America.*
- *American influence was an important factor in Canadian life from the beginning. Canadian Jewry, like Canada itself, sees a need to define itself by differentiating itself, politically and culturally, from the American experience.*

Why Study the Canadian Jewish Community?

Canada is perhaps not a country that comes to mind first when enumerating significant contemporary Jewish communities. Yet in any demographic survey of world Jewry that goes beyond the two mega-centers of Israel and the United States, Canada figures prominently.

Although it does not have the Jewish population of either France or the countries of the former Soviet Union (taken together), at approximately 364,000¹ Canada's Jewish community is both a leading diaspora population center and one of the few second-rank diaspora communities that are actually growing demographically. For this reason alone, the Jews of Canada are well worth investigating. In addition, the community is simultaneously a mirror of trends found in Jewish communities elsewhere, particularly the United States, with which it is tied in many ways, as well as a distinct society, exercising

a measurable influence on the culture and politics of world Jewry.²

What major trends affect the contemporary Canadian Jewish community?³ Like Jews in most Western countries, Canadian Jews have recently experienced issues regarding anti-Semitism. These, however, have been dealt with adequately by Manuel Prutschi.⁴ They will not, therefore, be discussed in detail here; neither will the issue of the place of Jews in Quebec society,⁵ nor the Jewish community's attempts to influence the Canadian government's position on Israel. A survey, however, of some significant internal trends in Canadian Jewish life will provide a picture of an important community at an interesting moment of transition.

Canadian Jewish Geography

Canadians live in a country of immense geographic space. However, the vast bulk of Canada's population of some 32.4 million⁶ live in less than a dozen major urban centers, of which Toronto and Montreal are the largest. Canadian Jews mirror this pattern and are likewise largely urban. Most live in either Toronto or Montreal, with smaller concentrations in Vancouver, Winnipeg, Ottawa, and elsewhere.

Thus the story of Canadian Jewry today is largely, though not exclusively, a tale of two cities: Montreal and Toronto. Toronto now contains nearly half of all Canadian Jews and Montreal nearly a quarter of them. The first notable thing about Canadian Jews, then, is their strong demographic concentration in two urban centers. Hence, the focus here will be mainly on events and trends in Canada's Jewish population hubs, with the other centers of Canadian Jewish population getting less attention than they perhaps deserve.⁷

The most important trend in Canadian Jewry in the past decades is the rise of Toronto to preeminent status in terms of Jewish population and the concomitant decline of Montreal.⁸ This trend was set in motion by a political process in the Province of Quebec often called the "quiet revolution," which marked the social, political, and economic empowerment of Quebec's French Canadian population, often at the expense of the previous anglophone elites. This process was exacerbated by the rise of Quebec separatist nationalism, which culminated in the rise to power of the pro-Quebec independence Parti Québécois in the provincial election of 1976.⁹

These events caused a mass exodus of businesses and individuals from Quebec, among whom were thousands of Jews. Thus whereas the Jewish population of Montreal in the 1971 census peaked at approximately 112,000, the next three decades saw a diminution of more than 17 percent in the number of Jews in the city to approximately 93,000. This occurred despite a significant immigration into Montreal of francophone Jews of Sephardic (North African) origin¹⁰ as well as a substantial increase in the city's *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) population.¹¹ Moreover, the raw numbers do not entirely reflect the fact that most of the Jews who left Quebec were young and middle-aged adults in their peak earning and reproductive years, who left behind a community with a high proportion of seniors.

The fall of Montreal from its hitherto preeminent position in the Canadian economy as a whole worked to the decided advantage of Toronto and served to cement its economic prominence within Canada. This in turn made Toronto an attractive place for Jewish immigration for those who had left Montreal. It further made Toronto a more popular choice than Montreal for Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union, Israel, South Africa, and other places. Thus, Toronto's Jewish population rose from approximately 107,000 in 1971 to 179,000 in 2001.¹²

Governance of the Canadian Jewish Community

The fundamental demographic change in Canadian Jewry's two largest communities has led to a similarly fundamental change in the governance of the Canadian Jewish community. Whereas previously Montreal could be considered the "capital" of Canadian Jewry, the weight of political influence has decisively shifted to Toronto.

This process is perhaps most clearly symbolized by the decline of the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC).¹³ CJC was founded in Montreal in 1919 so as to allow Canadian Jews to speak with a united, democratic voice on both internal Canadian issues and international issues bearing on Jews. It was headquartered in Montreal and considered itself "the parliament of Canadian Jewry." Daniel Elazar described CJC as a distinctively Canadian approach to communal governance.¹⁴ As such, it bucked the general North American trend toward governance of the Jewish community by Jewish Federation bodies.

Today, however, CJC has declined considerably in power and is effectively controlled by the Toronto-based UIA Federations Canada (UIAFC). UIAFC was founded in June 1998 by the merger of United Israel Appeal Canada and the Council of Jewish Federations of Canada, which were modeled after similar organizations in the United States.¹⁵ In the communal reorganization that resulted from the founding of UIAFC, CJC, which depends on UIAFC for funding, became an essentially subordinate agency along with Jewish Immigrant Aid Services of Canada (JIAS) and National Jewish Campus Life (NJCL). All these agencies are funded by UIAFC as a part of its "National Collective Responsibility...to support organizations that strengthen the national fabric of Canadian Jewry."¹⁶

It is no coincidence that in 1999, the year after the founding of UIAFC, CJC transferred its headquarters building in Montreal to Concordia University and moved its main office from Montreal to Ottawa. The latter, while it is the capital of Canada, has a relatively small Jewish community. Clearly Montreal's Federation/CJA, which represents Canada's second largest community and also has significant historical claims to leadership, has an important voice in UIAFC.¹⁷ It is equally clear, though, that the leadership baton has passed to Toronto and that Montreal, which maintains an enviable network of Jewish organizations and services, can no longer claim to be the Jewish capital of Canada.

Jewish Cultural and Religious Creativity in Canada

When discussing the cultural life of Canadian Jews, it is important to understand some of

the constitutional differences between Canada and the United States and what these signify for the acculturation process of Jews in Canada. The United States, from its inception, has adumbrated a basically unitary culture and language, and immigrants were expected to learn and conform to it. Canada, by contrast, was founded as a compromise between two "founding nations," Anglo-Protestant and French-Catholic, and its founding constitutional document, the British North America Act of 1867, gave specific guarantees to each group.¹⁸

Therefore, Jews in Canada faced a cultural and linguistic duality as well as a reluctance by both "founding nations" to include Jews in their respective polities. This resulted in a pronounced tendency, in the early twentieth century, for Jews in Canada to create their own religious and cultural space. As a consequence, Canadian Jews developed with a relatively greater sense of autonomy vis-à-vis the established linguistic and cultural groups.

In the later part of the twentieth century, the Canadian government supported an official policy of multiculturalism that encouraged Canadians of all ethnic backgrounds to assert their cultural distinctiveness in a Canadian "mosaic."¹⁹ This policy also rendered Canadian Jews more culturally identified as Jews.

Equally noteworthy, unlike the United States Constitution's separation of church and state, which the American Jewish leadership embraces as a cornerstone of American Jews' equality of citizenship,²⁰ there is no clear separation of church and state in the Canadian constitution. Thus Canadian provincial governments can and do support religious schools, and, with the exception of the Province of Ontario, Jewish day schools receive significant governmental financial support that they do not receive in the United States.²¹ Hence, day school education in Canada is relatively more affordable. As a result, whereas in the United States 12 percent of Jewish children attend Jewish day schools (considerably more than in past decades), in the Montreal community fully 34.8 percent of Jewish school-age children attend day schools and 25.2 percent in Toronto.

These are, respectively, the highest and second highest averages for day school attendance reported in North America.²² One concrete result is that, according to the 2001 Canadian census, 63,675 Canadians claimed to be able to speak Hebrew. This is a significant segment of the total Canadian Jewish population, going far beyond the number of Israeli immigrants to Canada.²³

The more intensive Jewish education in the two major centers of Canadian Jewry translates as well to the religious realm. Most surveys show Canadian Jews to be more affiliated with Orthodoxy²⁴ and less with Conservatism or Reform²⁵ relative to Jews in the United States. Observers of the Canadian Jewish scene remark, moreover, that Conservative congregations in Canada tend to remain relatively more resistant to the trend toward egalitarianism than their American counterparts. Non-Orthodox congregations in Canada are likewise relatively slower to accept women rabbis. With respect to Judaic observance such as Yom Kippur, Passover Seders, or Hanukkah

candles, Canadian Jews tend to register higher percentages than American Jews.²⁶

Another important difference in religious composition is the growth of a large Sephardi community, mostly of Moroccan origin, in Montreal. The religious characteristics of this community, which embraces a traditionalism not completely congruent with any standard North American Jewish denominationalism, require those researching the Jewish identification of the Montreal Jewish community to add the category "Traditional Sephardic."²⁷

An ongoing, considerable degree of identification with Yiddish and Yiddish culture indicates a relatively high level of Jewish cultural identification on a nonreligious basis. This is symbolized by the flourishing of KlezKanada, a Klezmer music workshop and festival held annually near Montreal that describes itself as "arising from the wellsprings of Jewish culture and expertise unique to Montreal and Canada,"²⁸ and Toronto's Ashkenaz festival.²⁹ Montreal's Dora Wasserman Yiddish Theatre and Jewish film festivals in Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal all testify to the continued popularity of secular Jewish culture in Canada. Memorialization and ritualization of the Holocaust similarly has loomed large as a factor of Jewish identity in Canada. According to Franklin Bialystok, however, the emergence of the Holocaust as an issue for Canadian Jews had a somewhat different trajectory than in the United States.³⁰

Canadian Jewish Studies

One of the most significant recent intellectual developments affecting Canadian Jewry is the rise of Canadian Jewish studies as an academic field, which has largely paralleled the development of Jewish studies in the United States.³¹ What has emerged from the Canadian academy, however, in the past decade or so is a distinctive focus on the Canadian Jewish experience from a historical, sociological, and literary perspective. This trend has naturally involved mostly Jewish academics but has also interested some French Canadian intellectuals.³²

The field has been institutionalized through the transformation of the Canadian Jewish Historical Society, founded in 1976 as a largely lay-based group supporting the research of local rabbis, CJC officials, and amateur historians,³³ into a largely academic group called the Association for Canadian Jewish Studies. The association supports a growing number of professors and students devoted to this developing field, as well as a journal dedicated to academic scholarship in the area, *Canadian Jewish Studies*.³⁴

In this period there have also emerged chairs in Canadian Jewish Studies at York and Concordia universities, an Institute for Canadian Jewish Studies at Concordia,³⁵ and a program in Jewish Canadian Studies at the University of Ottawa. Evidently, one of the major aims of the nascent field of Canadian Jewish studies is to establish a separate Canadian Jewish dynamic. One of its most distinguished practitioners, Gerald Tulchinsky, notes that:

Canadian Jewish history is a subject in its own right, not a branch or pale reflection of the

Jewish experience in the United States. Its contours were shaped by Canadian conditions, and did not necessarily reflect occurrences and trends that took place first among mainstream Americans and, years later, were experienced by their northern cousins. The Americanization of the Jews - their gradual or rapid adaptation to and acceptance in the mainstream of American culture, and the development of what might be called the American Jewish symbiosis - was not necessarily mirrored in Canada. The Canadian Jew who becomes chief justice of the Supreme Court of Canada (Bora Laskin), or governor of the Bank of Canada (Louis Rasminsky), or a member of a federal Cabinet (Herb Gray), or a highly decorated officer in the Royal Canadian Air Force (Sydney Shulemson), or a leading literary figure (Mordecai Richler), is not simply the northern equivalent of an American Jew like Justice Brandeis, Henry Morgenthau, Bernard Baruch, Admiral Rickover, or Philip Roth.³⁶

Some Conclusions

Tulchinsky's statement clearly indicates that Canadian Jewry, like Canada itself, sees a need to define itself by differentiating itself politically and culturally from the American experience. This is not entirely easy to do because American influence, which was an important factor in Canadian life from the beginning, took on even greater proportions with Britain's twentieth-century retreat from empire and the corresponding rise in American power and influence worldwide. It is clear that the Jews of the United States have exerted considerable influence on Canadian Jewry, not least because the Canadian Jewish community is so much smaller and the border between the two countries has historically been relatively open to the movement of people and their ideas.

To take but one example, Canada possesses no major institution for the training of rabbis and professional Jewish community workers.³⁷ This means Canadian synagogues and other Jewish institutions are led by those trained elsewhere, especially in the United States and Israel. Although some are indeed Canadians who left Canada for their professional training and returned, mostly the positions are taken by non-Canadians who have to learn the differences and similarities of the Canadian Jewish community with Jewish communities elsewhere.

For most casual observers, the major difference between the Canadian and American Jewish communities is a sort of "time lag" in which the situation of the former community seems to lag a generation behind the realities of the latter. As Harold Waller put it, "trends in community life probably appear in Canada about twenty to twenty-five years later than they do in the US."³⁸ As demonstrated here, this phenomenon is no accident. Instead it stems from factors in the Canadian polity that have given the Canadian Jewish community a different valence and a different approach to the issues of contemporary Jewish life.

Notes

1. This is the estimate given in Sergio DellaPergola, "World Jewish Population 2002," *American Jewish Year Book* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2002), 102, www.jafi.org.il/education/100/concepts/demography/demtables.html#3. The Canadian census of 2001 lists 329,995 Jews by religion and 348,605 Jews by ethnicity, www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/home/index.cfm. For an analysis of the 2001 census figures, see Ron Csillag, "Jews Up 3.7% Census Shows," *Canadian Jewish News*, 22 May 2003, www.cjnews.com/viewarticle.asp?id=470&s=1.
2. The most recent sociological analysis of the Canadian Jewish community is Morton Weinfeld, *Like Everyone Else - but Different: The Paradoxical Success of Canadian Jews* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2001). Gerald Tulchinsky has written the most recent historical study of Canadian Jewry in two volumes: *Taking Root: The Origins of the Canadian Jewish Community* (Toronto: Lester, 1992), and *Branching Out: The Transformation of the Canadian Jewish Community* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998). For a guide to the literature on the subject, see Ira Robinson, "Canada," in Michael Terry, ed., *Reader's Guide to Judaism* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000), 100-01. The best current bibliography on the Canadian Jewish community, compiled by Michael Brown, Richard Menkis, Benjamin Schlesinger, and Stuart Schoenfeld, was published as a special number of *Canadian Jewish Studies*, Vols. 7-8 (1999-2000).
3. For a convenient and comprehensive chronicle of significant events in the Canadian Jewish community, see the article "Canada" in the volumes of the *American Jewish Year Book*. For the past two decades this article has been ably written by Harold Waller.
4. Manuel Prutschi, "Anti-Semitism in Canada," *Jewish Political Studies Review*, Vol. 16, Nos. 3-4 (Fall 2004), www.jcpa.org/phas/phas-prutschi-f04.htm
5. Cf. Pierre Anctil, Gerard Bouchard, and Ira Robinson, eds., *Juifs et Canadiens Français dans la société Québécoise* (Sillery, QC: Septentrion, 2000). [French]
6. Estimated population of Canada as of 1 January 2006 according to Statistics Canada, www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/060328/d060328e.htm.
7. As Harold Waller notes, the dominance of community life by Montreal and Toronto has long been a source of resentment in the West, somewhat paralleling developments in Canadian politics. But communities like Winnipeg, Calgary, Edmonton, and even Vancouver are just not large enough to give them any real weight compared to Toronto. Efforts are made from time to time to demonstrate recognition that such communities are an integral part of Canadian Jewry, but demographic realities generally predominate. Harold Waller, "A Community Transformed: the National Picture," in Ruth Klein and Frank Dimant, eds., *From Immigration to Integration: The Canadian Jewish Experience - A Millennium Edition* (Toronto: B'nai Brith Canada, 2001), 158, www.bnaibrith.ca/institute/millennium/millennium00.html.
8. For a largely upbeat evaluation of the contemporary situation of Montreal's Jewish community, see Lisa Keys, "Jews Thrive in La Belle Province despite Separatist Movement," *Forward*, 14 June 2002, www.forward.com/issues/2002/02.06.14/news7.html.
9. For background on the history of Quebec in this era, see Claude Belanger, "Events, Issues and Concepts of Quebec History," www2.marianopolis.edu/quebechistory/events/quiet.htm.
10. Charles Shahrar and Elizabeth Perez, 2001 *Census Analysis: The Jewish Community of Montreal, Part VI, The Sephardic Community* (Montreal: Federation/CJA, 2005), www.federationcja.org/index.php/jewish_montreal/demographics/?langID=1.
11. Charles Shahrar, *A Comprehensive Study of the Frum Community of Greater Montreal* (Montreal: Federation/CJA and Ahavas Chesed, 2003).

12. www.jewishtoronto.com/content_display.html?ArticleID=185657.
13. For a portrait of CJC in its years of decline, see Ira Robinson, "Virtual Reality Comes to Canadian Jewry: The Case of the Canadian Jewish Congress Plenary," *Jewish Political Studies Review*, Vol. 11, Nos. 1-2 (Spring 1999): 63-73, www.jcpa.org/cjc/cjc-robinson-s99.htm.
14. Daniel J. Elazar, "Constitutional Documents," in Daniel J. Elazar, Jonathan Sarna, and Rela G. Monson, eds., *A Double Bond: The Constitutional Documents of American Jewry* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), 31. Cf. Daniel Elazar and Harold Waller, *Maintaining Consensus: The Canadian Jewish Polity in the Postwar World* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990), 42ff.
15. www.jewishcanada.org/content_display.html?ArticleID=68440.
16. www.jewishcanada.org/content_display.html?ArticleID=68369.
17. Thus, in May 2006, both the current president of UIAFC, Stanley Plotnick, and its executive vice-president, Maxyne Finkelstein, had served in similar capacities in Montreal's Federation/CJA.
18. Cf. Andrew Kirn, "The Absence of Pan-Canadian Civil Religion: Plurality, Duality and Conflict in Symbols of Canadian Culture," *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 54 (1993): 257-75.
19. Howard Adelman and John H. Simpson, eds., *Multiculturalism, Jews, and Identities in Canada* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996). Cf. Victoria M. Esses and R.C. Gardner, "Multiculturalism in Canada: Context and Current Status," *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science* (1996), www.cpa.ca/cjbsnew/1996/ful_edito.html. A convenient summary of the issue may be found in the online publication "Multiculturalism in Canada," produced by the Canadian Studies Program of Mount Allison University, www.mta.ca/faculty/arts-letters/canadian_studies/english/about/multi/index.htm.
20. For an expression of this ideology, see the American Jewish Committee's pamphlet *Separation of Church and State: Protecting Religious Liberty in America Today* (April 2005).
21. This issue has recently been prominent in Ontario politics. Nevertheless, Jewish day schools in Toronto are thriving. Cf. Stuart Schoenfeld, "Transnational Religion, Religious Schools, and the Dilemma of Public Funding for Jewish Education: The Case of Ontario," *Jewish Political Studies Review*, Vol. 11, Nos. 1-2 (Spring 1999); Alex Pomson, "Jewish Day School Growth in Toronto: Freeing Policy and Research from the Constraints of Conventional Sociological Wisdom," *Canadian Journal of Education*, Vol. 27 (2002): 379-98. On the complex issue of Jewish schools in Montreal, see Arlette Corcos, *Montréal, les juifs et l'école* (Sillery, QC: Septentrion, 1997).
22. Jewish Life in Greater Toronto Study: Introduction and Methodology, 22, www.jewishtoronto.net/content_display.html?ArticleID=185657.
23. The author is indebted to Prof. Leo Davids of York University for bringing this statistic to his attention. The Israeli community in Toronto supports a weekly newspaper, *Shalom Toronto*.
24. On Orthodoxy in Toronto, see Etan Diamond, *And I Will Dwell in Their Midst: Orthodox Jews in Suburbia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).
25. On Reform Judaism in Canada, see Richard Menkis, "Both Peripheral and Central: Toward a History of Reform Judaism in Canada," *CCAR Journal*, Vol. 51 (Fall 2004): 43-56.
26. Harold Waller, "A Community Transformed: The National Picture," in Klein and Dimant, *From Immigration to Integration*, 158.

27. Charles Shahar remarks that this category was added "since Sephardim may not necessarily describe themselves as either Orthodox or Conservative Jews." See his *A Survey of Jewish Life in Montreal*, Part 2 (Montreal: Federation/CJA, May, 1997), 4.
28. www.klezkanada.com/site/index.php.
29. www.ashkenazfestival.com.
30. Franklin Bialystok, *Delayed Impact: The Holocaust and the Canadian Jewish Community* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000).
31. On Jewish studies in Canada, see Michael Brown, *A Guide to the Study of Jewish Civilization in Canadian Universities* (Jerusalem and Toronto: International Center for the University Teaching of Jewish Civilization of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Centre for Jewish Studies at York University, 1998). On Jewish studies in Quebec, see Ira Robinson, "La Tradition et la littérature juives," in Jean-Marc Larouche and Guy Ménard, eds., *L'Étude de la religion au Québec* (Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2001), 77-85 [French], www.erudit.org/livre/larouchej/2001/livrel4_div10.htm.
32. Ira Robinson, "Jewish Studies in French Canada," *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies* (forthcoming).
33. On this process, see Ira Robinson, "David Rome as an Historian of Canadian Jewry," *Canadian Jewish Studies*, Vol. 3 (1995): 1-10; idem, "Dr. Joseph Kage: Interpreter of Canada and Its Jews," *Canadian Jewish Studies*, Vol. 6 (1998): 81-87.
34. www.acjs-aejc.ca/.
35. www.web2.concordia.ca/jchair/.
36. Gerald Tulchinsky, "The Canadian Jewish Experience: A Distinct Personality Emerges," in Klein and Dimant, *From Immigration to Integration*, 19.
37. It does possess, at McGill and York universities, Jewish teacher training programs. These, however, do not satisfy the demand for teachers in Canadian Jewish schools, which often still depend on personnel from the United States and Israel.
38. Harold Waller, "A Community Transformed: The National Picture," in Klein and Dimant, *From Immigration to Integration*, p. 162.

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