

# NORTH OF THE BORDER

Richard Menkis

Recently, on the occasion of the 350th anniversary of Jewish history in America, a number of Jewish historians reminisced about the bad old days, when American Jewish history was considered somewhere between trivial and irrelevant. As Paula Hyman pointed out at the time, those days are gone and Jewish historians are finally paying attention to the American Jewish experience and the rich scholarship in the area.

Those of us who study Canadian Jewry can only feel envious of our American counterparts. Its size alone should underscore the significance of Canadian Jewry. According to recent estimates, Canada is the third largest diaspora community, after the United States and France. But it is very hard to find Canadian content in non-Canadian—and especially American—journals of Jewish studies. There are many possible reasons for the neglect. Perhaps scholarship on Canadian Jewry has been less cutting-edge than it should be. But I suspect that the explanation lies in the fact that Canada in general does not loom large in the American scheme

of things. I lived in Boston for a while; as far as I could tell, the representation of Canada in the American media consisted mainly of a weather reporter sweeping a hand over the top of the map with “There’s a cold front moving in from Canada.”

Perhaps more disturbing than neglect is the startling claim, also heard in academic circles, that Canadian Jews are like their American counterparts, but a decade behind. To the extent that this statement suggests that there are similarities between the communities, it’s true. To the extent it suggests that Canadian Jewry in some ways seems more religiously “traditional,” it’s also true. But the time lag thesis has to go. To the best of my knowledge,

the 49th parallel has not created a disruption in the space-time continuum. The Canadian Jewish experience is indeed different from that of U.S. Jews, but its special character derives from patterns of immigration and the unique Canadian environment.

## Immigration

Significant Jewish settlement in Canada began after 1763, when the British took control of the land from France. Over the next hundred years, the majority of the Jewish immigrants came from the United States or Great Britain. These settlers were part of what recent researchers, engaging the current emphasis on transnationalism, have described as a far-flung, English-speaking Jewish diaspora which also encompassed Great Britain, the



Map of Canada (Political). U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, 1997.

United States, Jamaica, Bermuda, and Australia. But transnational connections should not obscure national differences, especially between Canada and the United States. In Canada, the model of Anglo-Jewish Orthodoxy, for example, persisted with some vitality into the first decades of the twentieth century. The oldest congregations in Montreal, Toronto and Winnipeg all had ministers who were trained in England, or in the case of Montreal, the son of an English-trained minister.

These English-speaking Jews became the establishment, the *yahudim*. Canadian Jewry did not experience a large wave of German-Jewish immigration. To the best of my knowledge, only one congregation in Canada—the Reform one in Hamilton—ever used German in its minute books. The east European Jews who came before 1914, and then between 1918 and 1924, became the next dominant force in the community. This was a heterogeneous group, coming from different regions and various social classes, but there were certain commonalities. They established Orthodox synagogues with buildings ranging from rented storefronts to Moorish monstrosities. Socialists, especially the Labour Zionists, created remarkable secular Jewish organizations such as the Jewish Public Library of Montreal. The Yiddish day school in Winnipeg, established in 1920, was one of the first of its kind in North America.

After World War II, Canadian Jewry was augmented by a number of new waves of immigration. Two stand out for their impact on Canadian Jewry. The francophone Sephardic Jews of Montreal, a unique group in North America, have slowly achieved significant demographic and political strength within the Montreal Jewish community. This growth has been especially

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noticeable in the aftermath of the large-scale exodus of Anglophone Jews as a result of the increased political strength of separatist Quebecois nationalism. The other group, the survivors of the Holocaust, constitutes a higher percentage of the Canadian Jewish community than in the United States. According to Franklin Bialystok, in 1961 survivors and their descendants made up 13 to 15 percent of the Canadian Jewish community, compared to approximately 4 percent of American Jewry. Once these survivors (and then their children) discovered and asserted their power, their concerns, including the fight against neo-Nazis and Holocaust denial and the drive for various forms of Holocaust commemoration, ranked high on the agenda of the organized Canadian Jewish community.

### **Canada and the Management of Diversity**

Talk to students in English Canada today, and you are sure to hear from most that Canada is characterized by a tolerant “multiculturalism.”

Canada is not, they know, an assimilatory “melting pot” like the United States, but a “mosaic” where differences are legitimized and celebrated. Multiculturalism as an official policy, however, and as a term reflecting a pluralism that respects the differences of minorities, is of relatively recent vintage. In 1971 Pierre Elliot Trudeau declared multiculturalism a

federal policy. In 1982, the newly minted Charter of Rights and Freedoms included one section that announced: “This Charter shall be interpreted in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians.” In 1988 the federal government passed the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, which called for ongoing protection of minorities from prejudice and adequate research funding for the study and promotion of diverse cultures.

The prominence of multiculturalism as a policy and as an ideal has led Canadians to believe that their country has *always* been imbued with respect for the variety of ethnic and religious minorities in the country, which is not the case. On the contrary, the challenge of managing diversity has loomed large in Canadian history, and has rendered ethnic differences salient. Both before the creation of the Dominion of Canada in 1867, and after, much of the energy of Canadian political, social, and cultural life has been expended on finding an equilibrium between the Francophone (largely Catholic) and Anglophone (largely Protestant) communities. This challenge has affected groups beyond these two, including Jews.

Canadian Jews have had explicit legal assurance of their political rights since the early 1830s, two decades before those of Great

Britain. Nevertheless, indirect legal realities operated to foster a sense of Jews as a separate group. This is especially evident in education in Montreal, home to Canada's largest Jewish community until the mid-1970s. The British North America Act, which the British Parliament passed in 1867 to confederate the provinces and create Canada, granted provincial control over education but insisted that the province of Quebec support a school system for its Protestant minority, and that Ontario fund Catholic education. In Montreal, members of the burgeoning Jewish community at the beginning of the twentieth century sent their children to the Protestant school system, but no Jew could be elected to the board, and there were limitations on scholarships for Jewish children. This symbolized how Jews had become a "third solitude" within the city divided between English and French. In the 1920s, one part of the Jewish community pushed hard for a separate Jewish school board, something the Quebec government came very close to creating. Internal dissension and opposition from the Roman Catholic hierarchy brought an end in the early 1930s to the possibility of a separate Jewish system.

In the years between Confederation and World War II, both the French and English elites developed a religious-racial hierarchy with themselves on the top that emphasized exclusivity not just toward each other, but also vis-à-vis First Nations (aboriginal peoples), immigrants from China and India and elsewhere—and Jews. The Anglo-Celtic Protestant elite quietly but effectively restricted Jewish business, social, and political opportunities. In French Canada, nationalists and clerics (two groups with overlapping membership) expressed the hostility more noisily, although not necessarily with much more social and political impact.

Both English and French politicians came together with mean-spirited bureaucrats to limit immigration of Jews and other minorities. From their perspective they were effective; for the Jews it was tragic. Canada, according to historians Irving Abella and Harold Troper, had arguably the worst record in the western world in admitting Jewish refugees between 1933 and 1947, when their needs were the greatest.

Canadian immigration policy loosened several years after World War II, in no small measure because the government realized the need for urban factory workers. Human rights legislation addressed the problems of fair housing and hiring practices, among others. In the 1960s, however, increasing discussion of multiculturalism resulted in new policy and legislation. To many, this multiculturalism has seemed to be a work of alchemy, transforming prejudices that divided the country into pluralism, with rich respect for various groups. After some initial hesitancy with regard to multiculturalism in sections of the organized Jewish community, Canadian Jews saw themselves as its beneficiaries. When Canadian Jews tell American Jews that they are different, it is in part because they feel that Canadian policy and social norms legitimize diversity.

The truth is, however, more complex. In Quebec, French Catholics are a majority but the feelings of being a beleaguered minority persist. Quebec's public policy of "interculturalism" has emphasized integration with respect for difference. The history of a recent government-initiated commission on "reasonable accommodation" reflects the ongoing tensions. There was willingness on the part of prominent members of the Quebec elite to work through the difficult issues and call on both the majority and

the minorities to contemplate adaptations. But the events that led to the creation of the commission (including majority discomfort with public religious displays such as the *eruv*, the sukkah and religious headgear), as well as some of the presentations before the commission—and the reactions to it—point to the existence of a core Catholic constituency that sees no need to make adaptations. In the rest of Canada, federal multicultural policy and ideology in the 1980s and 1990s shifted from supporting cultural diversity to fighting racism against visible minorities. In the latter struggle, Jews were perceived as both victims and victimizers. Now there are signs that the current government would like to navigate multiculturalism toward emphasizing "core Canadian values," or "integrative multiculturalism," apparently in response to the threat of extremism among minority youth. How the government would implement this vision is still unclear.

For Canada's Jews, as well as for its other minorities, these changes in multiculturalism are the latest phases in an ongoing negotiation of Canada's distinctive management of diversity. Given the international interest in Canada's experiments with multiculturalism and how Canada's laws have been used in national and international settings, the ways in which Canada's Jews have experienced Canadian multiculturalism point not to a community that is lagging behind the rest of the Jewish world but one that has been dealing with some of the newest challenges of balancing integration and difference.

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