

Lillooet Nördlinger McDonnell

**Friends with Benefits: Leon Koerner and Frederick
Charles Blair, 1939-1959**

Due to the strict immigration measures developed and enforced by Frederick Charles Blair, director of the Immigration Branch 1936–1943, Canada had the poorest record for admittance of Jewish refugees during WWII. Blair’s letters to various government officials are quoted extensively in None Is Too Many, and have been perceived to reveal his intrinsic distaste for Jews. That Blair, like many among the Canadian elite, was an antisemite is hard to refute. And yet his relationship with Jewish-refugee and lumber-baron Leon Koerner begs closer examination of what it meant to be an antisemite in Canada during the WWII era. Hailing from an industrialist upper-middle-class Jewish family from Czechoslovakia, Koerner was able to use his expertise in the forest industry to persuade the upper echelons of the Canadian government to ignore his Jewish origins and to allow himself and members of his extended family entry into Canada. Despite Blair’s negative predisposition towards Jews, from the time of Koerner’s arrival into Canada until Blair’s death in 1959, the two men maintained a friendly correspondence. This article elucidates the nuances of gentile antisemitism prevalent among members Canada’s elite by examining the relationship between F.C. Blair and Leon Koerner, as documented by letters dated 1939–1959.

En grande partie à cause des mesures de régulation migratoire particulièrement strictes mises en place et appliquées à la lettre par Frederick Charles Blair, directeur de l’Immigration Branch de 1936 à 1943, le Canada a le pire bilan d’accueil de réfugiés juifs pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale. La correspondance de Blair avec différents représentants du gouvernement fédéral a été très largement citée dans None Is Too Many et est considérée comme révélatrice de son aversion pour les Juifs. Il est difficile de réfuter que Blair, comme beaucoup parmi l’élite canadienne de l’époque, était antisémite. Pourtant, sa relation avec Leon Korner, réfugié et magnat du bois juif, complexifie notre compréhension de ce que voulait dire être antisémite dans le Canada de la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Issu d’une famille d’industriels de la classe moyenne supérieure tchécoslovaque, Koerner a pu se servir de son expertise en matière d’industrie forestière pour convaincre les haut-fonctionnaires du gouvernement d’ignorer ses origines juives et de l’autoriser à venir au Canada avec ses proches. Malgré les à priori négatifs de Blair vis-à-vis des Juifs, les deux hommes ont ainsi entretenu une correspondance amicale de l’arrivée de Koerner au Canada jusqu’à la mort de Blair en 1959. En analysant la relation entre Koerner et Blair et leurs lettres pour la période allant de 1939 à 1959, cet article permet de saisir les différentes nuances de ce gentile antisemitism qui prévalait alors parmi l’élite canadienne.

On October 29, 1941, a Jewish refugee by the name of Leon Koerner wrote to the then Canadian Director of Immigration, Frederick Charles Blair. From his new home in Vancouver, Koerner warmly expounded upon a recent visit he and his wife had made to Ottawa: “We both feel that we have to thank you again with all hearts for the great kindness with which you received us in Ottawa during our stay there, and especially also for your friendliness in showing us around the suburbs of your beautiful city.” This was only one of several indications of a friendship between the Jewish refugee and the bureaucrat that had been growing since Koerner first

arrived in Canada in the winter of 1939. Less than two months later Koerner would again write to Blair, thanking him for his “friendship.”² In the early New Year of 1942, the prominent civil servant responded to Koerner’s letter, reminiscing about their recent visit and signing off by writing “With kindest personal regards to Mrs. Koerner and yourself.”³ For the next seventeen years—until just prior to Blair’s death in 1959—the correspondence would continue, as would the mutual expressions of affection.

The “friendship” between Koerner and Blair was an unlikely one, to say the least. Koerner was a recent refugee from the war in Europe and Blair presided over one of the most restrictive immigration policies in Canada’s history—one that reduced to a trickle the number of Jewish immigrants admitted to Canada during the years leading up to and following the outbreak of World War II (WWII). Blair personally vetted each immigration application for admission, and, in 1938, stated that the “pressure on the part of the Jewish people to get into Canada has never been greater than it is now, and I am glad to be able to add that after 35 years of experience here, that it has never been so carefully controlled.”⁴ The Immigration Director also bemoaned that Jews were “utterly selfish in their attempts to force through a permit for the admission of relatives or friends;” that “they do not believe that ‘No’ means more than ‘Perhaps;’” and that they “make any kind of promise to get the door open but...never cease their agitation until they get in the whole lot.”⁵ In view of these statements, Koerner’s 1939 admission to Canada was certainly an anomaly. Even more unusual was the fact that, in spite of their differences, F.C. Blair and Leon Koerner maintained a written correspondence that spanned some twenty years, from 1939 to 1959—continuing long after Koerner received his Canadian citizenship and Blair retired from the civil service. The full collection of over 80 pages of typed and handwritten letters is housed in the Rare Books and Special Collections at the University of British Columbia Library in Vancouver.⁶

Although their association began for bureaucratic reasons, it quickly became personal and, in writing, both men regularly acknowledged an affinity for the other that went beyond mere acquaintance. This article uses the written correspondence between Koerner and Blair to examine how and why a “friendship” developed between them. It contends that, in an era of overt antisemitism in Canada, a number of factors overrode both men’s opposing assessments of the role that Jews and Judaism could play in Canadian society—at least enough to maintain an enduring, if not especially intimate, “friendship.” Koerner, founder of the Alaska Pine Company—which went on to become one of Canada’s most prosperous lumber mills—hailed from an industrialist upper-middle-class Jewish family from Moravia, Austro-Hungary.⁷ Koerner had a strong desire to contribute to society at large (an aspiration which likely stemmed from his Jewish upbringing) and a belief in the ability of other Jewish refugees to do the same. Blair, for his part, was a career bureaucrat who became one

of the most influential civil servants in Canada during the 1930s and early 1940s. He deemed Jews as being incompatible with Canadian society and unlikely to contribute to the country's future well-being. Despite their glaring differences, both men maintained an enduring friendship based on their common pursuit of economic and social uplift—whether personal or public.

Relationships between high level bureaucrats and Jewish refugees during the WWII era have yet to be written about in any depth, both in Canada or internationally. In 2011, Israeli filmmaker Arnon Goldfinger released a documentary entitled *The Flat*, about his grandparents, Kurt and Gerda Tuchler, and their friendship with a high-ranking Nazi official, Leopold von Mildenstein, head of the SS Office for Jewish Affairs.⁸ Research material for the documentary was accidentally discovered while the filmmaker was cleaning out his grandmother's apartment. Similarly, the Koerner-Blair correspondence was inadvertently discovered at the University of British Columbia library,⁹ while conducting research for the writing of another publication, *Raincoast Jews: Integration in British Columbia*.¹⁰ There are likely many more such correspondences between anti-Semites and Jews waiting for discovery in public and private archival files around the world.

The Koerner-Blair "friendship" helps elaborate the scant historiography that addresses relationships between Jews (particularly Jewish refugees) and the Canadian civil service in an era of institutionalized antisemitism. The seminal work on this topic in Canada is Harold Troper and Irving Abella's 1982 publication *None is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933-1948*, which provides a detailed analysis of the Federal government's failure at assisting Jewish refugees between 1933 and 1948, arguing that the Canadian government did less than other Western allied countries to help Jewish refugees. Among other things the book was the first to systematically expose F. C. Blair as the bureaucrat in charge of constraining Jewish immigration, with the complicit support of Prime Minister Mackenzie King and Vincent Massey, High Commissioner to Britain.¹¹ Working partly off of Troper and Abella's groundwork, Alan Mendelson's *Exiles from Nowhere: The Jews and the Canadian Elite*, published in 2008, elucidated how during the WWII era the members of the Canadian government practiced "genteel antisemitism," a non-violent and intellectual antisemitism based on notions of "noblesse oblige, gentlemanly decorum," and the boundaries of "polite society."¹² Derived from a long tradition of understated negative assumptions about Jews and Judaism, "genteel antisemitism" flourished among certain strata of the Canadian elite for much of the twentieth century. As Mendelson explained, during much of this period, people of Hebraic descent were depicted "as enemies of Christianity, enemies of the national state, enemies of peaceful international coexistence, enemies of the poor, or simply enemies of all humanity."¹³

In exploring the Koerner-Blair correspondence, this study does more than reaffirm

Troper, Abella, and Mendelson's respective assessments of the presence of subtle and not-so-subtle forms of institutionalized antisemitism that existed within the Canadian government and mainstream society during the WWII era. It also suggests that opportunities for "friendship" between Jews and gentiles existed even amidst institutionalized antisemitism. To call the relationship between Blair and Koerner a "friendship" is not to ignore the insidious nature of anti-Jewish sentiment during this period in Canada, nor the antisemitic nature of F.C. Blair's policies. Rather, it is to acknowledge the multifarious motivations, many of which were self-serving, that can go into fostering relationships of mutual affection. Both Koerner and Blair found reasons to deliberately ignore, if not exactly neglect, the blatant differences that separated them. There was nothing unconditional about their friendship. Instead, both men found their own priorities reciprocal enough to set aside their particular differences. Their correspondence always remained amiable and gracious, as they discussed business developments, petitions for refugee visas, citizenship status, national pride, social contributions, personal well-being, and seasonal celebrations. Koerner in particular was careful never to let disappointment or disagreement disrupt the flow of correspondence (i.e. particularly when Blair rejected Koerner's requests for visa permits for friends and extended family members). It was under these unusual circumstances that one of Canada's most antisemitic bureaucrats and one of its newest Jewish refugees were able to forge a warm relationship that lasted for two decades.

Setting the Stage: Antisemitism in Canada, 1930s and 1940s

Although Canadian immigration policies towards Jews during the WWII era were clearly part of larger international trends in immigration restriction,¹⁴ of all the allied countries Canada arguably had one of the poorest records for admittance of Jewish refugees in the years leading up to, during, and following WWII.¹⁵ Indeed, Canadian immigration officials displayed a particular dislike of Jewish applicants during these years. As mentioned earlier, immigration policy came under the charge of the Immigration Branch Director, F. C. Blair, who, like the Liberal Prime Minister (PM) Lyon Mackenzie King and his cabinet, "increasingly mirrored the antisemitic spirit of his times."¹⁶ Despite the fact that Jews formed around 1.5 percent of the total Canadian population during the 1930s and 1940s, antisemitism was widespread across the country. In 1937 a Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) committee reported that "During the past few years we have witnessed an amazing growth of antisemitism. Manifestations of an intensified anti-Jewish sentiment have been springing up everywhere."¹⁷ In a 1938 CJC study, it was found that "quotas and restrictions had become a way of life for Canadian Jewry."¹⁸ As Troper and Abella noted, "Anti-Jewish sentiments were being voiced regularly—and with impunity—by many respectable newspapers, politicians, businessmen and clergymen, and by leading officers of [various national organizations]."¹⁹ A Gallup poll taken in mid-1943 asked Canadians what nationalities they would "like to keep from settling in Canada?"²⁰ Forty seven percent said

they would keep out Jews.²¹ A similar poll, taken in 1946, showed that time forty nine percent of Canadians preferred to restrict Jewish immigration to Canada. The same poll found that the highest percentage of prejudice against Jews existed in Québec, followed by the Maritimes, Ontario, the Prairies and British Columbia.²² Indeed, across the country Jews were routinely turned away from prospective jobs, excluded from university fraternities, refused entrance to resorts, and prevented from renting apartments or buying houses in certain residential locations and from gaining access to certain health and business clubs.²³ This was extended to Vancouver's elite business sector, which found itself in the position of being unable to conduct business meetings with Jewish business people in popular meeting places.

In the years leading up to and including WWII, Canadian political and business elites were infused with "genteel antisemitism." Goldwin Smith, scholar, controversial writer, and mentor to many of that generation's civic leaders, was instrumental in instilling antisemitism into Canadian social thinking.²⁴ Smith opined that Jews, who did not accept Jesus as messiah, were "condemned to wander the earth and to make their living through the parasitic exploitation of non-Jews."²⁵ By this logic he inferred that Jews could never be truly patriotic. Although Mackenzie King was occasionally moved by the plight of an individual Jewish refugee, overall he and many in his government, including Director of Immigration, F. C. Blair—a church-going Baptist from southern Ontario—believed that "Jews harboured dangerous tendencies."²⁶

So acceptable was antisemitic rhetoric during that era that Blair did not consider himself an anti-Semite. The government reasoned that Jewish immigration restrictions were humanitarian because they prevented future antisemitic provocations against Jewish Canadians.²⁷ This policy was strongly influenced by Vincent Massey, then High Commissioner in London. Massey pushed for the acceptance of 3,000 Sudetenland Germans, thus creating the illusion that Canada did indeed welcome immigrants.²⁸ By mid-January 1939, six weeks after Kristallnacht, Mackenzie King considered the Jewish refugee problem resolved.²⁹

The genteel antisemitism expressed by Canada's elites can be further understood when one considers that the political and social climate within which they found themselves was one of the most restrictive and exclusionary in Canadian history. The Liberal government's main priority was not humanitarian outreach but rather it was to rectify the economic devastation of the Great Depression while maintaining its base of popular support among Canadians. In this way, immigrants were considered a threat to the Canadian economy—they were seen as job "takers," rather than as job creators and investors. Furthermore, the economic decline inspired a nativist reaction among Canadians which permeated all levels of Canadian society. The previous three decades of open immigration came to be seen as a hindrance to local prosperity. Antisemitic rhetoric continued to gain traction among Canadians in part because

it may have been viewed as an extreme form of nationalism. The combined efforts of Nazi propagandists, American hate-mongers, Eastern European immigrants and certain Christian fundamentalists (who both held culturally rooted antisemitic beliefs about Jews), as well as the widespread belief among the majority of Canadians that all Jews were communists only intensified matters.³⁰ This highly antisemitic atmosphere in Canada on the eve of WWII was particularly evident among members of elite society, who steered clear of sympathizing with European Jewry.

Overview of the Blair-Koerner Correspondence

The letters exchanged between Leon Koerner and F. C. Blair began with Koerner's arrival to Canada in 1939 and ended months prior to Blair's demise from lung cancer in 1959. Koerner's letters are typed, while Blair's are typed and handwritten, likely a reflection of the dates when he held tenure as the Director of Immigration and had access to his own personal secretary: Jessie Reid. Blair retired from the civil service in 1943, shortly before Koerner became a naturalized Canadian. Only a selection of letters is described here.

One early letter in the Koerner-Blair correspondence is a letter from Koerner to Blair dated December 12, 1939. In it Koerner thanked Blair for the immigration permit he granted to Ladislav Kirz, an expert employee of Koerner's who helped run the lumber mills back in Czechoslovakia and who Koerner needed to help run Alaska Pine. Koerner also highlighted for Blair the fact that he has already hired 168 Canadian workers (plus ten additional experts from Czechoslovakia), a mere ten months after his arrival in Canada. Koerner's petition to get Blair to allow the Zuckermans, a Jewish refugee family, entrance into Canada was met with a cool reception from Blair in a letter dated June 19, 1939. On June 27, 1939 Koerner responded by acknowledging Blair's kindness and asks him to keep the Zuckermans in mind, should circumstances change. Koerner then noted that he surpassed his initial promise to employ 100 to 150 workers, and instead is employing nearly 300 Canadian workers, and has invested a working capital of \$500,000 into the Canadian economy. In his letter dated October 21, 1940 Koerner expounded upon the financial successes of Alaska Pine, noting that it produces nearly 20 per cent of British packing boxes (box shooks). Koerner also reported on his sponsorship of seven non-Jewish British child refugees, sent over to Canada for safekeeping. Koerner sponsored their room and board and schooling. On December 8, 1941 Blair once again responded negatively to one of Koerner's petitions for admission of a Jewish refugee by the name of Dr. Egon Glessinger. Blair's response was, "This is one of many similar cases which come to the attention of this Department from time to time and where there are no circumstances which warrant favourable consideration."

Not one to be deterred, Koerner's October 29, 1941 letter attested to his trip to Ottawa, where together with his wife Thea, Koerner visited Blair, who gave them a tour of the Gatineau Park. It is here that the friendship appears to begin. As a memento, Blair sent them Gatineau maple leaves, which Koerner intended to use partly for his Christmas decorations and promised to preserve the rest for a long time. Following Koerner's 1944 naturalization, the correspondence continued with exchanges of good-natured remarks, gifts, and the occasional philosophical ponderance on the part of Blair. In a letter sent from Ottawa dated December 31st, 1951 Blair wrote to Koerner thanking him for a thoughtful Christmas gift and their continued correspondence. Blair wrote:

I cannot let this weary, tired and anxious 1951 slip away without sending you a line to say how much Mary and I appreciate your kindness in sending the box of holly. What surprises me is that you remember from year to year, one whose contact with you and other members of your family, was but a passing experience in your busy life. I like to remember that you came in the days when I could extend a welcoming hand. And I like to think of the benefit that has come to this Land because you came...

By 1951, WWII receded further into the background but Nazi atrocities and the devastation of Europe's Jews became unavoidably evident. Blair seemed relieved to have "extended a welcoming hand" to Koerner, a far cry from his proud statements of keeping Jews out the country prior to WWII. In a letter dated January 17th, 1956 Blair wrote to Koerner describing his visit with various members of his extended family and took a certain pleasure in reminding Koerner of how instrumental he was in Koerner's survival.

Your good letter of the 5th reached my home while I was absent visiting members of my family in various parts of Ontario and the State of Michigan: they range in age from 76 to 89 years. I decided to begin the New Year in doing this and I was so glad to find them all fairly well. And I am so glad to get good news of Mrs. Koerner and yourself. What a blessing that your eyesight has been reinstated. I have note also that all the grafts on the family tree are growing. Do you know that I have often wondered what your lot might have been if you had remained in Europe?

On April 1st, 1958, a little over a year before his death, Blair wrote to Koerner in perhaps his only philosophical letter to Koerner. In it he quotes from the biblical story II Samuel Chapter 9 regarding King David's relationship with the son of his late friend Jonathon and the kindness King David shows him (commentary in following section). Blair wrote:

Some days ago I received your heart-warming letter. Then three days ago I found at my door a notice of a parcel which contained the most wonderful dates grown in the region where you have your winter home. I wonder at your great kindness to me, also I wonder how you knew that I have a liking for dates, which goes back to my childhood days—only then we never dreamed of the quality of dates such as filled the box you sent. And again I can only say thank you for another kindness which reminds me of that...of a story you will find in the Bible, II Samuel Chapter 9. I would only spoil the story by trying to tell it so I suggest you read it at your leisure.

The background of the story is found in I Samuel Chapter 20. Saul the first king of Israel was on the throne. David—later the greatest of all Israel's Kings—was a young man beloved of all except Saul who was jealous of David. Even Saul's son Jonathan sided with David and I Samuel chapter 20 tells of a friendship between Jonathan and David that is known and admired wherever words are written. Between I Samuel Chapter 20 and II Samuel Chapter 9 lies a period of upwards of 25 years. [During that time] Saul and his son Jonathan were slain by a war with the Philistines and Saul's family was represented only by Jonathan's son Mephibosheth [whose name means "from the mouth of shame" and] who was lame through his nurse dropping him in flight. Now read II Samuel Chapter 9 and note in verse 1 the words "that I may show kindness for Jonathan's sake." Then see in verse 3 the words "the kindness of God unto him." I think you are showing to me "the kindness of God." What more can I say?

Motivations for Friendship

There were likely several motivating factors as to why Koerner and Blair befriended one another. From Koerner's perspective, a close affiliation with Blair augmented two of his main priorities: 1) Securing refuge in Canada for himself, various family members and friends and others fleeing Nazi occupied Europe; and 2) regaining the financial success and social prestige that he enjoyed (or aspired to enjoy) in his homeland. These two goals were never divorced from each other. From the beginning, Koerner's search for a new country of residence was an effort to protect his family from both the existential and commercial threat posed by Nazi occupation.

From Blair's perspective the original motivation for building a friendship with Koerner almost certainly stemmed from the larger demands of creating economic prosperity in Canada. As Director of Immigration, Blair was not completely autonomous in his decision-making power. In fact, he reported to the Minister of Mines and Resources, Thomas Alexander Crerar, whose main responsibility was to find ways to profitably exploit the rich natural resources of Canada's hinterland, including its

lumber industry, which was in a depressed state following the economic downturn of the 1930s. It would not have been difficult for Blair to assess how Koerner's substantial investment in the Alaska Pine Company could go a long way in revitalizing Canada's lumber industry. It appears that Blair made the pragmatic decision to let economic considerations take precedence over social prejudice in this case.

By March 15, 1939 all Koerner family assets and corporate holdings—which had been substantial—came under Nazi control, never again to be recovered.³¹ Some of the Koerner family's best employees would betray them. Despite the dissolution of the Koerner business holdings, Koerner together with his brothers Otto, Walter, and Theodore, insisted on continuing the family business in London, a place where they maintained longstanding business ties. There they managed to raise a credit of approximately three hundred thousand pounds, a fraction of the family holdings before the rise of Nazi power—yet, considering their circumstances, significant capital nevertheless.³²

While Koerner's brothers struggled to find financial success in London, in February of 1939 Koerner and his wife Thea set sail for North America in hopes of finding business investment opportunities further afield.³³ Their first stop was New York City.³⁴ After visiting the World's Fair, they travelled to Montréal where they met with Sir Edward Beatty, a leading businessman and a prominent figure in the rail industry. Initially attracted to Canada because of its business potential and its parliamentary system of governance, Montréal's cold weather quickly inspired the Koerners to spend the rest of the winter in California.³⁵

By the time Koerner reached Vancouver, the high economic expectations placed upon him compounded with the stress of not knowing the fates and whereabouts of missing relatives, plummeted him into "an acute state of depression."³⁶ Moreover, Koerner's first impressions of British Columbia were not exactly favourable. Canadians, it appeared, did not know what to make of the European businessman. His letters of introduction were ignored, his formal and sophisticated manners were ridiculed, and his business acumen threatened his contemporaries. He also had little in common with the established Canadian Jewish community.³⁷ Had it not been for the fact that Thea Koerner contracted mumps, the Koerners would have left immediately. When Hitler invaded what remained of Czechoslovakia, Koerner understood that it would be impossible to ever call Europe home again. He galvanized himself and persevered. After visiting some coastal mills on the mainland and Vancouver Island, Koerner was "amazed" at the potential for opportunity.³⁸ It would not be long before he opened the Alaska Pine Company, which would go on to become one of British Columbia's most prosperous lumber mills by processing hemlock, a previously unsellable wood. But if Koerner was to exploit the rich commercial potential he found along Canada's West Coast, it was necessary for him to secure a stable legal

residency in the country for himself and his family. Officially classified as an enemy alien, there was only one man who could formally change his status to legally reside in Canada and continue his business pursuits. This man was, of course, F. C. Blair.

Almost certainly, his practical goals of legal residency and the potential for continued economic prosperity it afforded motivated Koerner to first strike up a friendly relationship with the Director of Immigration. This is perhaps what explains his attentive good humour in addressing Blair during the earlier months of their correspondence. Indeed, from the very outset, Koerner's letters mixed pleasant and cordial inquiries into the state of Blair's wellbeing, with updates on business developments, and requests for asylum.

Even when Koerner disagreed with Blair's decisions on other matters, he nevertheless stifled his disappointment in order to praise Blair. For example, in a letter dated June 27, 1939, and sent nearly four years before he received his Canadian residency, Koerner overlooked Blair's denial of admission to another application by a Jewish refugee and his family. Writing to Blair, he admitted: "I regret very much that your decision in regard to Mr. and Mrs. Zuckerman had to be negative.... Nevertheless, dear Mr. Blair, I thank you for the kind interest you have shown again and wish to mention that I was very pleased to hear your voice on the telephone when speaking to you recently." Despite his obvious displeasure at the decision, Koerner nevertheless attempted to ingratiate himself with Blair by promoting his business accomplishments. In the same letter Koerner also wrote: "Everything at Alaska Pine is going quite well...my first promise was to employ 100 to 150 men, amongst whom ten Czechoslovakian experts and we are employing now double that amount with only nine Czechoslovakians. The working capital of Alaska Pine, which was all brought over from Europe exceeds \$500,000." By emphasizing his business acumen more than his disappointment over the rejected application of a fellow Jew, Koerner was suggesting to Blair that he prioritized economic prosperity over ethnic identity, and the importance that he and Alaska Pine might contribute to Canada's war effort—an emphasis he knew would be well-received by the Director of Immigration.

Twinned with Koerner's pursuit of economic prosperity was an equal yearning for social propriety. When Koerner arrived in Canada, mainstream society was unified in its accepted definitions of status and prestige.³⁹ In order to gain prestige it was widely understood that one had to adhere to a code of respectability, defined by good character, honesty, industriousness, self-sufficiency and sobriety. It was also strongly associated with rootedness, stability, family, and above all, British culture.⁴⁰ Canadian society was based on class, the higher echelons of which were typically unattainable by most Jews. In British Columbia, the divisions between the genteel and Jewish strata were obvious. There was a strong social separation, for instance, between Vancouver's predominantly Eastern European Jewish community and the

British-based general population.⁴¹ Koerner understood this process of social definition and although he could not claim a British ethnicity, he sought social respectability via other avenues.

He endeavoured to endear himself to Blair in the same way he pursued respectability elsewhere, by subverting his Jewishness and expressing a willingness to assimilate with his host society. During his early years in Canada, Koerner reported to Blair of his decision to sponsor the room, board, and schooling of seven non-Jewish child refugees, sent over to Canada from Britain for safekeeping. This followed a long series of petitions by Koerner on behalf of Jewish refugees, whose applications to Canada were ultimately rejected regardless of wealth. Whether the later sponsorship of non-Jews resulted from a genuine compassion for all those affected by the war, or whether it was a strategic move to make himself look good in the eyes of the Canadian government is unknown. Regardless of his motivations, Koerner's safe-harboring of British gentiles in Canada may have also been construed as a symbolic sponsorship of the ethnic status quo in his new host country.

This willingness to submit to Anglo-Saxon favouritism was also paralleled by an overt acceptance of Christian values and practices. For example, when Blair sent the Koerners autumn leaves from the Gatineau Park, Koerner reported that they used some of them for their Christmas table: "The maple leaves will be preserved for a long time and... used for our Christmas decorations."⁴² Blair was not the only recipient of Koerner's holiday cheer. The businessman and his family dutifully sent Christmas cards to friends and family each year, and Koerner also gave his employees special considerations at Christmas time.⁴³ Outwardly, and especially during holiday times, Koerner seemed eager to portray himself as a good Canadian Christian.

It is impossible to know how much of Koerner's apparent willingness to assimilate was rhetorical rather than earnest. But he may have been more willing to assimilate than others, for the businessman had no special affinity for the more religious aspects of his own religious heritage. Prior to his arrival in Canada, Koerner's Jewish identity could be described as secular with Zionist leanings. The impact of WWII, including Canadian sentiments towards Jewish refugees, took their toll on Koerner's Jewish identity. Koerner's wife Thea Rosenquist converted to Lutheranism at some point prior to 1938. Documents also attest to the conversion of Koerner's sister-in-law,⁴⁴ Iby Molnar, as well as his youngest brother Walter Koerner and his wife Marianne Hinkl. Since the first decade of the twentieth century, Jewish conversion to Christianity in Europe had been on the rise. Jewish motivation to convert was often prompted by an understanding of traditional European antisemitism, which was based on religious differences, rather than racial ones. Conversion was considered an "entry ticket" into fashionable European society and upward mobility.

Following his own wife, brother, and sisters-in-law, it is possible that Koerner and his other brothers formally converted to Christianity shortly after arriving in Canada. Sella Heller—a fellow Jewish refugee from a forestry industrialist family—reported that the Koerners were all baptized at a Presbyterian Church in Windsor, Ontario. She explained that there was a Presbyterian clergyman “who had a lucrative business to turn rich Jews into Presbyterians.”⁴⁵ It is not known whether Koerner recited Jewish prayers or observed Jewish holidays; however, at least one family friend from that era maintains that the Koerners did observe Jewish holidays behind closed doors.⁴⁶ That he celebrated Christmas in a religious sense is doubtful, but Koerner’s outward acceptance of Christmas is indicative of the degree to which he wished to facilitate his assimilation into Canadian society and be accepted by the established social and economic elites.

If the practicalities of gaining legal residency motivated Koerner’s efforts to confirm his suitability as a respectable member of Canada’s higher social echelons, what then motivated Koerner to continue his relationship with Blair after he and his family obtained full Canadian citizenship and after Blair himself retired? There must have been other reasons, to which one can only surmise. Koerner’s own fragile claims to propriety may have inspired him to keep up the correspondence. His brand of European sophistication, as displayed through his formal style of letter writing and manner of speaking, had been ridiculed when he first arrived in Canada, and this experience may have made his claims to respectability seem tenuous. Keeping up correspondence with a once prestigious personality such as Blair may have helped allay any status anxiety he might have felt. Alternatively, Koerner’s own long-ingrained sense of respectability (regardless of whether it had been ridiculed) may have remained with him throughout his life, and with it a sense of decorum and duty when it came to maintaining relationships. Or perhaps he felt a genuine sense of personal gratitude towards Blair. Indeed, despite his refusal to help thousands of other Jewish applicants, Blair had agreed to grant Koerner and his family entrance into Canada. Another possible motivation for maintaining a friendship with Blair may have included an impulse to somehow prove Blair wrong in his assumption that Jews could not make good citizens or productive contributions to Canadian society. Indeed, in this respect, Koerner had much to show Blair. In addition to establishing one of British Columbia’s most prosperous lumber mills, Koerner was also concerned with the health, safety, and overall well-being of his workers. He and his brothers introduced a number of workplace initiatives previously non-existent in British Columbia. In 1955 he established the Leon and Thea Koerner Foundation. Some of these accomplishments he shared with Blair. In doing so, Koerner earned the distinction of becoming the founder of the third private foundation in the province, as well as the distinction of becoming the first refugee/immigrant to establish such a foundation.⁴⁷

On his part, Blair did not originally have any reason to pursue anything more than a purely professional relationship with Koerner. He probably realized early on that the Jewish refugee had few other viable opportunities to gain legal status in a country that was also amenable to his economic success. Moreover, Koerner was not the only one ready to invest in Canada's flagging lumber industry. Other industrialists were also beginning to show interest, among them several Jewish refugee families such as the Hellers, the Sauders, and the Bentleys. This perhaps explains why Blair's early letters to Koerner, particularly during his time as the Director of Immigration, are official in nature, at times even curt.

Over time, however, and especially once he left the bureaucracy, Blair's tone softened in his letters to Koerner and he seemed to become truly open to a deeper friendship. Soon he even became amenable to exchanging seasonal greetings and gifts with the lumber baron, including holly and honey dates from Koerner and Gatineau maple leaves from Blair. What explains this transition in Blair's attitude? On a certain level the (former) civil servant's motivation for constructing a friendship with Koerner may have resulted from the Jewish refugee's persistent efforts to demonstrate his own openness to assimilation. After all, Koerner's sponsorship of British children and his writing of annual Christmas card wishes demonstrated an abundant readiness to accept, and even adopt, Christian Anglo-Saxon values. It is impossible to know whether Blair realized the extensive efforts Koerner made in order to curry favour with him. But given Koerner's ability to obscure his obvious Jewish attributes, along with his ability to successfully align himself so quickly with elite circles, it is probable that Blair chose to ignore Koerner's Jewish roots, if not exactly forget them.⁴⁸ This was not an unheard of occurrence among the upper circles of Canada's elite, as exemplified by Mackenzie King's warm assessment of a Jewish doctor named Leathem. While attending the funeral of Dr. Leathem, Mackenzie King stated, "Dr. Leathem was one of the finest men we have had in Canada. A Beautiful Christian type with a refined mind, great moral strength and purpose."⁴⁹ That Koerner may have been perceived as a "beautiful Christian type"⁵⁰ would have only complimented the main determinant in his entrance into Canada: the expectation that he and his brothers would provide the Canadian economy with capital and much needed jobs in a depressed sector of the Canadian economy. It was not by coincidence that Blair's immigration branch was housed in, and beholden to, the Department of Mines and Resources. The government of Canada expected that immigrants to the country, should there be any, would invigorate the mines and resource sectors of the Canadian economy. Thus economic interests needed to be Blair's primary objective for allowing Jews like Koerner into the country. That the Koerners displayed sophisticated manners, decorated their Christmas tables, and demonstrated their commitment to the Canadian establishment would have only sweetened their economic promise.

Blair's friendship with Koerner—whose Jewish identity remained mostly confined within the relatively safe boundaries of his private life—may have also indicated that Blair was open to the possibility of clandestine irregularity. Indeed, there seems to be an unspoken acknowledgement on the part of Blair that abnormal, even illicit, practices were acceptable if they were kept hidden from public life and did not obviously challenge an outward display of respectability. Blair himself may have been hiding such an illicit lifestyle himself. In a letter to Koerner, dated January 17, 1956, the former civil servant signed off with the names, "F. C. Blair and Mary." From the information exchanged between Blair and Koerner, it appears that Mary McCracken was a federal government employee, a Christian, and F. C. Blair's live-in companion—at a time when it was socially unacceptable to have unwed romantic companions living together. Blair never referred to McCracken as his wife, but they evidently shared the same postal address. Perhaps Blair was a man who lived up to social expectations externally, but made exceptions on a personal level in more than one area of his life.

As palatable as Koerner had made himself seem to Blair, the former bureaucrat may have been all the more willing to sympathize with Koerner's plight as an uprooted refugee, despite his ethnic and religious background. In a letter dated January 17, 1956 Blair comments, "Do you know that I have often wondered what your lot might have been if you had remained in Europe?" Was Blair, in his own limited way, trying to be compassionate—or acknowledge Koerner's unsuitability to be lost to the ravages of war? Was he trying to assuage a sense of guilt by patting himself on the back for saving Koerner's life? The governments of allied countries had received explicit details about the genocides taking place in concentration camps since 1944. Was Blair, in 1956, naïve enough to wonder about the fates of Jews who remained in Europe during the war? Whatever his reasons for lamenting Koerner's difficult circumstances, there appears to be evidence that Blair saw Koerner as a benevolent friend. One of Blair's most poignant remarks to this effect came in his second to last letter to Koerner dated April 1, 1958. In it Blair marveled Koerner's "great kindness" towards him, and he wrote, "I think you are showing to me 'the kindness of God.' What more can I say?" These comments are in reference to the biblical verse in I Samuel Chapter 20, in which the newly anointed King David shows kindness to the lame son of his deceased best friend, Jonathan, and grandson of the deceased King Saul. The custom of the day was to slaughter the direct descendants of the previous ruler. Was this how Blair saw himself, the lame prodigy of a former ruler, who should have been forgotten by those, like Koerner, in places of power? Did Blair deem himself unworthy for other reasons? Was this an expression of genuine gratitude for decades of friendly outreach? It is hard to know. These few comments are the only hints of Blair's reflection on his relationship with Koerner.

Conclusion

What can be learned about the broader cultural pattern of Canadian antisemitism, as it was expressed by F. C. Blair, Director of Immigration and as it related to his friendship with Leon Koerner, lumber industrialist and Jewish refugee? The correspondence between Blair and Koerner demonstrate that antisemitism—at least in its genteel form—could coexist with a more collaborative and affectionate sensibility based on a degree of trust and respect. The circumstances under which this rapprochement could occur, however, were also exceptional. Forging a “friendship” during the period between 1939 and 1959 required the refugee to steadfastly demonstrate his willingness to both invest in the Canadian economy and assimilate to mainstream cultural values. It also required the bureaucrat to overlook the businessman’s Jewish heritage in order to satisfy ostensibly more important concerns, such as economic prosperity and the outward adherence to bourgeois principles of respectability. Acknowledging this friendship is in no way meant as a rejection of the institutionalized anti-Jewish sentiment present in Canada during this period, nor F. C. Blair’s antisemitism specifically. Indeed, Blair formed the immigration policy and vetoed thousands of applications keeping Jews out of Canada. Thousands of Jews perished as a result.

What the Koerner-Blair letters demonstrate are the nuances of collective exclusions. When a mindset of antisemitism and exclusionary measures is adopted collectively, it is possible on an individual level to find exceptions, and step beyond the collective consciousness. Affectionate relationships among disparate parties are possible, even desirable given the appropriate circumstances. To call Leon Koerner and F. C. Blair’s relationship a “friendship,” when genteel antisemitism was so firmly entrenched in Canadian society, perhaps devalues the connotations of the term. But it also suggests ways of moving past social impasses. Conciliation is possible, even if it never completely dismantles dominant power structures. Friendships do not profit everyone identically, or even equally, but friendships always have their benefits.

1

Letter from Koerner to Blair October 29, 1941, Leon Koerner Fonds, Box 13-6, UBC Library.

2

Letter from Koerner to Blair, December 23, 1941, Leon Koerner Fonds, Box 13-6, UBC Library.

3

Letter from Blair to Koerner, January 5, 1942 Leon Koerner Fonds, Box 13-6, UBC Library.

4

Alan Mendelson, *Exiles from Nowhere: The Jews and the Canadian Elite* (Toronto: Robin Brass Studio, 2008), p.8.

5

Abella and Troper, *None is Too Many*, p.25.

6

Leon Koerner Fonds, Box 13-6, UBC Library.

7

This region would later become part of Czechoslovakia.

8

Arnon Goldfinger, *The Flat*, Ruth Diskin Films, 2011.

9

Leon Koerner Fonds, Box 13-6, UBC Library.

10

Lilloet Nördlinger McDonnell, *Raincoast Jews: Integration in British Columbia*. (Vancouver, BC: Midtown Press, 2014).

11

Troper and Abella's work is also the first on the Canadian Jewish historiographical landscape to confront the myth of Canada as a longstanding immigrant welcoming country.

12

Mendelson, *Exiles from Nowhere*, p.3.

13

Mendelson, *Exiles from Nowhere: the Jews and the Canadian Elite*, pp.1-2. For further discussion see Pierre Anctil. "Interludes of Hostility: Judeo-Christian Relations in Québec in the Interwar Period." In *Antisemitism in Canada: History and Interpretation*. Edited by Alan T. Davies (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992), pp. 135-166.

14

Louise London, *Whitehall and the Jews, 1933-1948: British immigration policy, Jewish refugees and the Holocaust*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

15

Irving M. Abella and Harold Martin Troper, *None is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933-1948* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1982), p. x, p.109

16

Abella and Troper, *None is Too Many*, p.7.

17

In Canadian Jewish Congress, *Report on Antisemitism Activities 4-6*, ed. CJC National Archives (now Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives) (1937) p.750.

18

Canadian Jewish Congress, *Report on Antisemitism Activities 4-6*, p.750.

19

Abella and Troper, *None is Too Many*, p.51.

20

Wilfrid Sanders, *Jack [and] Jacques: a scientific approach to the study of French and non-French thought in Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1943), p.40.

21

The 1943 Gallup poll also showed that 78% of Canadians wanted keep Japanese from settling in Canada and 58% of Canadians wanted to keep Germans from settling. Sanders, *Jack [and] Jacques*, p.40.

22

The degree of prejudice had little to do with the percentage of Jews to the general population. Manitoba had the highest percentage of population at 2.6 per cent; Quebec had two per cent; while Ontario had 1.84 per cent. Pierre Berton, "No Jews need apply," *Canadian Jewish News* 35, no. 50 (December 23, 2004), re-printed from MacLean's Magazine November 1, 1948.

23

Louis Rosenberg and Morton Weinfeld, *Canada's Jews: A Social and Economic Study of Jews in Canada in the 1930s* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), p.300.

24

To various degrees these included PM William Lyon Mackenzie King, Henri Bourassa, Vincent Massey, and George M. Grant. Mendelson, *Exiles from Nowhere*, p.4.

25

Mendelson, *Exiles from Nowhere*, p.4.

26

Mendelson, *Exiles from Nowhere*, p.34.

27

Mendelson, *Exiles from Nowhere*, p.84.

28

Vincent Massey was a fringe member of the aristocratic and antisemitic Cliveden set. He was enthusiastic about anti-Nazi Sudetenland refugees. Massey told Mackenzie King that only a few of the refugees were Jews. "If we could take a substantial number of them it would put us in a much stronger position in relation to later appeals from and on behalf of non-Aryans." The Sudetenlanders included

"many persons who would be much more desirable as Canadian settlers and much more likely to succeed in our country than certain other types of refugees." Abella and Troper, *None is Too Many*, pp.47-48.

29

Mendelson, *Exiles from Nowhere*, p.84.

30

Irving M. Abella and Franklin Bialystok, "Canada," In *The World Reacts to the Holocaust*, eds. David S. Wyman and Charles H. Rosenzweig (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins university Press, 1996), pp.753-754.

31

Walter C. Koerner, *The Tree May Prefer Calm, But the Wind Will Never Subside*. (Vancouver: WC Koerner, 1988), p.13.

32

Rosemary Cunningham, "Leon Koerner: Industrialist and Philanthropist Extraordinaire." *British Columbia History* 40, no. 1 (Fall 2007), pp.13-21.

33

Koerner, *The Tree May Prefer Calm, but the Wind Will Never Subside*, p.15.

34

Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, "Border Crossings: From Canada to U.S., 1895-1956 about Thea Korner," in The Generations Network, Inc. [database online]. Provo, UT, USA March 12, 2009 [cited 2009]. [<http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?db=canadianbc&h=5598227&ti=0&in-div=try&gss=pt>].

35

Koerner, *The Tree May Prefer Calm, but the Wind Will Never Subside*, p.18.

36

Mackenzie Porter, *Leon Koerner's One-Man Giveaway Program*, (MacLean's: August 4, 1956), p.35.

37

Cunningham, *Leon Koerner: Industrialist and Philanthropist Extraordinaire*, p.4.

38

Harold Hillier, "They've Built a Forest Empire," *Star Weekly*, 15 Nov. 1952, p.2.

39

Status and prestige were prominent social determinants in the years prior to WWI, and continued to affect Vancouverites in the decades that followed. Robert A. J. McDonald, *Making Vancouver*, (Vancouver BC: UBC Press, 1996), p.236.

40

Patricia Roy, *The Oriental Question: Consolidating a White Man's Province, 1914-41* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003), p.10.

41

Oral History Interview Sella Heller, Irene Dodek, September – October 1996 JHSBC Oral History Project, Tape 3/7 side 2:294.

42

Letters from Koerner to Blair, October 29, 194, Leon Koerner Fonds, Box 13-6.

43

APEAC Minutes, June 18, 1942, Leon Koerner Fonds, Box1-3.

44

Koerner's wife Thea Rosenquist converted to Lutheranism at some point prior to 1938. Documents also attest to the conversion of Koerner's sister-in-law Iby Molnar as well as his youngest brother Walter Koerner and his wife Marianne Hinkl. Since the first decade of the twentieth century, Jewish conversion to Christianity had been on the rise. Jewish motivation to convert was often prompted by an understanding of traditional European antisemitism, which was based on religious differences, rather than racial ones. Conversion was considered an "entry ticket" into fashionable European society and upward mobility. *Walter Koerner family official documents—Testimonium Baptismale, 1909-1938*, Walter C. Koerner Fonds, Box 28-2, UBC Library.

45

Oral History Interview Sella Heller, Irene Dodek, September/ October 1996, JHSBC Oral History Project, Tape 3/7 side 1:251.

46

Joanne Emerman, personal communication, September 24, 2015, Vancouver, B.C.

47

Cunningham, *Leon Koerner: Industrialist and Philanthropist Extraordinaire*, p.20. The Chris

Spencer Foundation (1949) and the Mr. & Mrs. P.A. Woodward Foundation (1951) were the first two Ibid., p.16.

48

See Abella and Troper, *None is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933-1948*, p.336.

49

Mendelson, *Exiles from Nowhere: the Jews and the Canadian Elite*, p.333 n81.

50

Upon entry to Buffalo, New York from Canada in 1941, Thea Koerner was recorded as being of the "Hebrew" race, while Koerner was only ever recorded as being of the "Moravian" race. "New York Passenger Lists, 1820-1957 re: Leon Korner," in The Generations Network, Inc., Provo, UT, USA, cited 2009, [<http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?db=ny-pl&h=1004123463&ti=0&indiv=try&gss=pt>]. Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, re: Thea Korner *Border Crossings: From Canada to U.S., 1895-1956*.