

The Political Consequences of The Jewish School Question, Montreal, 1925-1933*

DAVID ROME

*A fuller treatment of the subject appears in *Canadian Jewish Archives New Series*, Number 3, "On the Jewish School Question in Montreal, 1903-1931". Montreal, Canadian Jewish Congress National Archives, 1975.

The sources for this study are listed in "Inventory of Documents on the Jewish School Question 1903-1932" in *Canadian Jewish Archives*, Number 2, 1975.

Résumé

Monsieur David Rome s'interroge sur les conséquences politiques de la question des écoles Juives de Montréal (1925-33). Faisant remonter le problème à l'établissement de la constitution, David Rome passe en revue l'histoire de la question en soulignant que l'origine du problème réside en la division arbitraire: Écoles catholiques vs Écoles non-catholiques (C'est-à-dire protestantes). Ainsi le manque de vision des chefs de l'époque (et cela inclut certains leaders de la communauté juive) finit par refouler les enfants juifs dans les écoles protestantes, avec les problèmes que cela peut impliquer . . .

Ainsi l'antisémitisme Anglo-Saxon se manifesta d'une manière explicite quand les Juifs tentèrent de faire partie de l'administration de l'enseignement. Puis le succès des écoles juives privées contribua au déclin des assimilationnistes. Mais au-delà des complexités historiques, une structure semble s'affirmer: le préjugé Chrétien.

L'opinion du 'Comité catholique' est un exemple de cette manière de penser: notre état a été fondé par des Chrétiens pour des Chrétiens; il est donc normal que ceux qui ne font pas partie de notre groupe religieux n'obtiennent pas nos privilèges. Cette attitude typiquement 'catholique de droite' finit par expliquer le manque de sympathie que les Juifs ont pour les nationalistes québécois ainsi que leur association avec les libéraux. La question des écoles juives peut alors se lire comme un signe politique.

On the assumption that the broad outline of the Jewish school question in Montreal in the 1920's and early 1930's is familiar to readers of Canadian Jewish history, it is interesting to summarize the political consequence of these developments.

It is rather striking that that issue — in its nature not particularly

central or of great scope — should have become so far-reaching in its consequences.

The seeds for this issue were planted in the confederation debate, when the Quebec educational system was founded in the Canadian constitution. When the existing rights of Catholics and Protestants were guaranteed, the place of Jews and other non-Catholics was not. How did it happen?

If the fathers of Confederation overlooked this in 1867 as a minor matter, how did it happen that the Jews of Montreal disregarded their interest in the central and decisive debate of the age?

It is not that there were no Jews in Canada at the time. There were nearly 1,300 of them in the country in 1867, twelve times as many as in 1832 when legislation was passed in Lower Canada giving them political equality with members of other faiths and three times as many as in 1857 when similar legislation was passed in the broader assembly of the United Province of Upper and Lower Canada. They had three congregations established by colonial charter, (two were in Montreal, one in Hamilton and there was a Victoria Congregation chartered under B.C. law in 1864).

The Jewish community was an old Canadian community with a longstanding awareness of constitutional rights and of the need for them. In the days of Benjamin Hart and even of his brothers Ezekiel and Moses, and of his nephew Samuel Becancour — there never could have occurred a lapse of determined assertion of full status. When, by 1846, Montreal found itself in a position different from 1829, the community sought a restatement of the position of the Spanish Congregation and an affirmation of the not yet fully-formed Congregation of English, German and Polish Jews, later the Shaar Hashomayim.

But this did not occur in 1867, possibly just because these Harts were no longer on the scene. In fact, leadership in the community was undergoing a brief crisis of transition. The 1850's and 1860's followed the peak years of the Harts — exemplified by Benjamin who left the scene after the Rebellion Losses Bill which he opposed so violently.

The name of Dr. Abraham de Sola springs to mind in a review of the successive leadership within the Jewish community, but it fades when we examine closely the implicit conditions of his long tenure, even after his marriage into the Joseph family.

Twice he nearly failed to be reappointed to his pulpit within a decade of his arrival in Canada and ever since, he remained meticulously at a distance from public concerns. The distinguished ambassador of Jewry, with

his broad concerns, ritual and cultural, did not include Canadian affairs in the periphery of his studies. That was left to the lay membership of the congregation.

By 1867, the early Lithuanian immigrants exemplified by the Cohens and Vinebergs and Jacobs families had not yet come to Montreal from their early years in eastern Ontario.

So it happened that the Jewish children automatically came to attend the English-language schools run by the Protestants without these pupils being assured of any status or the protection of law. Nor did the schools, on the other hand, have any settled instrument for the continuity of the linguistic or cultural tradition of these non-Christian children, or a clear delineation of their powers or resources in educating these children. It was never clear — indeed, not even to this day — which children they could, or had to accept.

The story of these schools, therefore, has been a century of unrest, and the story of the Jewish children has been equally restless. When the account of the other decades are detailed, the 1920's will not be exceptional.

It is a story with some stability and good will and respect. Indeed, within this history there are cases of Jewish schooling maintained by public funds. We might recall that fine moment in 1903 when the Protestants were unhappy to win their court case against young Pinsler. They moved of their own free will to have Jewish rights enacted so that there might never be another Pinsler case.

But time moved on and a quarter of a century later, crisis, anger and legal action, sprang from issues concerning the schooling of a number of Jewish children residing in parts of the city of Montreal.

Those outside the shifting ghetto were not affected; curriculum was not in question; taxation was not in question; religious instruction and proselytism were not involved; the constitutional status of the school boards or governmental organization were not involved; employment of Jewish teachers was not involved. The Protestants became suspicious of the Jews' political intentions in seeking seats in the educational structure, and of the ultimate cultural intentions and influences of the Jewish sectors on the Anglo-Saxon environment. A society that has been traditionally reserved in expression suddenly became vocally anti-Semitic. In these processes the integrationalist utopia that many Jews and Protestants had seen as an attainable objective suddenly evaporated.

The naming at the proper moment of a liaison representative of Jews to maintain communications with the Protestants might have defused the is-

sue.

This did not happen for reasons largely psychological. There were fears in the air, all about. These proved self-fulfilling, even though experienced leaders on all sides warned of the consequences. In this sense the heroes without a following proved to be the Honourable Alexandre Taschereau, Premier of Quebec, on the government side, Henri Bourassa in the Catholic Church, H. Marler among the Protestants. They did not prevail, and events took their course.

Within the Jewish community, the consequence was a conflict of ideologies that has not quieted during the scores of years since. The school question is still unsettled in the Jewish community, and it is still impossible to discuss it coolly, without strong prejudgmental emotions. There are still powerful tensions within the community in regard to the positions which Jews ought to occupy in the public education sector.

The decade of conflict between Jews and Protestants brought to the surface a grave bitterness. Many Jews came to feel that their children, as pupils, and that they, as citizens, were not welcome — and were not becoming more welcome with the passage of time — in the schools, in the administrative bodies, or in the total society which the schools represented.

Among the several consequences of the battle of those years was the establishment of the Jewish day schools. Their success has revolutionized the attitude of the Jewish community towards all Jewish education, notably towards the school system. The success of the parochial schools won respect for the values taught in these schools and helped to achieve dignity and an equality of status for the totality of Jewish culture in circles where intense Judaism had been identical with the very term “enthusiasm” in the eighteenth century. This has been particularly significant in circles which were called assimilationists by their opponents and were praised as Canadian-integrated by their friends. That contributed considerably to the factual disappearance of the assimilationist philosophy in Canadian Jewry, though other factors such as the catastrophe of Hitlerism and the later emergence of the State of Israel, were much more influential.

At first, the Catholic concern was shared with the Protestants; that nothing occur in the course of the dealings in regard to Jews that might affect the basic constitutional structure of Quebec education, the confessional system, and the rights and authority of the Catholic community and of the hierarchy.

But in the course of the discussions, an important tendency in con-

stitutional philosophy developed in the Catholic Committee. Members of the Committee began to stress that the Canadian constitution was Christian; that confessional and Christian rights are embedded in the constitution and should be confirmed in law; and that residents who are not Christian do not, in law, have the rights of Christians either as individual citizens or as groups. This was reiterated at Catholic Committee meetings, in such journals as the *Devoir*, in the *Revue du droit* and even in the opinions of the judges.

This stand — certainly it cannot be called friendly to the Jewish community or conducive to world citizenship or to a deeper concern for the welfare of fellow-humans — contributed to the near-catastrophic consequences of the positions taken soon after by Episcopal members of the Catholic Committee.

The failure of sympathy by disdainful Protestants and by hostile Catholics left the liberals alone in seeking a solution. They seemed genuinely interested in finding an answer that would satisfy all contestants, and were finding none, not even a unified Jewish community. The Jewish politicians, Peter Bercovitch and Joseph Cohen, spoke for no particular resolution of the issues, attempting as they did to be all things to all men — to their political partisan chieftains, to the rich men of their community and to the poor of the down-town voters who elected them.

Premier Taschereau found himself forced to the solution to which the Privy Council opened the door, but which did not have even the support of the Jews to whom he was closest. But he did find the Jewish panel a just solution which Protestant leaders had often agreed to, which would fulfill broad Jewish aspirations and which, after much amendment, was acceptable to the hierarchy.

Above all, he backed Henri Bourassa who spoke on this question as a Catholic: the separate Jewish panel was the only solution that protected Catholic interests. It took the Jewish pupils — their numbers, their vigor, their influence, their taxes, their political coloration out of the Protestant universe. It would enable the Protestant network to remain fully Protestant and Christian. It would ensure that Jewish schools would be fully Jewish, and therefore religious, well under governmental, and even churchly control. It would prevent the Protestant school system from becoming a virtually neutral system. For, in the presence of a neutral school system, no Christian or religious system could survive as a parallel network.

The price was to be recognition of the Jews as a group and Judaism as a

religion. Bourassa did not consider it an excessive price. It was a simple and a positive statement of a fact he was prepared to reiterate on any occasion. Bourassa had a right to speak up. As one of the most potent political figures in the nation, a great orator, a magic personality, founder and director of the *Devoir*, a member of the premier aristocratic family of French Canada, an earnest communicant of the Catholic Church, a man of piety and devotion known to the Pope, an ultramontanist and profound supporter of the Catholic position on the world arena—Bourassa the layman could credibly speak for Christian interests with an authority near that of cardinal and archbishop. Taschereau could be comforted by Bourassa's support.

It could not have been easy for the premier to guess that this issue would become the touchstone of Bourassa's career as well as his own, that the leaders of the church would so forcefully disavow both him and Bourassa. It was a remarkable failure of communication that became a fateful landmark in the history of Quebec.

It was a crucial element — certainly not the sole cause of the downfall of Taschereau's long career as leader of the province and in the introduction of a new primitivism in Quebec politics during the decades that followed.

In the partisan arena, the Conservative opposition was silent. It was a problem of the utmost delicacy and they had no alternative solution, so Taschereau had the bill passed.

Immediately the storm broke.

It is unclear whether the government had the complete consent of the churchmen to each clause of the measure as it finally passed. In any case, Taschereau was immediately attacked by the hierarchy, with the unanimous consent of all the bishops.

Presumably, because the issue was, in point of fact, confined to part of the Island of Montreal, Bishop Georges Gauthier spoke out loudest. There was all the more weight behind his words for the circumstances that he was not by character an aggressive battler in public issues, but usually a man of great reserve and of guarded speech. On this issue some of his terms and actions are surprising to readers of his record and they bespeak an explosion against a defenseless group by a man who may long have restrained expression on matters that troubled him.

His attack on the bill took several forms, each of which had far-reaching consequences. There was his very formal statement, "his sermon from the mount" (from Mount Royal), where he unleashed an attack on

the Jews in which he specifically destroyed, in the province at least, for many crucial years, the recognition that the Jewish people were a persecuted people; that their very physical safety and security depended upon the humane understanding and the support of people of good will; that Canadians were called upon by elemental conscience not to join the persecutors.

All this, Mgr. Gauthier dismissed with a phrase: Jews are already surrounded with sympathy.

With this one pregnant phrase, the archbishop administering the archdiocese of the Ecclesiastical Province of Montreal, silenced the conscience of Christians who were — or might become — aware of Jewish suffering in contemporary Europe.

The remarkable statement was echoed in April, 1933 by an extraordinary public meeting scarcely paralleled anywhere in the free world. After a protest meeting against the German atrocities, a counter protest was sponsored by a very important French-Canadian nationalistic group, les Jeune Canada, against those who had joined the Jews in this humane expression. Important thinkers in the province took part in this counter protest, and the *Devoir* supported them. Chanoine Groulx gave his considered support to these anti-Jewish protestors. Under a *nom de plume* he utilized more violent comments than the vaguer views with which he signed his own name.

In the years that followed, condemnation of Hitler's horrors against the Jews was quite scarce in Quebec. The monsignor's clarion call against the Jewish schools was not an indirect manipulation of influence through personal contact. This was power directly versus power.

The organ of expression which the church chose for this combat was *Action Catholique*, the important Quebec City daily that had been established as the authoritative, and nearly official, voice of the ancient archdiocese of the provincial capital.

It was here that the major lines of the issue were drawn, and by the same influential and literate journalists who had made that paper one of the most consistent and unrelieved anti-Semitic periodicals of the world. Gauthier's warning against too great a sympathy for the Jews needs to be taken in context with the network of anti-Jewish myths — in relation to immigration, freemasonry, communism, Zionism, exploitation, anti-Catholicism, atheism, *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, public welfare, the cinema, fashion, liberalism, compulsory education, Sunday observance and a score of other emotional issues developed in Quebec long before Hitler borrowed them for his parallel purposes.

The other medium of expression which attacked the government on this score was the Arcand's Menard press: not even the *Devoir* (also a member of *la bonne presse* club), not *La Presse* not *La Patrie*, not even *Le Droit*.

This was more than a publicity relationship. Arcand repeatedly said that it was on the invitation of the archbishop that he entered the campaign. This was his introduction to the political aspects of the "Jewish question".

We have here ecclesiastical action and responsibility for the creation of a major anti-Semitic political program. Some seven years later, when it became clear that this fascism of "the defender of the faith" was also dangerously anti-Catholic, the church issued a warning to its leaders and communicants to be wary of it. But this was dangerously late.

Taschereau became aware of the nature of this new attack from a new source. He was being opposed not by the traditional opposition but by a new, extra parliamentary force. The veteran politician knew he could not fight it, nor could he retreat. He therefore took advantage of a clause in his own law, inserted originally for other purposes, to leave the door open for those Jews who were cool to separate schools and who continued to hope for an accommodation with the Protestant authorities. The act permitted the Jewish commission to negotiate with the Protestants to this end. Now Taschereau put strong pressure upon the Jews — and presumably also on the Protestants — to reach an agreement which would obviate the need for separate Jewish schools. It was a most intense pressure. Dr. Max Wiseman told of it later. Even an activist like Michael Garber who had led the battle for separate schools was now forced to succumb, even though this left him open to charges of betrayal.

The general public could not be admitted to the workings of the political mechanism. It was puzzled by the commission's inexplicable rejection of the program which it was empowered to follow. The tensions remained for a long time; the long dramatic story of the separate Jewish panel idea came to an end.

This was the first parliamentary and legislative victory in many years for a group of Quebec Catholics who had in the past fought — and lost — against compulsory education, free text books, public charities, the cinema and a long other series of innovations which they saw as emanating from freemasonry and sometimes from Jewry. This group now became a victorious political force with a program all its own on Quebec matters, on Canadian constitutionalism, and on national and external af-

fairs.

Its immediate opponent had been the entrenched Taschereau Liberal government which had dared to defy it on the Jewish school question. The relation between church and state was coming to an end and Taschereau's days were numbered. Its successor was not the Conservative Party. It had not fought the Jews on the school issue. In fact, this was the end of the Conservative Party in Quebec, which was affiliated with the National Conservative Party.

That party in Ottawa had more than flirted with the new force, and had even raised moneys for Arcand, but it soon thought better of it and abruptly withdrew this support, forcing the sudden closing down of Arcand's newspaper for a time.

The stunning victory over the school issue encouraged Arcand to move from the journalistic to the political arena. He expended this campaign with the same instruments of annihilation, anti-Semitism and reaction — always claiming to defend faith and church — into political partnership. This was the beginning of militant Quebec fascism, the only substantial form of this black force in Canadian history.

Without detailing the history of this complex movement here, it may be noted that as Arcand entered more seriously on the political arena, he was faced with important rivals in anti-Semitism such as the group of *La Nation* which divided the extreme right in the province and in their internecine struggle unmasked the underlying weaknesses in each section. Even more important, as their loyalty to fascist ideas came to be clearer, the weakness of their religious, Catholic adherence became more obvious, to the point where the church, after dangerous years of consideration, warned its communicants about certain irreligious elements in Arcand's teachings.

In the meantime, Arcand's intense anti-Semitism, anti-liberalism and anti-democracy were injected into the political thinking of Quebec in ferment. They became the underlying premise of movements for whom *Action Nationale* and the *Devoir* spoke, often for the advancement of much more respectable causes than race hatred. It is one of the regrettable facts of Canadian history that many phases of Quebec's social, cultural and political development — including separatist tendencies — was furthered in a climate where Arcand's racism was also accepted. It is a series of strains and confusions which has not yet been completely clarified and purged.

The most authoritative *Semaine religieuse de Quebec* became but little

distinguishable from the *Goglu*. Bourassa was ejected from the *Devoir* he had founded and had turned into a great Canadian institution.

The anti-racist nationalism of Bourassa succumbed to the anti-Semitic nationalism of Abbé Lionel Groulx, with all the consequences to later development of Quebec and of Canada.

The anti-Jewish campaign that burst out at this time in Quebec — from politicians, from churchmen, from the “good press” and from all and sundry — and its importance to Canadian history has not yet been fully evaluated. In a score of ways this anti-Jewish campaign was related to the Jewish schooling issue.

This is history broader than that of Arcand’s Parti National Social Chrétien. He had hoped to mobilize Houde and Duplessis into his team. But they proved too astute to become his lackeys. Each became a great Quebec force in his own right, less vicious than Arcand would have wanted. But Houde was sufficiently Hitlerite to win a cot near Arcand in the internment camp for dangerous anti-Canadians when the test of war came, and Duplessis’ record of reaction and anti-Semitism needs no elaboration.

One of the most tragic immediate results of the political power of the anti-Semites which had been demonstrated in the school issue was the actual loss of Jewish lives brutally refused refuge by the Canadian government during the years when the pogromists and the concentration camps were becoming more and more openly a phenomenon of the century. In any integrated survey of Canadian history, the role of Canada in the era of the Holocaust must become even more central in a view of our character, our leadership, our ethic, our place in world affairs.

In this basic overview of our country during the last half century the record is brutal. The unrelieved pressure mobilized and orchestrated by the victors of the school question is documented by the hundreds of petitions from Quebec sent to Ottawa protesting the admission of even a single Jewish refugee fleeing from Hitler. They are nearly all formulated in the myth terminology of Arcand’s *Patriote*. Among the signatories are the organizations who are always dutifully echoing Menard and the German propagandists. The City Council of Montreal joined them enthusiastically to make certain that the passengers of the *St. Louis* found no refuge in Canada. In other parts of Canada the objection was more often on the basis of current unemployment and economic conditions, and it was more often anti-immigration rather than anti-refugee.

The imagery of the Jews conveyed so successfully in the campaign

about the school question became deeply rooted in the thinking and in the articulation of that nationalistic church-led portion of French Canada. It generalized from *Semaine religieuse* de Quebec to the *Devoir* (never to the circles of *La Presse*) and eventually came to complicate the thinking of this society decades later when their country was at war with Germany.

During the terrible Hitler years that immediately followed the Jewish school crisis there was strong continuity of anti-Semitism in the many issues that arose to divide the Jews from other Canadians.

One of these was the Sunday question which had been dormant for a quarter of a century. Now the victors of the battle against the Jewish schools seized the time to attack what they chose to call another Jewish privilege, namely the legislation which permitted the Jew, who observed Saturday as a day of repose, to work on Sunday under certain conditions. When victory came, the Lique triumphantly pointed out the potential of further social action by similar means.

This marked the beginning of a new political orientation by the churchmen and a new chapter in church and state relations, at a time when Arcand was formally a campaign director of Duplessis' party.

To readers of Canadian history who take into consideration the minor, but revealing Jewish motif, what seems remarkable during these several decades is the almost unprecedented unanimity of churchmen in relation to both political matters, to the Jewish citizenry of the country, and to the fact — and problems — of Jewish existence.

Unlike the situation in many other countries, even in Germany, there was no Catholic dissent from anti-Semitism; there was no Quebec condemnation of Nazism; there was no Quebec plea for the threatened, for the attacked or for the tortured of Dachau. There were no Sisters or Fathers of Notre Dame de Sion to relate love of the Christ figure with love of his people in the flesh.

Concepts that underlay the intense school campaign and the Sunday observance measure were also influential in strengthening the world view of French Canada, now invigorated by the political and social necessities on the political front even during the last years of the Liberal government. The anti-Jewish myths basic to these campaigns conformed to political and social movements in Europe, which, each in its region, were vigorously warring on the Jewish position.

Unfortunately, all these trends fitted too neatly with other socio-philosophical conceptions that were accepted and promoted by this French-Canadian society. The result: a strong anti-equalitarian and pro-

fascist orientation which was not at all restrained by the political philosophy which animated the Anglo-Saxon world and was undoubtedly at the root of Canadian democracy.

The one restraining element that was strongly operative came from the ethical-religious convictions of the activists of anti-Jewish action. Constantly we read in their own writings the reserve that justice must be done to all concerned. They truly did not see the inconsistency between their world conceptions of morality and their political alignments and programs at this time.

By the same token, they abhorred violence in any form and on any occasion. If only by omission of any call to direct action they ensured that the disdain they promulgated and the attacks on the status and the rights of Jews were not accompanied, as they were in Europe, by physical attacks on the persons or the property of Jews. (The nearest to a threat of direct citizen's action by this sector of society emanated from Abbé Groulx, under a nom de plume, and the object of his anger was the immorality being disseminated on the film screens of Quebec.)

These victories over tolerance of non-Catholics in this Quebec society destroyed the moderates who sought a secure place for others in Quebec society. One searches in vain in the copious "messianic" literature of the French-Canadian nationalism of this period for a just or a justified place even for English Canadians, let alone Jews, in the French Canada of the future.

Xenophobia became not a fear but an aggressive, violent force in the native political ideology of the province. The Island of Quebec was not even near other Canadian or western worlds. There is scarcely a nationalistic thinker after 1920, from Groulx onward, who did not express himself anti-Semiticly. At best, (as in the later thirties) the attacks are rarer or even absent. An example of nearly benevolent silence on the so-called Jewish question may be seen in *Action Nationale* after its first frenetic years of the decade. One nationalist spokesman who protested anti-Semitism, possibly the only one, was Guy Fregault.

In such a climate in the province, and in the world, it was not expected that Jews in Quebec should sympathize with the nationalism of their French-Canadian neighbours. The results were a further consolidation of their links with the Liberal Party and a further breach with the local provincial political parties such as Duplessis'—later those such as the Bloc and Credit Sociale—and from the separatist groups of various tints.

The phenomenon was not only political. It was an arresting of the process of acculturation, of the adoption by younger Quebec Jews of the culture and language of the Quebec in which they were residing, in which more and more of them were being born. Suffered to continue, it would have resulted in deeper solitudes, in higher walls.

As an indication — not a proof — of the clerical factor in this development and in this condition, this phenomenon may be seen in the succeeding decade, when, in the course of events, the clerical influence became less in Quebec political thinking and simultaneously the bars against Jews in the nationalistic circles were lowered. Now we find a nationalism and a separatism which is not anti-Semitic, which has Jews in its ranks at several levels, and which openly invites Jewish participation in its struggle for the independence still being fought for. We find Jewish participation in French literature and even in the civil service.

The consequences of the school issue of the 1920's were dissipated by the phenomenon of the Quiet Revolution.

We may note that Professor Guy Fregault was, more than symbolically, a deputy minister of that revolutionary government.

These latter phenomena were not to come until Hitler's total defeat. As long as the fascist expansionist idea had a hope somewhere in Europe, somewhere in Canadian hearts, which anticipated another outcome from the conflict of ideologies, there was unanimity about Jews in the outspoken Catholic and patriotic spheres of the province. This homogeneity may have been efficacious at the time. But when, in the course of time, the political regime fell, as it must in every democratic society, the anti-Duplessis' reversal brought in its train the reversal of all the consequences that flowed from — or were caused by — the crisis of the Jewish school question.