

# A Look At Jewish Canadiana

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## *Résumé*

On a déjà souvent remarqué que l'histoire des Juifs Canadiens est encore à explorer. Il faut souligner pourtant que beaucoup a déjà été fait dans ce domain, non seulement par des historiens mais aussi par des représentants de différents groupes tels que les médecins, les rabbins, les journalistes etc. Parfois on découvre ainsi des détails historiques dans des textes qui ne sont pas strictement reliés à l'étude de l'histoire, et dont l'écrivain de l'article donne une liste très sommaire.

Il faut espérer, conclut M. Kayfetz, que d'autres suivront son exemple et se pencheront sur des textes non historiques mais qui peuvent être pourtant très enrechissants dans l'étude de l'histoire des Juifs Canadiens.

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It has been remarked that Canadian Jewish history is still an unploughed, unexplored field and that very little has been done in this area. No doubt, very true. But over the years, this reader, a very casual amateur of Canada's Jewish chronicles, has found a sizable number of books and booklets, pamphlets and monographs relevant to the subject, not all of equal value, but altogether of surpassing interest.

Canadian Jewry has its own character and its very own special qualities. The social scientist perhaps some day will find the answer to questions that fairly jump up from the pages and that shout at the observer:

Whence the special property of "folkishness" that sets the Winnipeg Jew apart? Why is Yiddish a livelier and more durable entity there than in other cities in North America, and than other cities in Canada? Is this related to the greater presence of followers of the old Socialist Territorialist movement (ST) among its founders? Was it because its Peretz School didn't undergo the political schisms that Toronto's experienced? Why was Western Canada the locale of Canada's — indeed North America's — earliest Jewish day schools, a Talmud Torah in Edmonton and a Peretz Shule in Winnipeg? Why not Montreal as might have been expected? How does one explain the total absence of Jewish provincial hinterland in Quebec — the non-existence of organized communities other than Sherbrooke and Quebec City? Contrast this with the clusters of structured kehilloth in nearby Ontario — the Galts,

Kitcheners, Cornwalls, Bellevilles, Brantfords etc. — at one time more than 30 in number. It is noteworthy that the early *g'dolim* of Montreal's Jewry — the Vinebergs, Jacobs and Cohens — first settled in the Brockville-Alexandria-Lancaster corner of Eastern Ontario. Was the wall of Quebecois Catholicism too inhospitable a barrier to permanent settlement among the French Canadians — or was it only perceived as such?

Why did Montreal boast (and it still possesses) a Jewish Public Library such as no other Jewish community on the continent has produced? Why has Montreal not been a provincial centre but rather a major centre of Yiddish letters, with names like Reuben Brainin who, living there barely half a dozen years, left an imprint that is still felt, with Melech Ravitch who chose to live in Montreal over many other centres, and with many other figures such as poet I. J. Segal and musicologist Israel Rabinowitz. It is interesting that it was Montreal, not another centre, that produced that unique poet among poets, the late Abraham Klein. Why has Montreal specifically, and Canada as a whole, produced a Jewish-Canadian "sub-literature" that was noted by critic Claude Bissell as far back as 1957?

One may not find the answers in the historical sketches and journals that are listed herein but the actual discovery of these questions is itself an exciting experience. And these are the excitements that are in store for the dedicated reader.

There are categories of writers and writings. Benjamin Sack in Montreal and Abraham Rhinewine in Toronto were Yiddish journalists who started early in their careers to examine the record of Jews in their adopted country. Rhinewine died in his forties and no doubt would have carried it much further than he did. Simon Belkin, Joseph Kage, Bernard Figler and Abe Arnold were Jewish public servants and in a sense their historical and biographical research was an extension of their professional and personal interest, even if in some cases it was not directly related to their daily pursuits. (Of this group Arnold is a journalist as well.)

Rabbis have been, and are most productive in this field. Dr. Stuart Rosenberg's two-volume work, despite criticism, is a most ambitious undertaking and remains a valuable contribution. Arthur Chiel's studies throw light on the Western Canadian development. (His identification of Sholom Aleichem's Uncle Nissel as a fugitive from Czarist justice who landed in Winnipeg is a real find.) Dr. Jonathan Plaut recently completed his study of the Jewish history of Windsor Ontario.

Others are men and women of scholarly tastes and background: H. M. Arnoni of Ottawa, whose work appears in the Canadian-Jewish Year-

book; Dr. Isadore Goldstick, a native of Courland who taught French and German in London's high schools (and who also translated Rhinewine, translated Sholom Aleichem, edited a collection of Yiddish folk sayings); Julius Aaron Cohen, a resident of London, Ontario; Lou Kurman, who was executive director of the Council of Jewish Organizations of Hamilton, Ontario.

The memoir genre has not gone unrepresented either. As it happens, two physicians, one in Montreal, Alton Goldbloom, and one in Toronto, Abraham I. Willinsky, told parallel stories of the barriers they faced as Jews in their profession. Both were of the same generation and both books appeared within a few years of each other. Another Jewish doctor, David Eisen, kept his student diary intact after 50 years and thanks to a government grant it was published (a slice of Jewish student life in Ontario during, and in the years immediately following, the first World War). Sigmund Samuel's memoirs tell of a more sheltered life in the bosom of a Victorian Anglophile Jewish family in Upper Canada.

Sometimes one comes across bits and pieces of Canadian-Jewish history in quite unexpected places. Rudolph Rocker was a German Gentile, a libertarian socialist, an anarchist he is called by some, who submerged himself in the immigrant world of the old Jewish East End of London and emerged as an editor of a Yiddish workers' weekly. In *The London Years* he reports a trip to North America in 1913 and records his friendly polemics with the Poale Zion and the Jewish socialists of Toronto. S. Almazoff was a Communist before the Party was organized and in his memoirs he recounts the dramatic, tense scene in Montreal in 1919 at the Canadian Jewish Congress' first assembly, when his dissenting voice could have registered a negative vote at the end of the debate endorsing the Balfour Declaration.

There were probably not as many "radicals" as it seems there were among the Jewish immigrants in the earlier days. The bulk of the Jews who came to Canada were still attached to tradition and to the mitzvoh, even if they were deficient in their punctilious observance. But it was the secularized maskilim, the "emancipated" intellectuals or would-be intellectuals, the autodidacts and semididacts who did most of the writing. The literate among the religious-minded Jews were more interested in Torah than in personal memoirs or historic annotations. Rabbi Jacob Gordon was the author of *Minchas Yaakov*. He also wrote a treatise on vegetarianism and a critique of spiritualism. In our day it is the same: Rabbis A. A. Price, Gedalia Felder and others have produced voluminous

editions of responsa on religious and halachic questions.

In our time, two liberal rabbis, both natives of the U.S.A. who held the same Toronto pulpit in succession, in writing their memoirs were responsible for recording some Canadian-Jewish history — Maurice Eisendrath and Abraham Feinberg. A third rabbi, Reuben Slonim, now somewhat at odds with the mainstream of Jewish thinking in Canada, has written a volume on the recent “Family Quarrel” as he calls it, between Canada’s Jews and the United Church over the anti-Israel views promoted by the editor of its “unofficial” organ.

*A People And Its Faith* — Essays on Jews and Reform Judaism in a changing Canada. Edited by Albert Rose. University of Toronto Press 1959. This was issued on the centenary of Holy Blossom Temple three years earlier (1956) and contains several essays of an historical nature.

*Can Faith Survive?* The thoughts and afterthoughts of an American Rabbi. By Maurice Eisendrath. McGraw-Hill 1964. Experience recollected in tranquility of a rabbinical career, much of it based on events and experiences in Canada. It records the shock and trauma suffered by a rabbi raised in the Midwest in a Classical-Reform background confronting, for the first time in his career, a community of immigrant East-European Jews. It reveals much of Toronto Jewry in the 1930’s, especially from the point of view of an outsider from a contrasting environment.

*Report Of The Special Committee On Hate Propaganda In Canada* — Ottawa, Queens Printer 1966. Recounts the neo-Nazi activity of the early 1960’s.

*History Of The Jews In Canada* — By B. G. Sack. Harvest House, Montreal 1945. Reprinted 1965. Also in Yiddish. Geshikhte fun di Yidn in Kanada. Goes to the end of the 19th century. The pioneer work in Canadian-Jewish history. Sack’s history, for all its faults, is still a basic requirement.

*Toronto’s Jewish Doctors* — By Dr. David Eisen. Canadian-Jewish Congress, Toronto 1959. The history of the medical profession among Jews in Toronto. Reprinted from the Jewish Standard

*Stars Of David* — By Hye Bossin. Jewish participation in the Toronto theatre with a special chapter on the Yiddish stage. Published by the United Jewish Welfare Fund of Toronto, Canadian-Jewish Congress, and the Jewish Standard, 1957. Tells of individual Jewish actors and impresarios who were active in Toronto and of the heyday of Yiddish theatre at the Lyric and Standard Theatres.

*The First Two Years* — By David Rome. Privately published in

Montreal, 1942. This monograph deals with the events of the first two years of the Jewish community of Victoria 1958-1959, which were also the first two years of the general settlement of this part of Vancouver Island. Excellent detail on what was literally a pioneer Jewish settlement.

*Der Yid In Kanada* — By Abraham Rhinewine (Yiddish) Toronto. Vol. 1 1925, Vol. 2 1927. An early effort by a Canadian-Yiddish journalist to assemble sources and record events.

*De Poalei-Tzion Bavegung In Kanada (1904-1920)* — By Sh. Belkin published by the Labour-Zionist Movement in Canada, Montreal 1956. Includes material on early beginnings of Canadian-Jewish Congress, the Yiddish secular schools in cities across Canada, early ideological conflicts; it covers Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, Hamilton, Vancouver and other centres. The Labour-Zionist participation in the formation of the Canadian-Jewish Congress is included; the *Sprachenfrage* which caused dual and multiple school systems and which at one point brought Ber Borochov to Canada to elicit his aid in settling the *disputat*.

*Jewish Life In Canada* — By William Kurelek and Abraham Arnold. Hurtig 1976. An interesting marriage of text and illustration. The paintings are by a Canadian of Ukrainian parentage and are inclined to be idealized in their concept. The text has managed to condense a vast material into a parsimony of words.

*Tzvey Hundert Yor Fun Yiddisher Imigratzie In Kanada* — By Joseph Kage. Montreal 1960. History of Jewish Immigration to Canada from the period 1759-1959. *With Faith and Thanksgiving* by Joseph Kage. (English version of above-named book.)

*The Jews In Manitoba* — By Arthur A. Chiel. University of Toronto Press 1961 (issued under the auspices of the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba) with a foreword by W. L. Morton. Essays on earlier Jewish days in Western Canada: the first farm colonies, the beginnings of Jewish education, the proliferation of synagogue and early attempts at cultural advancement, Zionist work, etc.

*Canada's Jews; A Social and Economic Study of the Jews in Canada* — By Louis Rosenberg. Published by Canadian-Jewish Congress, Montreal 1939. It is the most authoritative and informative source of information of Canadian-Jewish demography in the 1930's. Its detail is overwhelming. It provides exact data on deaf-mutism, blindness and insanity in the Jewish population, vocational and occupational data of all kinds, a list of all towns and villages in Canada with only one Jewish resident in 1931, and a list of towns and villages which had no Jews in 1931

but which had Jewish residents at some time prior to 1931. In each of the former lists the Jewish population of each place is given for each decennial census year from 1891 to 1931. The book is invaluable for its account of the Jewish farm settlements in Western Canada, for its analysis of the immigration laws of the 1920's and 1930's as they affected Jews and for its general all-round thoroughness. It is regrettable that a similar study was not prepared from at least one or two of the later decennial censuses.

*Diary Of A Medical Student (1917-1922)* — By David Eisen, Toronto 1974 (Canadian-Jewish Congress). A day-by-day account of Jewish student life in Toronto in the years of World War I and after. The influenza epidemic, controversy on the new post Balfour Declaration Palestine, Hart House debates and inter-collegiate wrestling, the two Jewish student organizations, Zionist Conferences, anti-foreign riots in downtown Toronto by returned soldiers, Galician Jews as "enemy aliens", Orthodox versus Reform — these are some of the themes covered, all put down with a sense of direct immediacy. A literal cross-section of Jewish student life against the background of an immigrant community.

*Toronto Jewry* — (mimeographed) Canadian-Jewish Congress Central Region 1957. An article from the Mail and Empire — 1897 taken from a series "Foreigners Who Live in Toronto" by "A Reporter". The writer is the young W. L. Mackenzie King, then a part-time reporter. The article is well written, objective and a good piece of reporting. The series was a "spin-off" from young Mackenzie King's series on sweating by government contracted firms which propelled him into public service and eventually a political career. The young Mackenzie King — he was 23 at the time — makes some shrewd observations in the Jewish population of the day. It is an excellent picture of an immigrant community in Canada in Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee year — also the year of the first Zionist Congress and the establishment of the Bund in Russia.

*The Swastika And The Maple Leaf* — By Lita Rose Betcherman. Fitzhenry and Whiteside, Toronto 1975. A much needed account of the recent past: fascism in Canada in the 1930's. The role of Adrien Arcand, his early associations with leading Canadian politicians, his ties to Duplessis. Fascism in English-speaking Canada, its link with Quebec. The paradox of pro-Germanism linked to Imperialist chauvanism. The Swastika gang in Toronto. Dr. Betcherman makes the point that in both English and French Canada the nazi-fascists had only one major commodity to sell — anti-Semitism.

*Looking Back A Century* — on the Centennial of Jewish Political

Equality in Canada. By Abraham Rhinewine. Translated, revised and enlarged by Isadore Goldstick with an introduction by Dr. Goldstick, Toronto 1932. Abraham Rhinewine died before the book's appearance. It is a detailed study of the Ezekiel Hart case. The least valuable aspect of this otherwise valuable book are the tributes by premiers and politicians that were included.

*Through Narrow Gates* — A review of Jewish Immigration Colonization and Immigration Aid Work in Canada (1840-1944). By Simon Belkin, Montreal 1966. An absorbing story told by someone intimately involved in the activity. The title is symbolic of the restrictions that were imposed especially in the 1930's.

### YEARBOOKS AND DIRECTORIES

*Yoivel Buch* — (Jubilee Book) Talmud Torah Eitz Chaim, Toronto 1943. Issued on the 25th anniversary of the institution. Yiddish, Hebrew and English. Edited by Nachman Shemen. Chronicles of Jewish Orthodoxy and traditional education.

*Canadian-Jewish Year Book* — Vol. I 1939-1940, Vol. II 1940-1941. Editor: Vladimir Grossman. A valuable compendium of Canadian Jewry at the beginning and in the early years of World War II, especially on its organizational physiognomy. Contains articles on the community by leading figures, biographical sketches, general surveys, lists of agencies and organizational officers, etc. The editor, Vladimir Grossman, who died in Geneva recently in his 90's, was a most interesting figure. He was a Jew from the interior of Russia (far from the Jewish Pale) who was a polyglot journalist writing in numerous languages including Danish, a devotee of Jewish agricultural settlement and of industrial retraining (hence his dedication to ORT). A refugee from Europe, he found himself in Canada in the years of World War II and, a newcomer and stranger to the country, succeeded in producing 3 volumes which survive today — a mirror of Canadian Jewry of that period.

*The Jew In Canada* — A. D. Hart, Toronto-Montreal 1926. Known in the trade as a "mug book", this volume more than 50 years later contains valuable information despite some inaccuracies and also lapses in taste to be expected from the nature of such a book. It has a day-by-day account of the proceedings of the first Canadian-Jewish Congress assembly of 1919, a history of Canadian Zionism, and a major segment of B. G. Sack's researches later to be published as a book.

*Canadian-Jewish Reference Book And Directory* — Edited by Eli Gottesman. Contains histories of Canadian-Jewish movements, agencies and institutions, and accounts of numerous communities including many sm-

aller towns.

*Who's Who In Canadian Jewry* — Edited by Eli Gottesman. Montreal 1965. Biographies of Canadian Jews.

*Canadian Jews* — Edited by Zvi Cohen, 1932. Biographies.

### MEMOIRS

*In Return* — The Autobiography of Sigmund Samuel. University of Toronto Press 1963. With a foreword by J. Keiller Mackay. The life story of a man whose father established Toronto's first synagogue and whose life spanned almost a century. A dual and paradoxical thread runs through it: one strand which recounts that he came up against no bias in his lifetime; the other which deplors the anti-Semitism prevalent in the city.

*Small Patients* — The Autobiography of a Children's Doctor. By Alton Goldbloom, M.D. Longmans Green, Toronto 1959. The Odyssey of a Jewish medical pioneer and his struggle for recognition in a day when bias ruled. A childhood that started in the Canadian West and, contrary to the norm, moved to Kovno in the Czar's realm, returning to Montreal.

*A Doctor's Memoirs* — This book is the Ontario counterpart of Alton Goldbloom's. A. I. Willinsky graduated in the horse and buggy days and died in the jet era. He too, a gifted practitioner, was confronted by barriers in his profession, barriers which he eventually overcame.

The preceding aggregation is by no means complete. It is a totally subjective one and clearly leans on the side of Ontario. It does not include, for example, *Montreal fun Nechten* (Montreal of Yesterday) by I. Medres nor the various biographies by Bernard Figler of such Canadian notables as Archie Freiman and Louis Fitch, nor H. M. Caiserman's biographical sketches of Lyon Cohen and Archie Freiman. Saul Hayes, in a recent article, has surveyed much of the historical writing on Jewish Montreal. The Selected Bibliography of Jewish Canadiana compiled by David Rome (Montreal 1959) is, of course, an important source for further research and study as is Shulamis Yellin's syllabus "The Jew In Canada: 1760-1960", though it needs a considerable supplementary bibliography, mainly on Ontario. The recent admirable study by David Rome on the Quebec Jewish school question is invaluable.

All this is to indicate that this essay is not meant to give an official or complete listings of sources in Canadian-Jewish history. It reflects what the reader has come across in years of only semi-attentive research. It is hoped this may encourage others to uncover additional sources of material in their reading, which often emerges from pages not otherwise linked with Canadian-Jewish history.