

The Jews of Toronto: A History to 1937

STEPHEN A. SPEISMAN

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Résumé

Il y a différentes façons d'envisager la recension de Stephen A. Speisman *The Jews of Toronto: A History to 1937*. La première consisterait en une évaluation faite par un membre de la Communauté Juive de Toronto. Le défaut de la cuirasse résiderait en ce que, prise sous cet angle, le membre de la communauté risquerait de n'être pas aussi au courant du passé que Stephen A. Speisman.

La seconde façon consisterait à donner l'oeuvre à un spécialiste en matière d'immigration et en études ethniques au Canada.

Quant à la troisième, elle résiderait en une plus ample évaluation de l'oeuvre par rapport à l'histoire urbaine et sociale du Canada plus généralement.

Je m'aviserai de tenter dans ce contexte de m'en tenir à la troisième approche c'est-à-dire une plus ample évaluation de l'oeuvre par rapport à l'histoire urbaine et sociale du Canada plus généralement.

Le livre *The Jews of Toronto* enrichit de façon remarquable notre connaissance des développements dans l'une des villes principales du Canada, survenus au cours de la période importante allant de la croissance urbaine moderne c'est-à-dire de la moitié du XIX^e siècle jusqu'à l'approche de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale.

Le Dr. Speisman nous explique par le biais d'une histoire parfois complexe des choses à propos de l'expérience au Canada de l'immigrant Juif, ses rapports sociaux à Toronto ainsi que la vie d'une communauté culturelle et religieuse influente de façon croissante et se développant dans un contexte canadien.

Le Dr. Speisman relate une histoire complexe car il doit traiter de plusieurs forces en présence au sein de la Communauté Juive, c'est-à-dire orthodoxe/réformé, éléments "Anciens/Nouveaux" la tendance

yiddichisante/l'anglo-acculturation, orientation rabbinique/poussées séculaires, etc . . .

Il est important de souligner que l'oeuvre du Dr. S.A. Speisman nous présente la vivante effervescence d'une multiplicité et d'une différence au sein même du Judaïsme de Toronto dont l'évolution et la croissance sont à tout le moins saisissants.

Une grande partie du livre traite de la montée continue des services et des activités de la Communauté Juive en Education et en occupations à caractère culturel, au plan des agences de bien-être et en ce qui a trait aux hôpitaux. En fait, en terminant de le lire, en s'approchant des années 1937, l'auteur croit qu'une structure institutionnelle a été établie par le Judaïsme de Toronto.

Il est regrettable de constater que certains aspects de ce front commun naissant furent conçus en réaction à la sempiternelle crainte de résurgence de l'antisémitisme réapparu dans les années 30 et qui plus est, que l'étape suivante menant vers l'unité de la communauté reposerait sur l'Holocauste.

Néanmoins, le Dr. Speisman à la fin de son livre, c'est-à-dire vers 1937, laisse malgré tout une communauté juive respectée, bien établie et relativement mûre si l'on considère les plus grandes entités de Toronto, d'Ontario et du Canada.

Reviews of this important book could take several different forms. One kind might be written by a member of the Toronto Jewish community, by one as much a part of it, though likely not so deeply versed in its past, as the author himself. A second sort could be produced by a specialist in immigrant and ethnic studies in Canada, weighing the works valuable contribution to that fast-growing field. And the third would be a broader assessment of it, in terms of Canadian social and urban history more generally.

I am not qualified to do the first form of review. As for the second, I could say more; for without being a specialist in ethnic studies, I do have considerable interest in the multicultural history of Canada, in which Jewish groups have played so prominent a part, and which this book helps notably to illuminate. But it is chiefly the third sort of approach which is offered here. And in this regard, let me summarize my opinion at the outset, by saying that *The Jews of Toronto* sizeably enlarges our knowledge

of developments in one of Canada's chief cities during a major period of modern urban growth, from the mid-nineteenth century to the approach of the Second World War. By clearly tracing out and substantially explaining an often complex story, Dr. Speisman tells us a great deal about Jewish immigrant experience in Canada, social relationships within Toronto in particular, and the life of an increasingly influential religious and cultural community growing within the Canadian context.

His story is necessarily complex, as he deals with vigorously contending forces within the Jewish community—whether “Old” versus “New” elements, orthodoxy versus reform, Yiddishism versus Anglo-acculturation, rabbinical direction versus secularist impulses, ethnic, class and Zionist pulls and counter-pulls, and even more. The outsider may feel inclined to ask anew, “With Jews like these, who needs Gentiles?” But it is of the essence of Dr. Speisman's work to present the lively ferment of variety and dissent within Toronto Jewry, against which the growth of communal self-organization and mutual achievement stand out all the more strikingly.

Much of this book, moreover, sets forth the continued rise of Jewish community activities and services, in education and cultural pursuits, hospital and welfare agencies. Indeed, by the close, in 1937, the author deems that an enduring institutional framework had been established by Toronto Jewry, the next stage being that of building a common outlook on this basis. Yet it is sad to note, as he does, that some of this emerging common front was shaped in reaction to the age-old external threat of anti-semitism re-appearing in the dirty thirties; and far worse, that the path ahead towards communal unity would lie through the destruction of European Jewry in the Holocaust. Nonetheless, Dr. Speisman can leave the Jews of Toronto in 1937 as a firmly grounded, relatively mature and actively self-respecting body within the larger entities of Toronto, Ontario and Canada.

There is still more to his many-sided account; but there are possible shortfalls to consider also. One concerns the entry of Jews into professional or business elements that reached beyond the ethnic community. This certainly gets mentioned but, like the process of acculturation in general, tends to be treated peripherally. One can well understand that the author's viewpoint centres on the distinctive Jewish community. Yet acculturation may not be just a detraction from it, but can also involve its accomodation and operation within the larger citizen group, and thus be a part of the very adjustment and survival of the Jewish community itself. This matter of acculturation is well treated in regard to politics (a very

useful chapter) but might have been more fully and positively examined elsewhere.

In similar fashion, the Jewish labour movement, and radicalism, socialism, secularism, are seldom treated centre-stage. In fact one might say that Dr. Speisman's view is decidedly main-line, and religiously-oriented: the strong concerns of many non-religious Jews get far less attention, for example, than involved disputes over ritual and dietary issues in synagogues or butcher shops. One might argue that the latter meant more to most Jews in Toronto during the period that is covered. And — as always — speaking as an outsider, I cannot claim any weight of decision on the point. Yet it seems a bit ironic that a study of a minority (with so many minorities within it) should focus on one kind of majority viewpoint for the community as a whole.

Of course, there are answers; and the best is given by Dr. Speisman himself in his introduction: no author can do everything, and he has done a great deal, in any event. Furthermore, every historian has a perspective, must have one, and will select according to it. The most he can do is recognize it, and be as fair and judicious as he can be to factors beyond — as this author certainly seeks to do. In any case, there is always room for more books to be added, which keeps historians usefully employed.

Finally, the book has still more merits to its credit, particularly the way in which its author has dealt with problems of documentary evidence, usually in short supply among newly arriving, and often very mobile, immigrant groups who tend to save few early records of their lives and labours. Through close knowledge of community informants, widespread drawing on their verbal memories, and careful use of well developed techniques of oral history, Dr. Speisman has filled in the evidence gaps to remarkable effect, producing a coherent account that carries conviction throughout. This indeed is an admirable contribution to scholarship. But beyond that, his book is well written, helpfully illustrated with fine historic photographs, and altogether enjoyable, as well as most instructive. Who could ask for more?