

Our Roots: The Evolution Of To-day's Jewish Community*

EVELYN MILLER

Résumé

Le Judaïsme au Canada a connu des hauts et des bas. En effet, si l'on remonte aux sources du Judaïsme Canadien, avec Evelyn Miller, on recoupe plusieurs notions de sincérité et de loyauté propre à des époques précises qu'Evelyn Miller cite dans son article. Il y a eu plusieurs mouvements au Canada: colons Juifs venus des colonies britanniques qui assurèrent la présence juive au Canada. Les Juifs orthodoxes, pour qui la religion primait avant toute autre chose, érigèrent une synagogue en deça des dix années suivant leur arrivée.

Il y eut également la question de l'affaire Ezekiel Hart, du refus du droit de siéger alors qu'il était dûment élu, etc. . . . En fait, depuis leur venue, les Juifs avaient joué un rôle actif dans la défense de leur nouveau pays.

Evelyn Miller souligne également, d'un point de vue historique, l'affaire du Révérend Abraham de Sola, et nous fait découvrir les différends qui opposèrent les Juifs aux non-Juifs. De plus, au cours de la moitié du XIXe siècle, l'aspect de la communauté juive allait changeant en raison d'une immigration émanant des communautés d'Allemagne et d'autres pays d'Europe.

En raison du nombre croissant de Juifs, de nouveaux services communautaires furent mis sur pied. Evelyn Miller en fait le développement raisonné.

Pendant plus de 125 ans, les Juifs du Canada avaient mis de l'orgueil et un point d'honneur en édifiant leur pays alors que, en même temps, ils affirmaient leur Judaïsme. Cependant, ainsi que le mentionne E. Miller, l'esprit vital n'avait pas changé et le Judaïsme au Canada demeura à l'époque comme de nos jours dévoué aux idéaux et traditions du

*Presented at the 5th annual meeting of the Canadian Jewish Historical Society, Montreal, June 5, 1980.

On September 8, 1760 New France's last bastion, Montreal, fell to the British. This date also marked the entry of the first Jewish settlers.¹ Aaron Hart and Chapman Abrahams arrived with the army to be closely followed by the army suppliers,² Levy Solomons, Benjamin Lyons and Samuel Jacobs.

For the next three years a thin trickle of Jewish settlers arrived from the British colonies to the south³ and it was primarily this handful of pioneers and their descendants who laid the foundations for the Jewish presence in Canada. These founders were a mixture of Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews, the majority born in the states of New York and Pennsylvania or in Britain, the minority coming from their native German or Polish homelands via Holland or England.⁴ Orthodox Jews, to whom their religion was of prime importance, founded the Portuguese Congregation "Shearith Israel" within eight years of their arrival. A decade later, the congregation occupied its own building.⁵

The synagogue, however, was but one aspect of the multi-faceted Jewish presence in Lower Canada. In addition to their preoccupation with earning a living, in ventures which ranged from fur-trader to Inspector of Chimneys, the Jews early manifested their commitment to obtaining a democratic form of government and to gaining full civil rights. From 1770 to 1785 a constant stream of petitions, including English, French and Jewish names, was presented to the various Governors, which first requested an Assembly for Lower Canada and later called for the repeal of the Quebec Act, which gave the Legislative Council insufficient power and for constitutional reforms based on fixed and liberal principles.⁶

In 1808 the Jewish community's interest in and desire to be a part of their country was gratified by the election of Ezekiel, son of Aaron Hart, as a member for the House of Assembly for Three Rivers. Elected in 1807 and 1808, he was defeated in 1809, after withstanding a series of protests by various other members of the House, who declared him unable to sit because of his religion.⁷

A generation later, however, Ezekiel's son, Samuel B. Hart, Ezekiel's brother, Benjamin, and Moses Judah Hays again took up the cudgels for Jewish civil rights. Placed on the lists for appointment as Justices of the Peace in their districts, Benjamin Hart and M.J. Hays were advised that legally, they could not accept the position. Despite the recent passage of

the law *1st William IV Chap. 57*, which declared “persons professing the Jewish religion entitled to all the Rights and Privileges of the other subjects of His Majesty in this Province”, the Abjuration Oath contained the phrase “on the true faith of a Christian”. In February 1834 the Legislative Assembly appointed a Special Committee to inquire into the question, before which the proposed Justices of the Peace and their counsel, A.P. Hart and A.M. Hart, testified. The Committee’s decision set aside the necessity of including this phrase for non-Christians⁸ and in 1841 the law was broadened to include naturalised subjects.⁹ Because of events which delayed ratification, Benjamin Hart and M.J. Hays become the only ones to receive their Commissions personally signed by Queen Victoria, S.B. Hart having preceded them in taking up his duties.

A few months later, the 1837 Rebellion broke out, in which Benjamin Hart and Major Eleazar David, as an office in the Royal Montreal Cavalry, rendered outstanding service.¹⁰ In fact, from the time of their arrival, Jews had played an active part in the defence of their new country. As volunteer members of the militia, they served as officers and privates, during the American Invasion of 1775-76,¹¹ in the War of 1812,¹² in the 1837 Rebellion¹³ and in the Fenian Raids of the 1860’s and 1870.¹⁴

It is interesting to note that Canadian Jews received full civil rights before their co-religionists in England and, despite the opposition to Ezekiel Hart in the Assembly, they never had to refute the canard—still repeated to-day—of divided loyalty. As late as 1848 Rev. Abraham de Sola felt it necessary to reply to this objection, raised during the debate concerning the repeal of the Jewish Disabilities Act in England. An alleged impediment mentioned was that “as Jews, they looked forward to be restored in Palestine . . . (and could) not identify with the state in which they dwelt”. Rev. de Sola stated unequivocally that “as a Jew and a Jewish teacher, he gave an unqualified denial” to this objection. “Every Jew was bound to pray for the welfare of the country in which he dwelt”.¹⁵

This conviction did not, of course, nullify the intense feeling of kinship which bound the Jews of Canada to their fellow Jews in all parts of the world — particularly to those in the Holy Land. Appeals to Dr. de Sola in aid of the distressed Jews in Persia, Morocco and the Holy Land were followed by generous subscriptions from both Jewish and non-Jewish members of the community. Often delivery of the sums raised was carried out through the agency of Sir Moses Montefiore. Correspondence exists from 1854 to 1878 expressing thanks to the Montreal community and to Dr. de Sola for this assistance, particularly from various groups in

Jerusalem.¹⁶

By the middle of the 19th century, the character of the Jewish community was changing, due to increased immigration from German and other European communities. In fact, in a letter to a London correspondent in 1859, Dr. de Sola suggested that this gentleman "might arrange a scheme to send Portuguese (Sephardic) emigrants to Canada". He states "the number of German Jewish immigrants is large and they are prospering—the Sephardic Jews could do likewise".¹⁷

As early as 1825 Benjamin Hart had been disturbed by the possibility that the Portuguese Congregation might become dominated by the Ashkenazi majority and change the form of service. These fears had become even more pronounced by the mid-1840's but, despite Mr. Hart's apprehensions, the Portuguese Congregation continued to observe the Sephardic tradition.¹⁸ However, a new congregation was founded in 1846, dedicated to the observance of the Ashkenazic custom and many of the new congregation had been members of the Shearith Israel. The cornerstone of this new synagogue, the Congregation of the English, German and Polish Jews, would not be laid till 1859¹⁹ but there were now two orthodox synagogues to serve the needs of the Montreal community which, by 1852, had reached the total of 181 individuals.²⁰

Because of the increased numbers, new community services were established to care for the added responsibilities engendered by the growing population. In 1847, the Montreal Hebrew Philanthropic Society was founded,²¹ the precursor of the Young Men's Hebrew Benevolent Society, which subsequently changed its name to the Baron de Hirsch Institute,²² one of the agencies of to-day's Allied Jewish Community Services. During the next three decades, several organizations catering to the varying community needs were established, including the Jewish lodge, Keshet Shel Barzel,²³ the Ladies' Hebrew Benefit Society²⁴ and the Montefiore Club, originally organized as a Literary and Amateur Theatrical Society.²⁵

The first Sunday School was also founded, classes being held in the Portuguese Synagogue rooms.²⁶ Later, there were daily schools under the direction of the Shearith Israel and the English German and Polish Synagogues. To these was added a third school in the Baron de Hirsch Institute, all eventually to be absorbed by the Protestant School Board.²⁷

The 1880's saw the beginning of what would become a rising tide of Jewish immigration. The Montreal community made every effort to provide succour and to support the ever-increasing numbers of Russian and Roumanian Jews, fleeing the persecution and pogroms of Central and

Eastern Europe. This steadily growing host, which reached its climax in 1914, brought with it traditions, language and customs rooted in its European past. As the younger generation attained maturity and in its turn, provided leadership, the orientation of the community gradually changed.

For over a century and a quarter, the Jews of Canada had taken pride in building their country while, at the same time immutably affirming their Judaism. The Anglo-Jewish community had been the centre from which the Canadian body drew its strength, while mirroring Anglo-Jewry's loyalty to Britain and British values. Now former ties with England were weakened and the influence of the earlier leadership diminished as the later arrivals began to channel the community in a new direction. The descendants of earlier immigrants, through death, assimilation and a turn of the century trend toward smaller families, had suffered a constant attrition in their number. The latest generation, though still playing its part in the community, now blended with the new forces brought into play by the latest "settlers". But the vital spirit had not changed and Canadian Jewry remained, then as now, dedicated to the ideals and traditions of Judaism, coupled with an everlasting devotion to Israel.

NOTES

1. "The Jew in Canada" ed. by A.D. Hart, p. 15: PAC Ms.B Series, Vol 217, pp. 7-9 Samuel Jacobs Microfilm, Reel 1, Jewish Public Library.
2. Samuel Oppenheimer Collection, American Jewish Historical Society, Dr. J. Marcus" Early American Jewry" Vol. I, p. 227.
3. "Jew in Canada" *ibid*: Harline D. Ruben's family notes.
4. "First American Jewish Families" by Dr. Malcolm Stern.
5. 150th Anniversary Book, Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue p. 13: Minutes of the Portuguese Congregation 1778-1782.
6. PAC Series Q. Vol. 11, p. 98 and Vol. 31 p. 249.
7. Ezekiel Hart Papers (copy) Jewish Public Library.
8. "Jew in Canada" Ed. by A.D. Hart p. 463.
9. Report of Special Committee, Feb. 28, 1834 (copy) Jewish Public Library.
10. Benjamin Hart letter to Lord John Russell, July 14, 1840 PAC Series Q p. 382 Dominion Archives Julius Price Collection, American Jewish Archives: Sir John Colborne's Despatch to Lord Somerset PAC Series C Vol. 1 p. 272 and McCord Museum.
11. PAC Series B Ms. Vol. 2 1769-90 Haldimand Papers; Michigan Pioneer Historical Collection Vol. 19, p. 493.
12. Samuel David Diaries Nov. 13, 1813 American Jewish Archives; Can. Military Institute Officers of the Br. Forces in Can. War 1812-15: McCord Museum, Volunteer Militia, General Orders Dec. 1866.
13. *Ibid* Note 9.
14. *Ibid* p. 535.
15. *Occident* Vol. VI No. 3 June 1848 pp. 143-48.
16. Lecture "Present State of the Jews and Christians in the Dominions of the Shah" *Montreal Transcript* Oct. 28, 1848; Mins of Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue June 15,

- 1854; Abraham de Sola Papers, Guide to the Microfilm by Evelyn Miller Nos. 162, 238-39, 243-44, 246, 251, 253-55; *Asmonean* Vol. 9 No. 21 Mar. 10, 1854 p. 160; *Israelite* Vol. 6 No. 28 Jan 13, 1860, p. 222.
17. Guide to A. de Sola Papers *ibid* No. 49.
 18. Canadian Jewish Congress Archives, Benjamin Hart Papers.
 19. Minute Book, Shaar Hashomayim Congregation. July 12, 1859; *Montreal Herald* July 13, 1859.
 20. *Montreal Transcript* Tues. Mar. 3, 1852.
 21. *Occident* Vol. V No. 5 Aug. 1847 p. 275; B.J. Sack papers, Canadian Jewish Congress Archives.
 22. Baron de Hirsch Institute Centennial Booklet 1863-1963 p. 12.
 23. Guide to Abraham de Sola Papers No. 172.
 24. *Jewish Times* 1900 Mar. 30 Vol. III No. 4 23rd Anniversary Meeting.
 25. History of the Montefiore Club 1880-1955.
 26. *Occident* Vol. VI No. 12 Mar. 1849 p. 620.
 27. Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue Minutes Nov. 12, 23, 1874; Shaar Hashomayim Synagogue Minutes Sept. 19, 1875, Apr. 7, 1877, Jan. 19, 1882, June 20, 1886. Canadian Jewish Congress Archives, correspondence and Minutes of the Baron de Hirsch Institute and the Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue Mar. 1891-Dec. 1896.