

Jews: An Account Of Their Experience In Canada

ERNA PARIS

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Résumé

Ce volume fait l'historique de ce que fut l'expérience des Juifs d'Europe Centrale venus au Canada depuis 1880. Il envisage trois volets: la signification de l'être Juif canadien, le lieu où ils s'établirent et l'expérience retirée en tant que Juif Canadien.

L'auteur du volume qui remonte depuis la colonisation et l'établissement des Juifs jusqu'en 1970 englobe trois foyers principaux: Québec, Toronto et l'Ouest du Canada. Ces trois principaux domaines ont frappé l'imagination de l'auteur qui se concentre sur certains sujets d'actualité. Dans un premier temps l'auteur fait l'analyse de "The Jews, Quebec and Parliament Hill": Des Harts à la fondation de la communauté juive de Montréal, le tournant de l'immigration du siècle, et, le problème de l'école.

Dans une seconde phase intitulée: "Toronto: the Jewish Left", l'auteur se penche sur les aspects communistes.

La troisième phase: "The Jewish Farmers in the West", est une chronique du bien fondé des colonies de fermiers établies au tournant du siècle.

En épilogue Erna Paris établit les conclusions à propos de ce que fut l'identité juive au Canada au cours des trois générations depuis le tournant du siècle.

At first glance, *Jews: An Account of Their Experience in Canada* appears to promise what academic historians have not yet produced — a social history of the Jews in Canada. A promotional leaflet distributed at York University supports this impression. The leaflet reads, in part,

Jews is a compassionate exploration of the lives of Jewish immigrants, their children and the grandchildren from the eighteenth century right up to the present. What hap-

pened to the thousands of Jewish immigrants who came from Eastern Europe to Canada back in the 1880's? Where did they settle? What was their experience of becoming Jewish Canadians? What does it mean to be a Jew in Canada today? It is a colourful and significant story, but one that is generally little known.

The text, itself, however, readily disclaims any intention of being "a comprehensive social history of the Jews in Canada" (13). While the book moves from the beginning of Jewish settlement to the late 1970's and covers the population centers of Quebec, Toronto and the west, its focus is partial, selective and subjective. Paris writes, "I have concentrated on those periods and events that struck me as most vital and significant" (14).

The first part, "The Jews, Quebec and Parliament Hill", begins with the Harts, the founding of the Montreal Jewish community, the turn of the century immigration, and the school question. It then concentrates on the Canadian response to Jewish refugees before World War II. The Depression, a small but noisy Quebec fascist movement, duplicitous politicians, hostile bureaucrats and betrayed and helpless Jewish politicians and community officials are all presented as part of the story. The first part concludes with a brief chapter carrying the Montreal community from 1945 through 1979.

In the second part, "Toronto: the Jewish Left", the Communist aspect is the centre of attention. The struggle of its Jewish members to remain true to their idealism and to the Soviet Union provides the main issue around which the narrative develops. A subsidiary theme, only partly developed, is the failure of the left to pass on to their children the desire to join and be active in socialist organizations.

The third and shortest section, "The Jewish Farmers in the West", chronicles the handful of farming colonies established at the turn of the century. The radical difference in experiences of different generations provides a theme — the immigrants who arrived from Eastern Europe were full of ideas, without money and ignorant of agriculture; their children grew up isolated in an almost totally Jewish environment; their grandchildren completed the move to the city started by the second generation and live as members of an affluent minority in a relatively tolerant society.

An epilogue contains Paris's conclusions about what has happened to Jewish identity in Canada over the three generations since the turn of the century.

Paris does not present the reader with a rationale for choosing the refugee issues, the Communist Party in Toronto and the Jewish farm

colonies in the West as the “most vital and significant” aspects of the Canadian Jewish experience. To some extent, as a journalist, she was dependent — especially in the first section — on the historical research of others. However, she chose to pursue certain leads and not others, to work with some documentary collections and not others.

In doing so, she was guided, implicitly or explicitly, by a perspective on what Canadian Jewish history should be about. One element of this perspective is the preference for discontinuities rather than continuities. The worlds of the Jewish communists and farmers are all but entirely gone. The worlds created around religious, Zionist and social welfare activities have histories which go back three generations in Canada. They are still very much with us, but they are hardly present in this book. A second element of Paris’ perspective is a reaction of ambivalence and uncertainty about Jewish identity. This reaction forms the basis of the introduction and the epilogue. As well, the individual of Paris’ generation who is given most attention is presented as “confused”, “embarrassed” and having a “growing void” which “an impressive list of personal services to the causes of the Jewish community” has not filled (272). Generalizing, Paris writes of “my generation of assimilated Jews” (15), begging the question of how many Canadian Jews of her generation actually do consider themselves assimilated. A third element of her perspective is a disparaging attitude towards Jewish history. She writes of “moments of triumph that blink light into the darkness of Jewish history like an occasional firefly in the night” (268). This judgement is, at best, *weltschmerz*.

Taken together, these elements fit a clichéd perspective on Canadian multiculturalism. This perspective, as much mythological as descriptively factual, uses a standardized framework in which non-English, non-French immigrant groups are presented as having parallel experiences. When each group comes to Canada, it leaves one hard life for another, suffers as immigrants, agonizes over the worse suffering of those left behind, fights its way to respectability by finding its economic niche, gradually acculturates to mass cultural standards, and yet retains bittersweet memories of suffering and community.

Paris writes from this cliché-ridden assimilationist perspective. It is her theme, and it shapes the periods and events with which she chooses to deal. Consequently, the subject matter of her book reflects not the subculture of which she writes, but what was fashionable in popular culture in the 1970’s — the search for ethnic “roots”, back-to-the-land romanticism about farmers, and radical chic.

There are, needless to say, other ways of writing about the Canadian Jewish experience. Speisman (1979),¹ for example, proceeds from a completely contrary set of assumptions about what issues are significant. His themes are not acculturation and assimilation but the transmission of a deeply felt cultural heritage and the building of community institutions.

The Canadian Jewish population is small compared to that of the U.S., but among the nations of the world, Canada ranks seventh in the size of its Jewish population. Canada's Jews are growing in number, having a vigorous community life and are significantly involved in world Jewish affairs. They deserve a readable history, placing Canadian Jews in the contexts of both the Canadian experience and Jewish experience — a history sensitive to the pull of assimilation into mass culture as well as to the preservation and modification of tradition. They are still waiting.

NOTES

1. Speisman, Stephen, 1979, *The Jews of Toronto: A History to 1937*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.