

Book Review

NONE IS TOO MANY

By Irving Abella and Harold Troper, Toronto,
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Résumé

Pour les Juifs condamnés revenant d'Auschwitz, le Canada a une signification particulière.

Ce fut le nom donné aux baraquements du camp où l'alimentation, les vêtements, l'or, les diamants, les bijoux, ainsi que d'autres biens pris aux prisonniers furent entreposés. Cela représentait la vie, le luxe et le salut. C'était un jardin d'Eden en Enfer. Cela tenait également de l'inaccessible.

En effet, les baraquements à Auschwitz symbolisaient ce que le Canada représentait pour tous les Juifs d'Europe depuis les années 1930 jusqu'aux années 1940, soit un paradis vaste, riche, abondant et plein de vie, mais hors de portée, un paradis totalement inaccessible. Pourquoi le Canada fut-il fermé aux Juifs d'Europe? tel est le sujet dont Irving Abella et Harold Troper, auteurs de ce livre traitent. C'est une histoire qui est le mieux résumée dans les propos d'un fonctionnaire senior Canadien anonyme, à qui, lorsque des journalistes, lors d'une discussion au cours d'une randonnée au début de l'année 1945, lui posèrent la question suivante: "Combien de Juifs pensez-vous seront autorisés à entrer au Canada après la Guerre? Il répondit: "Aucun". Sa réponse spontanée semblait refléter les points de vues qui prévalaient chez un certain nombre de ses citoyens: "Aucun" déclara-t-il, "c'est déjà bien trop".

Over the past four or five years, Canadians have begun to learn something new and unpleasant about their history and, in particular, about their history during the Second World War. Fighting German nazism and Italian fascism and Japanese imperialism, Canadians seldom paused, at the time or later, to consider whether their own country was doing as much as it might to uphold the values its politicians proclaimed and its propagandists trumpeted. A first

breach in the edifice of self-satisfaction was made by reflections on the treatment received by Canada's Japanese when, as the result of popular hysteria, they were deported from the west coast and their property confiscated to the benefit of their former neighbours. Later, Eric Koch's moving book, *Deemed Suspect*, argued that the treatment accorded anti-Nazi, and particularly Jewish, refugees interned in Canada during the war was considerably less than polite or sympathetic. Koch pointed a finger at Canada's immigration service, and particularly at the director of the Immigration Branch, F.C. Blair.

Two young Toronto historians, Irving Abella and Harold Troper, have taken up where Koch left off. Their book, *None is Too Many*, deals with attempts made between 1933 and 1948 to persuade the government of Canada to open its doors and admit Jewish refugees from Nazi persecution. The attempts were almost uniformly unsuccessful. For this, many reasons can be ascribed. Canada, like other western democracies, was suffering from the effects of the Great Depression. As the authors point out, other depression-struck countries found themselves able to admit refugees; although the depression aggravated anti-immigrant pressure; it does not by itself serve as an adequate explanation for Canada's indifference to the plight of the persecuted. As the authors show, there is reason to characterize Canadian society as, in some degree, anti-semitic; but this was true of other western countries as well. And lacking precise measurements of public opinion on this and other subjects during the 1930s, we are unlikely ever wholly to be able to assess how broadly, or how deeply, Canadian society was afflicted by the anti-semitic disease.

As so often in history, a unique combination of circumstances made immigration a particularly acute political topic in Canada during the 1930s and 1940s. Besides the malaise of economic ruin and xenophobia that afflicted so many countries during that unhappy time, Canadians also had to cope with a divided society, precariously balanced on the edge of racial discord between English and French-Canadians. Sitting on top was Mackenzie King's Liberal government, preoccupied with a host of problems from the bankruptcy of western provincial governments to the likelihood of a Second World War. As King and his ministers grappled with these major preoccupations, it seemed important not to allow less immediate concerns to rock the boat. Among these less immediate concerns was the plight of the Jews of Europe. That, by itself, would have guaranteed that the government would do little. It chose, however, to do less. In Quebec, the provincial Liberals were swept out of office in a series of scandals in 1935-6. Indignant crowds gathered in front of the provincial legislature to hiss the departing Liberals and, as *Le Devoir* informed its readers, "les Juifs". The Liberals in Ottawa responded by panicking. It was true that most

Jews were Liberals; but they must strenuously show that not all Liberals were Jews. To say that an arm's length situation resulted would be to understate the matter.

It is not that the politicians in power in Ottawa were themselves anti-semites; by the standards of their time they were not. But it was a situation made to order for an anti-semite to exploit, and one did. F.C. Blair, who first entered our literature in *Deemed Suspect*, was the civil servant in charge of immigration. Blair "deemed suspect" literally all Jews, and he was determined to keep them out of Canada. He had the immigration regulations to invoke in behalf of this cause; and when the politicians sitting above him experienced twinges of conscience he had only to wait for their fear of the political consequences of a liberal policy to take its toll. Blair knew he was right; the politicians were uncertain. Nor could the Canadian Jewish community bring much pressure to bear in the other direction. Jews were marginal voters in all but a few parts of Canada. Controlling only three parliamentary seats, they could not hope to swing an election or to outweigh, say, the loss of French-Canadian support that French-Canadian cabinet ministers so much feared.

As Abella and Troper painstakingly recreate one occasion after another in which Blair successfully barred the door, the evidence of official unconcern and political amorality mounts. Blair, typically, made no attempt to sanitize his files on his departure from the civil service in 1943 — superannuated and full of honours; presumably he was confident that the record would speak on his behalf. But as a horrified observer wrote in 1940, "the day will come when Immigration will be under debate, and then the Ottawa Immigration Service shall be judged by its records. For us it will not be unimportant to have these records at our fingertips. They shall then find us as their bad conscience." The record has indeed spoken, through Troper and Abella's book. The result should be carefully read and pondered by every Canadian interested in his or her country's history — or its future.

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