

# **The United Church and the Jewish Plight During the Nazi Era 1933-1945**

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## *Résumé*

Les auteurs du document intitulé: *The United Church and the Jewish Plight During the Nazi Era*, tentent de prendre le contrepied du volume intitulé: *None is Too Many* publié par Irving Abella et Harold Troper, volume où il est fait état d'une accusation portée par les auteurs contre le silence qu'observèrent les églises au Canada.

F11 Pour rétablir l'équilibre face à une accusation qui leur semblait par trop injuste, Alan Davies et Marilyn Felcher Nefsky ont entrepris des recherches sur ce problème qu'ils soumettent à l'attention des lecteurs, déclarant entre autres que l'Eglise Unie garda le silence soit, mais qu'elle ne l'observa pas totalement. Par ailleurs et selon les auteurs de ce document, le SILENCE est un phénomène social complexe dont des auteurs du document donnent et développent quatre interprétations possibles.

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In their exposé of the nativism and antisemitism that lurked behind the refusal of the King cabinet and its bureaucratic minions — notably the then Director of Immigration Frederick C. Blair — to open the gates of Canada to Hitler's Jewish victims, Irving Abella and Harold Troper accuse the Canadian churches by and large of silence. "Although some organizations and high-placed members of religious groups, such as the Anglican and United Churches, actively campaigned on behalf of Jewish refugees, most Canadians seemed indifferent to the suffering of German Jews and hostile to their admission to Canada."<sup>1</sup> This judgment from *None is Too Many* is later amplified: "As long as the churches remained silent — which they did — the government could dismiss the (Canadian National Committee on Refugees)

members as well meaning but impractical idealists to be patronized but not taken seriously.<sup>2</sup> One highly placed United Churchman who, as Abella and Troper acknowledge,<sup>3</sup> does not fall under this indictment was the Rev. Claris E. Silcox; there were, as we shall see, some others as well. But what of the denomination as a whole? How silent, in fact, was the United Church of Canada during this critical period, and what exactly did its silence mean — and not mean? Did the nativism and antisemitism that had wrapped its tentacles around the government also hold the most liberal (theologically, socially and politically) of the major Canadian churches in its grip? Was the silent majority an antisemitic majority, or would that be a false inference from the historical evidence? Undoubtedly, antisemitism had risen significantly in Canada during the Great Depression,<sup>4</sup> and the church could not have avoided some infection, but is this a sufficient answer? Or was the silence of the church — if, in fact, the church *was* silent — a more complex matter?

To probe these questions, a certain amount of historical reconstruction is necessary, both of the period itself and of the attitude of the United Church with respect to (a) Jews and Judaism (b) the fascist social order (c) the Nazi persecutions in Europe (d) the refugee crisis. We shall examine these in turn.

As far as the general period was concerned, Paul Tillich's famous dictum seems to apply. When, "at the end of an era", familiar structures disintegrate, a mood of neurotic anxiety arises, and society feels itself caught between the past and the future: the past with its "horror of being trapped" and the future with its fear of falling "without a place to fall upon".<sup>5</sup> Canada, like the rest of the Western World, only less acutely than the European nations that had experienced the ravages of war on their soil, was in a state of crisis. The Great Depression, in the words of an eminent historian,<sup>6</sup> was a catastrophe that had descended on all of the orders at once: economic, social, political and constitutional. In Alberta, it spawned the Social Credit movement, which (despite William Aberhart) soon became entangled in a certain amount of antisemitism.<sup>7</sup> In Quebec, it spawned Adrien Arcand and his *Parti National Social Chrétien*, a compound of German and Italian fascism that had promised to save the nation from a "bankrupt" democracy.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, it led to both reformation and radicalism on the left, including the birth of the C.C.F. party with its Regina Manifesto and the flirtation on the part of some Canadians with more extreme forms of anti-capitalism based on alien models. With such rumblings from both ends of the political spectrum, a fear of revolution began to stir in Canada.<sup>9</sup> These fears were never really justified, but their existence was no minor symptom of a troubled era.

As far as the United Church was concerned, except in one possible respect,

the period was scarcely one of profound religious thought and great moral perspicacity. The exception was the formation of the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order by such men as John Line, J. King Gordon, E. Crossley Hunter (who, incidentally, later took up the cause of Jewish refugees in his pulpit at Trinity United Church, Toronto),<sup>10</sup> R.B.Y. Scott and Gregory Vlastos. This socialist medicine for an ailing capitalist system, in spite of what Stewart Crysedale has called its idealistic “underemphasis on the extent and consequences of sin”<sup>11</sup> was virtually the only serious theological attempt to face the real problems of the age in a constructive fashion. Otherwise, the church largely sank into an escapist and reactionary mood, turning to panaceas such as the Oxford Movement (Moral Rearmament) for relief from the conflicts and confusions of a society *in extremis*.<sup>12</sup> The contemporary rise of Neo-orthodoxy was ambiguous; in one sense it represented part of the same flight from reality, but in another sense it represented the recovery of a larger spiritual perspective on the present historical situation. At its best, therefore, Neo-orthodox theology was truly profound, even if the Neo-orthodox theologians (except for Reinhold Niebuhr) were rarely adept at handling social issues. Although Karl Barth himself was by no means a political conservative, “Barthianism” tended to become a more or less reactionary and negative influence in the social arena. Even more reactionary in social and political terms was the resurgence of Protestant fundamentalism, especially in western Canada. However, the fundamentalists were mostly outside of the United Church.

On the subject of Jews and Judaism, the United Church, in spite of the social gospel strains that helped to create the denomination in 1925, 13 remained strongly imbued with older pietistic and evangelical assumptions concerning the alleged superiority of Christianity to Judaism and the necessity of converting Jews to the true religion. Moreover, as so often in the past, these missionary aspirations frequently contained an implicit antisemitism. Thus in 1927 (two years after church union) the official yearbook described the Jewish presence in Christian nations as a “problem” that could only be solved by means of conversion:

Wherever the Jew has settled in any part of the world he has created new problems, political, social, economic and religious . . . The power these people wield among the nations is out of all proportion to their numbers. They have attained positions in finance, commerce, industry, science, philosophy, law, politics, statecraft and in the press, enabling them to mold thought and public opinion and to influence the life and destiny of nations . . . In Montreal there are 76,000 Jews, in Toronto, 60,000, in Winnipeg 16,000, and in all of Canada, 160,000 . . . No democratic nation can survive unless its roots sink deep into the soil of moral religious truth. It is the task of the Church to teach these things unto the people and especially unto their children.<sup>14</sup>

Clearly, the only acceptable Jew was a Christian! Of course, this statement did not mean that *all* United Church members shared the sentiments of the ecclesiastical bureaucracy. Some were worse and some were better. The following decade would divide the wheat from the chaff. A regular columnist in *The New Outlook* (the official organ of the United Church), for example, still regarded the Jews — on whom the shadow of persecution was starting to fall — as a “bigoted people” with a “narrow” and “selfish” religion.<sup>15</sup> While he attached these epithets to first-century Jewry, his meditation supplied no reason for supposing that modern Judaism was in any way less bigoted and less narrow than its spiritual ancestor. Even during the war itself, when the Final Solution was gathering rapid momentum, there were still United Churchmen capable of responding to a rabbi’s plea for better Jewish-Christian relations by charging the Jews with deicide, and consequently with responsibility for their own sufferings.<sup>16</sup> In the generally liberal ethos of the United Church,<sup>17</sup> such views were surely exceptional; nevertheless, they did exist, and this fact must be acknowledged. Their expression, however, was sporadic and invariably prompted by editorial or other church proclamations of support for the Jews in the contemporary situation. More characteristic of the main spiritual currents of the United Church at this time was the following paean from the Rev. Richard Roberts:

For consider the case of the Jews. Here was a nation endowed with a peculiar genius for religion, and if there is a Divine Providence in the ordering of the world, we should say that this people was ordained to bring to mankind the knowledge of God. First among the nations they learned the towering truth of the One God of all the earth . . . their abiding historical distinction lies, firstly, in their discovery of the divine unity, in that great succession of inspired giants who laid the foundations of the religion of the Western world, Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, St. Paul and many another; and supremely, in fact that out of the loins of Jewry came Jesus of Nazareth, who is still the hope of the world.<sup>18</sup>

This of course, still rests on Christian triumphalistic assumptions, since the Jews (and Judaism) are praised chiefly because they produced Jesus and indirectly the even greater religion of Christianity, but Roberts meant well. In the context of the era, such statements were intended to evoke Christian sympathy for Hitler’s victims.<sup>19</sup> An editorial published in *The New Outlook* shortly before Roberts uttered these words in 1933 confirms this interpretation: “Hence, Gentiles should never be unmindful of their indebtedness to the people who gave them their scriptures and their Redeemer . . . and their continuity as a people, despite the fact that for nearly 2 millennia they have been without a national home, is one of the outstanding enigmas of all time . . . the people face a new crisis . . . for in the present world situation the normal channels of emigration and immigration are blocked.”<sup>20</sup> Admittedly, this

United Church version of the “Spiritually we are Semites theme” (Pius XI, 1938) was blissfully unaware that the new crisis and the blocked channels of emigration and immigration had something to do with the long ages of Christian anti-Judaism, but such insights were rare (although they did exist) among Christians until after 1945. Despite this deficiency, the statement represented the best that Protestant liberalism could do at the time.

On the subject of fascism, the widespread loss of faith in the democratic social order that was so acute during the Great Depression sent its tremors throughout the churches as well. Because of its British traditions, and because also of its social gospel associations, the United Church was strongly committed to Western political doctrines. Nevertheless, among the rank and file, and even among certain ministers, the attractions of other political (and economic) models either on the left (communism) or on the right (fascism) were certainly felt. The number drawn to fascism was no doubt small, but, in the early 1930s at least, it was no less possible to idealize Italy and Germany than it was to idealize Soviet Russia if one saw only what one wanted to see. For example, the Rev. H.B. Hendershot, an ardent Germanophile, wrote in glowing terms during the first summer of the Third Reich of German “idealism”, especially among university students “the very finest” of whom (at Marburg, where the author had recently studied) “were the most indignant against the Jews”.<sup>21</sup> If a few injustices were being committed, Canadians should remember that Germany itself had been treated unjustly, and that Hitler, whatever his faults, was only putting the nation’s house in order. That Hendershot was not alone in expressing these sentiments is demonstrated by various letters published in *The New Outlook* from time to time. One is worth citing:

A lot is being written these days about Fascism in Canada and the danger it may hold for democracy. One wonders if democracy is not its own greatest danger, and whether a period of Fascism would be all bad . . . The whole system of government and social order needs revamping . . .

A strong and unselfish man or group of men, having real vision of a country’s well-being, given powers to correct mistakes and set up an order adapted to modern needs, could effect changes in the social and economic set-up easily and quickly. If one dictator could give a broken and dismayed people a soul, could not another keep a hopeless and weary one in possession of theirs? Blood purges and regimentation of life appear abhorrent. But one must always die for the nation, and more of orderly discipline would be a real blessing.<sup>22</sup>

The church editorial staff, however, denounced these and similar views regularly. “It is quite the fashion nowadays to criticize and find fault with democracy, and there are no doubt very many things that may be said and said with truthfulness, when one is talking on that subject. But it may be the part of wisdom . . . to consider what we have to put in its place if we should decide to

get rid of it. The more closely we look into the substitutes . . . which are being tried, the less are we convinced that they are really an improvement.”<sup>23</sup> Hendershot’s account of German idealism was refuted by an acute description of the “German psychosis” by Silcox.<sup>24</sup> Other defenders of democracy such as King Gordon warned Canadians that the seeds of fascism existed in Canada itself — an observation that was certainly true.<sup>25</sup> Still others warned of its spiritual as well as its political dangers.<sup>26</sup> During the actual war years, when, for obvious reasons, the fascist temptation was scarcely in vogue, these denunciations were intensified and multiplied. “The Fascist state is founded on contempt for the living person . . . and Germany has followed this contempt to its logical conclusion by doing away with free elections, free exchange of ideas, representative government, responsible government as well as trade unions, free co-operatives, free professional associations, etc. . . . Fascism is the death of democracy.”<sup>27</sup>

On the subject of the Nazi persecutions, the United Church press usually reacted to the treatment of the Jews as swiftly as Hitler’s boycotts, Aryan laws and other anti-Jewish measures occurred.<sup>28</sup> At the beginning, however, the editors of *The New Outlook* could not refrain from finding the “deep distrust and hatred” toward the Jews in Germany somewhat “understandable.”<sup>29</sup> It was this qualification that Hendershot pursued in his pro-German, anti-Jewish article (August 9, 1933). Consider the following startling lines:

Our own Canadian hearts burn with indignation when we hear of Jewish atrocities in Germany — yet the fact stands that when the heat of released passions will have subsided the Jews in Germany will be seen to be happy compared with the lot of the Chinese in our own land . . . A reasonable German would argue with us that the Jews had unfairly pushed themselves to too great prominence during a period of dislocation and unrest, and the present situation is a rather natural reaction . . . The galling irritation of the whole situation to the Germans was not merely the *de-facto* situation of Jewish supremacy, but the knowledge that the Jews had climbed to the seats of the mighty since 1914 . . . If we place ourselves in the position of the young German — educated — seeking a position and finding none, and finding unpatriotic Jews — war profiteers — in control, it can scarcely be wondered that he would readily be disposed to make the Jew a scapegoat for his own misfortunes. *For be it remembered that every deposed Jew means a job for a good Nordic German.* (Italics ours)<sup>30</sup>

Obviously Hendershot accepted without demurrer the old romantic *volkisch* worldview of Paul de Lagarde and others<sup>31</sup> that the German Jews were not really Germans but an alien *Volk* whose very presence was in some mysterious way harmful to the Fatherland. The Germanophile Canadian also seems to have accepted at face value the antisemitic notion that the German Jews had evaded their patriotic duty during the First World War and engaged in illicit profiteering at the expense of the “Nordic” Germans. It is not much

wonder that Silcox was obliged to remind Hendershot of pre-war antisemitism, especially Houston S. Chamberlain's 1899 racist classic *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*.<sup>32</sup> To what extent Hendershot found support for his views in the church at large is difficult to determine. He was not alone,<sup>33</sup> but he was probably not representative either.

Antisemitism, notably the modern racial variety, was certainly disapproved of both in theory and practice by every eminent United Church preacher who raised the subject in his pulpit and in the church press during the era, including the Rev. Richard Roberts, the Rev. G. Stanley Russell, the Rev. E. Crossley Hunter and the Rev. Ernest Marshall Howse.<sup>34</sup> While preachers are generally ahead of their congregations in most issues, there is no reason to suppose that a Canadian religious community with liberal as well as evangelical roots was prepared to endorse without serious reservations a "German point of view" with its peculiar shibboleths even in an abnormal period. On the other hand, it would be foolish to deny that antisemitic feelings existed in the United Church; even those who publicly decried events in Germany tacitly made this admission. The *Zeitgeist*, as Silcox warned repeatedly, was saturated with antisemitism everywhere, and the fate of democracy hung in the balance.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, the United Church had an additional reason to keep a close watch on German affairs: the growing church struggle. Even if they had wished to do so, the persecution of Christian and other political dissenters together with the construction of concentration camps made it virtually impossible for outside observers to ignore the Jewish plight. By 1936, as far as the United Church was concerned, the two forms of oppression merited the same general condemnation. The church struggle was becoming an international scandal, and the anti-Jewish policies of the Third Reich had reached "a pitch of brutality and injustice" that the world could tolerate no longer.<sup>36</sup> Certainly, the editorial pages of *The New Outlook* rang with periodic denunciations of persecution everywhere, but especially in Nazi Germany: now the object of universal "contempt".<sup>37</sup> When Mussolini began to imitate Hitler in 1937, relief was expressed that thus far he had not embarked on a direct purge of Italy's Jews.<sup>38</sup> Careful note was taken of the escalation of anti-Jewish decrees and the "aimless cruelty" in which the Nazis seemed to delight.<sup>39</sup> The infamous *Krystallnacht* (Nov. 11-13, 1938) was described in the following words: "The primitive savagery of totalitarian state methods was fearfully illustrated in last week's news from Berlin. Germany, determined to crush out unwanted citizens, descended to new depths of infamy in her brutal campaign versus the Jews."<sup>40</sup> That something was terribly wrong was evident not merely in the pogrom itself but also in its bizarre justification as an expression of "young"

Germany's "healthy instincts."<sup>41</sup> Now the future was indeed ominous both for the Jews and the world. "We may be facing the "mood and method of violent revolution", and the horror of the onslaught on the Jews may be dwarfed by its significance as an indication of the new powers and purposes of the Third Reich."<sup>42</sup> Christians could also expect to suffer, and, indeed, were already suffering, as the deepening German church struggle — the object of constant scrutiny — was ample proof.

The first public intimation of the true fate awaiting the European Jews came with Hitler's *Reichstag* speech on January 30, 1939, in which he predicted that, in the event of war, the Jewish race could not expect to survive. As Paul Hilberg has commented,<sup>43</sup> the concept of mass murder had now apparently matured in the Fuhrer's mind. He who has ears to hear, let him hear! Did the United Church of Canada hear? Not quite. Judging from its February 3rd editorial, *The New Outlook* at any rate, like most of the world, failed to grasp the real import of Hitler's words. The antisemitic accent was not overlooked, nor the role of scapegoat that the regime intended for the Jews, nor even the sinister suggestion that the Jewish problem had to be solved before peace could be achieved.<sup>44</sup> But what Hitler was really saying was not heard. Even the brilliant editorial that appeared one week later, in which the refugee question and its moral ramifications for the Christian conscience was raised in the face of a probable catastrophe for "at least a million men and women" and in which even the "final end of Jewry, its total destruction" was dangled before the church,<sup>45</sup> did not entirely succeed in understanding the German leader. That a definite intention to annihilate rather than simply persecute the Jews actually lurked behind Hitler's prophesy was too incomprehensible a thought for outside observers to embrace at that moment in time. Not until reports of the death camps — the Holocaust itself — started to circulate in the West in 1942 did the true significance of the *Reichstag* address start to become apparent. According to Robert W. Ross,<sup>46</sup> virtually no detail of the Final Solution discovered in 1945 had not been previously mentioned somewhere in the American Protestant press by 1943, except for the total number of extermination centres and their more refined cruelties. Protestant Americans therefore were informed by 1943; Protestant Canadians, especially those (a large number of United Church clergy) who read American church journals such as *The Christian Century*, must also have been informed. How did the United Church react to this information? It reacted — when it did react — with passion.

On October 11, 1942, when the fires of extermination were already burning at Treblinka and Auschwitz, the Rev. Ernest Marshall Howse of Westminster

United Church in Winnipeg addressed a public meeting at the Civic Auditorium:

Now the new suffering comes to the Jew first, and to the Jew it comes most terribly. The scourge has fallen upon defenceless people as perhaps earth has not seen it since at the siege of Jerusalem a savage soldiery in one night ripped open the bellies of 2000 Jews to see if they had swallowed the gold of the temple. After two milleniums [sic] of history it becomes the loathsome distinction of the Nazi party again to shame the memory of man with the degenerate ferocity of those by-gone days.<sup>47</sup>

How widely this cry of outrage was echoed in Canada's Protestant pulpits at the time is now impossible to ascertain. Few sermons of the period have survived, and the distrust of atrocity tales — a legacy of the propaganda of the First World War — was still prevalent. Nevertheless, Howse was not alone. On April 15, 1943, Silcox, who for at least a decade had been the United Church's most vigorous and effective foe of antisemitism, employed the term "holocaust" in referring to events in Nazi-occupied Europe long before most of his contemporaries, and lamented the fact that so few brands had been plucked from the burning.<sup>48</sup> On May 28, 1943, at a Jewish-Christian service convened in Montreal's Temple Emanu-El in order to protest, in the words of the main speaker, the "greatest crime in history . . . the murder of a nation and the deliberate extermination of Jews, particularly throughout Europe"<sup>49</sup>, Professor R.B.Y. Scott of the United Theological College declared his "solidarity" with the suffering children of a "religion so closely associated with our own."<sup>50</sup> Finally, on September 15, 1944 — the date is important because it apparently took this long for all doubts to be dispelled in the collective mind of the United Church establishment — the *United Church Observer* (successor to *The New Outlook*) published this confession:

For some time we were reluctant to accept at face value the accounts which occasionally leaked out of the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis against conquered people . . . But Lidice changed all that . . . There have been statistics . . . that of three million Jews in Poland, all but one hundred thousand have been exterminated by the Nazis. The publication of these figures did not arouse the conscience of the world, perhaps again because we were defending ourselves against propaganda. But now that reputable American correspondents . . . give us eye witness accounts of the scientifically brutal way in which men, women and little children were destroyed in mass murder gas chambers, there is no escaping the conviction that in our own generation there has been carried on the greatest murder plot of all ages. The story told by correspondents of Lublin's extermination camp in Poland . . . is too brutal and horrifying beyond description."<sup>51</sup>

One gathers that Jewish reports alone were insufficient to convince sceptical United Churchmen; American reports, however, were a different matter. Obviously hearing is *not* the same as knowing; information is one thing, knowledge is another thing. At last the church *knew*!

On the critical subject of Jewish refugees, which arose quickly on the heels of the persecution crisis, some calls for Christian action appeared in the church press at least as early as 1935 (prompted, incidentally, by the International Missionary Council and its Committee on the Christian Approach to the Jews — a body, one presumes, with conversionist aspirations).<sup>52</sup> Only the Quakers, according to Conrad Hoffman of the IMC, were taking up the cause of Jewish relief in the form of practical assistance at the time.<sup>53</sup> Other Christian groups, *The New Outlook* argued in 1936, should take a “realistic look” at their own discipleship and do likewise.<sup>54</sup> During the dangerous year of 1939, when, behind the scenes in Ottawa, an “unofficial, unholy triumvirate” consisting of the Immigration Branch, the federal cabinet and the Department of External Affairs was doing everything in its power to prevent Jewish refugees from entering Canada,<sup>55</sup> the pro-refugee forces, headed by Senator Cairine Wilson’s Canadian National Committee on Refugees and Victims of Political Persecution, were attempting to move the mountains that blocked the path of Jewish freedom.<sup>56</sup> In January, Silcox urged Canadians to welcome King George VI to Canada by demonstrating to their sovereign that the “spirit of British fair-play” was “still alive in this Dominion by our answer to the challenge of the refugees”.<sup>57</sup> The same writer also adroitly turned the tables on the Anglo-Saxon nativists who railed against the racial dilution of Canada’s native stock by defending the German Jews as better “Anglo-Saxons” than the Anglo-Saxons: “. . . what do we need most on this continent — the Anglo-Saxon blood or the Anglo-Saxon spirit? Is it not primarily the Anglo-Saxon spirit, the love of freedom, the capacity for discipline, the regard for fair-play, the intellectual eagerness, the respect for cultural and scientific attainment, the political *savoir-faire* that knows how to deal with all kinds of minorities? Is it not this which we most need in Canada? And where in all the world are we more apt to find it than among these refugees now seeking a new home?”<sup>58</sup>

In February, *The New Outlook* denounced the federal government for its procrastination, especially in the face of Quebec nationalism: “To keep out others when our own house is largely empty is to be guilty of a political immoralism as grave in its implications as the crude immoralism of the Nazis.”<sup>59</sup> The same editorial criticized the Canadian churches, including the United Church, for their “disconcerting silence”.<sup>60</sup> In April, Howse preached two sermons in his Winnipeg church on the refugee situation, using the Matthaean text (25:40): “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” The refugees, he declared, particularly the Jewish refugees, far from swamping the country with undesirable types, represented “refined gold from a very fierce crucible”.<sup>61</sup>

The first signs of official concern from the United Church were emitted in 1937 when, prompted by Silcox, the Board of Evangelism and Social Service decided to urge its constituency to urge the government to provide a "haven for at least a reasonable number of selected refugees from certain countries in Europe."<sup>62</sup> These selected refugees, of course, would not be Jewish only, although Jews were certainly in mind. In 1938, the same Board endorsed the activities of the newly formed National Committee (which, incidentally, its own newly appointed secretary, the Rev. J.R. Mutchmor, had already joined).<sup>63</sup> Moreover, local presbytery committees throughout the church were encouraged to give the problem "careful and constructive thought" and to work toward the "creation of a favourable public opinion" in order to strengthen Senator Wilson's hand.<sup>64</sup> Some presbyteries began passing resolutions in favour of the refugees in an attempt to pry open the gates that the Immigration bureaucracy was secretly determined to keep shut.<sup>65</sup> In 1939, Jewish refugees were explicitly mentioned for the first time as the Board started to worry about Canadian antisemitism in light of the passionate opposition to a more generous policy from the nationalistic St. Jean Baptiste Society in Quebec.<sup>66</sup> In 1940, it commended the National Committee once again to the church, stressing the "tragically changed conditions in Europe", and the need to persuade Canadians that "German-born" refugees could be desirable immigrants.<sup>67</sup> Since antisemitism and xenophobia had not diminished in Canada, the struggle against these evils could not be allowed to diminish either. The fact that many of the refugees were children lent a poignant character to the entire crisis, and rendered both ridiculous and outrageous the (as we now know, deliberate) obstructionism of Ottawa in requiring certificates of release from their vanished parents before they could be awarded sanctuary.<sup>68</sup> In 1941, the Board once again recorded its opposition to all those who are "imbued with hatred of the Jewish people" — although not without adding the reflection that Christian attitudes today "will be the strength of the Christian Gospel message among Jewish people tomorrow"<sup>69</sup> — and in 1943, it called for the rescue of a number of Jews then stranded in Portugal before it was too late."<sup>70</sup>

### Conclusion

In answer to the question of the church's silence, while Abella and Troper are more or less correct as far as the denomination as a whole was concerned — there was certainly no mass outcry on behalf of the refugees — they are incorrect in confining the voice of conscience to only a few highly placed and perhaps relatively isolated individuals. The United Church was silent, but not that silent. From the first signs of persecution, the dark side of the fascist political system, notably antisemitism, racism and the progressive destruction

of democratic institutions, was noted and denounced in the church press, despite the appeal of the new European social order for a segment of its readership. As German anti-Jewish activities grew more evident and more sinister, these denunciations intensified. Even before the war, on both the local and the national levels, the United Church demonstrated a keen interest in saving Hitler's victims, both Jews and non-Jews, in the face of the anti-immigrant sentiments and policies of the era; this interest deepened as the crisis mounted. Finally the struggle against antisemitism itself grew more resolute as the church leaders and opinion-makers realized that this insidious disease was not restricted to the eastern shores of the Atlantic Ocean. It had to be contended with at home.

The silence of the church, however, is not the only important question. To the extent that Canada's largest Protestant denomination really *was* silent, what did its silence mean? Silence is a complex phenomenon, with more than one possible connotation: (a) it can arise from simple ignorance; (b) it can arise from willed ignorance, *i.e.*, from hearing but not knowing; (c) it can arise from knowing but not caring; (d) it can arise from knowing and tacitly approving the crimes that others are committing. In the United Church, with the many reports of an escalating persecution during the pre-war period, and the later accounts of mass murder during the war period (1942-45), there could not have been much simple ignorance on the part of its more literate and more alert constituency. But what the church membership read and heard, and what it chose to believe are quite different matters. There were numerous reasons, some plausible, for rejecting the information that was being presented: fake World War I atrocity stories, propagandistic exaggerations, the suspicion of witness reliability, the conviction that civilized nations cannot act in a grossly uncivilized fashion (after all, the ban on gas warfare had been accepted by both sides), the conviction, typical of religious liberals, that humankind is intrinsically moral and rational in spite of everything, the memory that German soil and German culture had given birth to the Protestant Reformation as well as to great theologians, great philosophers, great artists, so that Germany could not descend to the depths of total evil, etc. Even amid the jingoism of war fever, it was easy to find reasons for not believing the unbelievable. Most of the silence found in the United Church is probably explained by this kind of willed ignorance rather than by conscious or unconscious antisemitism.

Yet, of course, since antisemitism — real antisemitism — did exist in Canadian society, it was also present in the church as well. We have already cited some evidence for this assertion. Indifference was therefore a factor — the same indifference that induced Blair (incidentally, a Protestant elder), in

perfect awareness of the probable fate of the Jews he deliberately pushed away from the safe haven they were seeking, to shrug off the entire crisis as “almost wholly a Jewish problem”.<sup>71</sup> Such hardness-of-heart had virtually a religious flavour: the self-righteousness of the elect community — White, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant — which, confident of its own moral superiority, need not concern itself unduly with the plight of peoples who dwell outside the sphere of divine grace. These time-honoured Calvinist sins (so different from the humane and humanitarian spirit of John Calvin himself, with his compassion for the refugees who crowded sixteenth-century Geneva) were, and still are, embedded in much Canadian Protestant piety, not merely in the so-called Calvinist churches. The United Church, in spite of its liberal ethos, was no exception. Self-righteousness permeated its inherited condescension to Jews as fodder for conversion (1927 Yearbook), and, even when these earlier attitudes were modified, a sense of Christian religious superiority subtly intermingled with Anglo-Saxon racial superiority remained. The silent majority was never an antisemitic majority; nevertheless, there were some antisemites in both the ministry and in the congregations. As far as they were concerned, the Jews were not worth rescuing.

Did anyone in the United Church tacitly approve of the Holocaust? We do not know. We will probably never know. We do not even wish to guess.

#### NOTES

1. Irving Abella & Harold Troper, *None is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe 1933-1948*, Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1982, p. 51.
2. *ibid.*, p. 284.
3. *ibid.*, p. 51.
4. Lita-Rose Betcherman, *The Swastika and the Maple Leaf: Fascist Movements in Canada in the Thirties*, Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1975, *passim*.
5. Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952, p. 62.
6. Donald G. Creighton, *Dominion of the North: A History of Canada*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1944, p. 484.
7. Howard Palmer, *Patterns of Prejudice: A History of Nativism in Alberta*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1982, pp. 154-158.
8. Betcherman, *op. cit.*, p. 38.
9. H. Blair Neatby, *The Politics of Chaos: Canada in the Thirties*, Toronto: Macmillan, 1972, p. 34.
10. Interview with Dr. Ernest Marshall Howse, October, 1983.
11. Stewart Crysdale, *The Industrial Struggle and Protestant Ethics in Canada: A Survey of Changing Power Structures and Christian Social Ethics*, Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1961, p. 90.
12. Keith Clifford, “Religion in the Thirties: Some Aspects of the Canadian Experience”, *The Dirty Thirties in Prairie Canada*, D. Francis & H. Ganzevoort (editors), Vancouver: Tantalus Research Ltd., 1980, pp. 128-132.
13. Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada 1914-28*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1971, p. 256.
14. *The United Church of Canada Year Book* (1927), Toronto, pp. 116-117.
15. “Mr. Black’s Bible Class”, *The New Outlook* (August 26, 1936) p. 797. In 1934 this

- columnist charges the Jews at Christ's time with a "narrow nationalism" which had grown to presume "that God had chosen them, not for responsibility and service, but to special privilege and opportunity". That he implicitly refers to Jews in general is evident in a later statement from the same article. "How deadly upon the Jewish people themselves the effect of this attitude of mind had become the whole history of the years before and *after the coming of Christ* very clearly reveals". "When Patriotism Goes Bad", *The New Outlook* (March 2, 1934) p. 322; italics added.
16. See W.H. Colclough, "Gentiles Only", *The United Church Observer* (March 15, 1943) p. 10; G.G. Harris, "Christian Toleration", *ibid* (September 1, 1944) p. 17; R.H. Baxter, "Challenges Rabbi's Statement", *ibid*. (October 1, 1944) p. 13.
  17. For representative citations of this liberal ethos, see the following: "Editorial in Brief" *The New Outlook* (March 4 & 18, 1936) pp. 205, 261; "Jewish Tradition and Peace", *The New Outlook*, (April 2, 1937) p. 309; "Missing the Point: IV The Torah" *The United Church Observer* (December 15, 1940) pp. 13, 35; "What Our Readers Say" — "The Racial prejudice in Our Hymnary", *The United Church Observer* (June 1, 1944) p. 13.
  18. Richard Roberts, "The Quiet Hour", *The New Outlook* (November 29, 1933) p. 845.
  19. In "The Ethical Teaching of Jesus: In Its Jewish Background", S. MacLean Gilmour insisted that Jesus' ethical teaching must be presented against the background of contemporary Jewish piety, so that it is better understood "as the fulfillment of the best in the Mosaic tradition, as the full flowering of the Hebrew prophetic insight . . ." *The United Church Observer* (May 15, 1939) p. 13. See also C.A. Lawson, "Christianity's Debt to Judaism" *The United Church Observer* (January 1, 1942) p. 11: "In a day when terror has been spread around the world among the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, I say this tribute to how much we owe them in the hope that it may add to the peace of our Jewish brethren . . ."
  20. "The Jewish New Year, 5694", *The New Outlook* (September 13, 1933) p. 660.
  21. H.B. Hendershot, "The German Point of View", *The New Outlook* (August 9, 1933) p. 584.
  22. See "Our Readers' Forum", *The New Outlook* (July 8, 1938) p. 658.
  23. "Editorial in Brief", *The New Outlook* (November 21, 1934) p. 1029.
  24. Claris E. Silcox, "The German Psychosis", *The New Outlook* (August 16, 1933) p. 598.
  25. "Warning Against Fascism", *The New Outlook* (January 1, 1936) p. 11.
  26. "Wake Up, Canada!", *The New Outlook* (April 22, 1938) p. 385.
  27. "Citizens' Forum — Democracy in Action", *The United Church Observer* (December 1, 1943) p. 11.
  28. For example: "Anti-Jewish Bigotry", *The New Outlook* (March 29, 1933) p. 267; "Tragic Lack of Humour", *ibid* (July 11, 1934) p. 547; "Flies in German Ointment", *ibid* (May 21, 1937). H.B. Letterly, "German Youth Trained for War" *The United Church Observer* (May 1, 1939) p. 22.
  29. "Editorial in Brief", *The New Outlook* (April 12, 1933) p. 301. See "Facing the Storm", *ibid* (May 6, 1938) p. 432; "In a vague way we agree that it is wrong to penalize the Jews but . . ."
  30. Hendershot, *loc. cit.*
  31. Paul de Lagarde, *Deutsche Schriften* (1878); Eugen Dühring, *Die Judenfrage* (1881); Wilhelm Marr, *Der Sieg des Judentums über das Germanentum* (1873), etc. This view found initial expression in J.-G. Fichte in Napoleonic times.
  32. Silcox, *loc. cit.*
  33. See "Our Readers' Forum — Germany and the Jew", *The New Outlook* (February 5, 1936) p. 130. Ironically, the letter in question is signed "Fair Play".
  34. Of course, there may have been others as well. Except in a few well-documented cases, the evidence is fragmentary and survives mostly by word-of-mouth. See, for example, Richard Roberts, "If Jesus went to Germany?" *The New Outlook* (November 15, 1933) p. 805; "German Barbarity Deplored", *ibid* (May 17, 1933) p. 387; see the penetrating article by Devere Allen "Back of Hitler: and Beyond", *The New Outlook* (April 12, 1933) p. 302; also

- "Beyond Protest", *ibid* (November 25, 1938) p. 1114; E. Crossley Hunter "The Marks of Anti-semitism" *The United Church Observer* (March 15, 1941) pp. 10-28.
35. Silcox, *The Challenge of Anti-Semitism to Democracy*, an address delivered before Canadian Clubs in Western Canada, January, 1939; Even Silcox "privately grumbled that Jews should 'learn some manners so they would be more acceptable.' ", Abella and Troper, *op. cit.*, p. 284.
  36. "The Limit Has Been Reached!" *The New Outlook* (January 22, 1936) p. 73.
  37. "Appeal for the Persecuted", *The New Outlook* (August 12, 1936) p. 73.
  38. "You Must Keep in Step", *The New Outlook* (June 4, 1937) p. 509.
  39. "Keeping the Money at Home", *The New Outlook* (June 24, 1938) p. 603.
  40. "Scared by a Mouse", *The New Outlook* (November 18, 1938) p. 1092; see also "A New Phase in Germany", *ibid* (November 25, 1938) p. 1116.
  41. "Healthy Instincts", *The New Outlook* (November 18, 1938) p. 1095.
  42. "A New Phase in Germany", *The New Outlook* (November 25, 1938) p. 1116.
  43. Paul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, New York: New Viewpoints 1973, p. 257.
  44. "Hitler Tells the World" *The New Outlook* (February 3, 1939) p. 99.
  45. "Is It Nothing to You?", *The New Outlook* (February 10, 1939) p. 120. At the time of this publication Gerald R. Cragg was the editor of *The New Outlook*.
  46. Robert W. Ross, *So It Was True: The American Protestant Press and The Nazi Persecution of the Jews*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980, p. 170.
  47. Ernest Marshall Howse, *I Speak for the Jew* (October 11, 1942). Unpublished manuscript.
  48. "Let My People Go!", *United Church Observer* (April 15, 1943) p. 11. See also "Conference on Post War Role of Religion", *The United Church Observer* (May 1, 1943) p. 26 which treats of "millions of human beings . . . tortured to death in Nazi-occupied land". Atrocities were reported but not believed.
  49. Ven. A.P. Gower-Rees, *Religion Pleads the Cause of Refugees* (May 28, 1943), p. 7. Privately published pamphlet.
  50. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
  51. "The Atrocities", *The United Church Observer* (September 15, 1944) p. 4. See "Terrible but True", *The New Outlook* (December 30, 1938) p. 1273: "the sooner the rest of the world realize this fact the better."
  52. Margaret Wrong, "International Missionary Council", *The New Outlook* (October 23, 1935) p. 1025.
  53. "Practical Christianity", *The New Outlook* (March 11, 1936) p. 267.
  54. *Ibid.*
  55. Abella & Troper, *op. cit.*, p. 50.
  56. *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45. In October 1938 the Canadian League of Nations Society announced that it would "place the strength of [its] entire organization behind a move to aid the Jewish refugees . . . by requesting the Canadian government to take immediate action." The society's president Senator Cairine Wilson took on the duties of president for the Committee on Refugees and Victims of Political Persecution upon its creation in December of 1938. (Abella and Troper, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-5.)
  57. Silcox, *The Challenge of Anti-Semitism to Democracy* Toronto: The Committee on Jewish Gentile Relationships (January, 1939) p. 16.
  58. Silcox "Should Canada Provide Sanctuary for European Refugees?", *The Canadian Friend* (December 1938/vol. 36/#6) p. 11; originally broadcast on CFRC radio, Kingston, Ontario, November 1, 1938, 7:15-7:30 p.m.
  59. "Is It Nothing to You?", *The New Outlook* (February 10, 1939), p. 120.
  60. *Ibid.*
  61. Howse, "Christian Canada and the Refugees" and "The Refugees — A Policy for Canada",

- Westminster United Church, Winnipeg (April, 1939) p. 13. Privately published pamphlet.
62. *HE is Mightiest in the Mightiest*, Thirteenth Annual Report (1937), Board of Evangelism and Social Service, *The United Church of Canada*, p. 37. See also General Secretary's Report to the Christian Social Council of Canada, 1938, p. 5 which deals with "Refugees". On April 1938 the Executive dispatched a communication to the Honourable Thomas Crerar, calling attention to the plight of the refugees and urging the Canadian Government to take the necessary steps "to find a needed and adequate solution of a condition which, by reason of the factors of persecution and hopeless suffering, is at variance with all our cherished ideals." Rev. Dr. Claris Edwin Silcox file, National Archives, Canadian Jewish Congress, Montreal.
  63. On October 17, 1938 the Canadian Jewish Congress — Central Division printed a confidential "Resume of Activity in Connection with the Refugee Situation" which stated that after consultation with Rev. Mr. Silcox in September, "it became apparent that a number of non-Jewish bodies were prepared to take some action to secure the entry of refugees to Canada." The final product of this concern was the Committee on Refugees and Victims of Political Persecution (Rev. Dr. Claris Edwin Silcox file, National Archives, Canadian Jewish Congress, Montreal).
  64. *Let The Church Be The Church*, Fourteenth Annual Report, Board of Evangelism and Social Service, *The United Church of Canada*, p. 52.
  65. *Ibid.* The Montreal Presbytery, for example, deplored "the continued and bitter persecution of the Jewish people by certain European Governments, chiefly Germany and Italy, that is driving into exile and making homeless hundreds of thousands of helpless men, women and children, thus creating a world problem in suffering of the last degree of poignancy; the Presbytery, therefore, earnestly calls on the citizens and Government of Canada to do everything in their power . . . to help the persecuted and hopeless by opening the gates of Canada to as large a number as possible of such expatriated and pitilessly plundered people." (September 16, 1938). Cited in David Rome, *Clouds in the Thirties: On Anti-Semitism in Canada 1929-1939*, Section 12, National Archives, Canadian Jewish Congress, Montreal, 1980, p. 691.
  66. *There am I in the Midst*, Fifteenth Annual Report (1939), Board of Evangelism and Social Service, *The United Church of Canada*, p. 55.
  67. *The Eternal . . . The Contemporary*, Sixteenth Annual Report (1940), Board of Evangelism and Social Service, *The United Church of Canada*, p. 66.
  68. *Ibid.* p. 67. The following letter from the personal file of Dr. Howse is highly illuminating:

Department of Health and Public Welfare  
Child Welfare Division.  
657 Portage Avenue,  
Winnipeg.

File No. Misc.224

July 14th, 1979.

Rev. Ernest Howse,  
Honary Secretary-Treasurer,  
Canadian National Committee on Refugees,  
120 Maryland Street,  
WINNIPEG, Manitoba.

*Re: Jewish Refugees.*

Dear Mr. Howse:

With further reference to our correspondence herein, I beg to advise that I am now in receipt of a ruling from the Department of Immigration in which they state in part, "If there is any movement of refugee children they must be orphans in the true sense of the word [sic]. If the cases which you have on record cover children that are not orphans (in the true sense of the word) there is no use in any further action being taken with respect to their admission to

Canada.”

It would appear, therefore, that it would be necessary for you to provide us with a *certificate of death of both parents* of any refugee children being admitted to this country. I shall therefore be pleased to hear from you further in this respect.

Yours faithfully,  
(signed) Mildred B. McMurray  
Legal Supervisor

- 69. *Hope in God*, Seventeenth Annual Report (1941), Board of Evangelism and Social Service, The United Church of Canada, pp. 27-28.
- 70. *Right Relations Among Men*, Nineteenth Annual Report (1943)/Board of Evangelism and Social Service, The United Church of Canada, p. 62.
- 71. Abella & Troper, *op. cit.*