

The Jews and the Public Education System: The Students' Strike over the "Flag Fight" in Toronto after the First World War¹

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Introduction

This essay deals with an historical incident regarding public education and Jews in Toronto. It focuses on a specific incident which took place in December 1918 and January 1919 in the public schools in Toronto. In order to understand this topic there is a need to be aware of other situations external to the school system. Education does not exist in a void, but rather it is a part, though an important part, of the wider society. Therefore, the early beginnings of Canadian and Toronto Jewry must be examined.

Historical Background

Between 1881 and 1921 the Jewish population in Canada increased from 2,393 to 126,196 and the Toronto Jewish population increased from 534 to 34,377. The Jews were emigrating from anti-Semitic violence in Eastern Europe. These immigrants "were far less assimilationist in orientation than were their predecessors . . . (Thus) the earlier era of the rapidly assimilating Canadian Jew came abruptly to an end"².

The large influx of the East European Jews led to increasing overt anti-semitism, while the old Jewish community in Toronto was trying its best to integrate with the dominant Anglo-Canadian society. However, most of the Jews lived in their own area, "The Ward", and did not feel daily anti-semitism³.

During the 19th century and in the beginning of the 20th century the prevailing ideology throughout Canada was assimilation. The education system in Toronto was no exception⁴. At the turn of the century in Toronto:

The Queen, the Bible and clean fingernails were the three great symbols of the time. Ida (Siegal) remembers that certain (teachers) women who were cranks insisted on children bringing New Testaments to school. "One day she and some classmates were to be strapped for not having their Bible the day before . . . The feeling against (the

immigrants) showed itself in . . . brutal form in the efforts of schools, community workers and Protestant missions to convert and Canadianize the children . . . The children were regarded as capable of salvation and assimilation”⁵.

This aggressive assimilation strategy in Canada is well reported and documented including the school system⁶. The “Flag Fight” is another example of this. It was a very emotional and vocal dispute, but it has become a forgotten story and this paper tries to bring back this dramatic story to the public domain.

The “Flag Fight”

At the end of World War I in at least six elementary schools in Toronto there arose a conflict regarding Jewish students and the Jewish flag. The story of the conflict is sketchy and the main sources of information are the reports in *The Evening Telegram* and the *Hebrew Journal* which supply sometimes contradictory details. According to the *Evening Telegram* on December, 18, 1918 twenty Jewish boys in Miss Hagarty’s class of King Edward School went on strike because “Miss Hagarty would not allow them to put up their Zion flag among the flags of the allies”⁷. The striking boys complained to the Chief Inspector and to the Mayor (Mr. Church). However, the boys were “turned down” and were advised to go back to class. Moreover, the chief inspector, Mr. Cowley who was approached on this matter by the boys said: “I told them that they were simply truants in being out of school . . . for no legitimate reason”⁸. The animosity around this matter seems to be high as is evident from the parents’ intervention which followed. Two days later on Friday, 20.12. 1918, the parents joined their children. “The striking boys with several irate parents, attended the King Edward School closing (for Christmas) with the intention of further pushing the matter . . . the boys were out to ‘fight’⁹”.

Two trustees who were present, backed the strikers’ demand and were sorry for ignoring their Jewishness and promised the boys that the Jewish flag “will also be placed in the group containing the Irish Flag, the flag of New Zealand, Australia and others which are not in the regular allies group”¹⁰. In return the Jewish students and their parents, agreed to cancel their complaint letter to the “Hebrew Journal” which was already prepared, and were asked to apologize to their teachers and principal¹¹. However, the *Hebrew Journal* credited its intervention for the strikers’ victory¹².

This report is solely based on the *Evening Telegram*, one of the major daily newspapers in Toronto. The *Hebrew Journal* was the only Jewish daily newspaper at the time in Toronto and the reports in the *Evening Telegram* had been described by it¹³ as incitement against the Jews. The teacher, Miss Hagarty had been described in a sarcastic way as “someone who does not

love Jews very much’’¹⁴. When she decorated the classroom for Christmas she did not put up the Jewish flag. According to the students she refused to put it up in spite of their requests and protests and even insulted them by saying that the Jews were worse than the Germans¹⁵. These accusations took place at the Board of Education level¹⁶ and were directed mainly to the Chief Inspector¹⁷. The accusations were denied by the teacher, who said that the reason for refusing the Jewish flag was disciplinary¹⁸. The publicity of this incident led to public pressure. The strikers got the backing of the Board of Education, and even the Mayor supported their case and put up in his office a Jewish flag¹⁹. However the Jewish reaction was sporadic. One of the parents personally protested to the Board and the ‘‘Hebrew Journal’’ among others protested too. The protest was uncoordinated and that led the Zionist organizations, B’nai Zionism and the Zion Council, to take the lead in protesting as far as the federal level. The protest was intensified by the anti-semitic reports of the *Evening Telegram* concerning both the ‘‘flag incident’’ and the ‘‘newspaper incident’’²⁰.

When school resumed after the New Year break in January, 1919 the promise was not kept and the Jewish flag was not placed²¹. However, the unrest among the Jewish students spread to other public schools. On January 8, 1918 strikes were reported in Ryerson and Orde Street School²² in Manning Avenue School in Elizabeth Street Schools²³ and also in Victoria Street School: ‘‘the schoolboys strike of Miss Hagarty’s room at King Edward School was duplicated when a large number from Miss Sophia Cooper’s class at Victoria Street School took French leave²⁴, because their flag was not placed among the allies²⁵. Again the boys went to the Chief Inspector, the Chairman of the Toronto Board of Education and the Mayor. All of them declined to meet the boys. Their school principal even said that he was unaware of the strike and their teacher refused any comment.

This ongoing struggle and its scope is only hinted at in the *Evening Telegram* reports. For instance, Mr. Connely, the Chief Inspector commented in regard to King Edward school’s strikers: ‘‘They came to me *again*’’. The Principal of Victoria Street School commented in regard to his school boys’ strike: ‘‘It may be the *same* old story of the flag *again*’’ [emphasis added]. And one of the trustees commented in regard to Victoria Street strike ‘‘The Chief Inspector should take this matter up once and for all and settle it . . . We can’t have this sort of thing going on’’²⁶. Moreover, the *Evening Telegram* referred to the Victoria School strike in this way: ‘‘again the school boys’ strike was duplicated’’. The large scope of these strikes led The *Hebrew Journal*²⁷ to call for stopping these strikes from

becoming a daily practice. The unrest which was connected to this struggle, was very high and the *Hebrew Journal* called in its editorial on two consecutive days²⁸ for a peaceful solution and more parental guidance.²⁹ The fear of spreading of the unrest might have been one of the factors which led to the trustees intervention in favour of the strikers in December, 1918. But the most important factor was the timing of the first strike, just three weeks before the election to the Board of Education and City Council. Both trustees (Brown and Boulton) came in second place out of three candidates in their Wards in the January the 1st 1919 election³⁰ (in each ward two were elected). The two trustees were accused directly by another trustee of playing politics with the Jews and using the flag dispute to get Jewish votes. The two trustees had threatened to resign from the Board. They denied that they sold their “souls for a Jewish vote”³¹ and stated that: “We endeavored to win over these Jewish boys to support their teacher above all things”³². These changes took place one week *after* the elections and the deal with the strikers took place one week *before* the election. Nevertheless, the meeting on January, 8, 1919 took place in the management committee of Toronto Board of Education³³. The committee received a letter from the principal of King Edward school asking for guidance³⁴ and a communication from The Canadian Jewish Publishing Company (which was the Hebrew Journal’s publisher) regarding the students’ and parents’ concerns³⁵. Thus, it is apparent that the broken deal led the strikers and their parents to complain to the Jewish newspaper. The complaint was not dealt with (for technical reasons) and the committee decided: that no flag other than the British flag be displayed on any of our buildings or in any of our classrooms³⁶.

This decision got mixed reactions. On the mainstream side it was applauded in two editorials of *The Evening Telegram*. One reason given was that “the Jewish flag was also the emblem of Austro-German Hebrews”³⁷, and that “the home or the synagogue, not the Public school, is the place for the flag of Zion”³⁸. On the Jewish side³⁹ it was labelled as a stupid decision, but an expected one due to the fact that there was not even one Jewish trustee in the Board⁴⁰. The *Hebrew Journal*⁴¹ even called on the Jewish Community before the election to vote for a Jewish candidate to the Board to prevent the anti-Jewish decisions.

The other daily newspapers did not mention the dispute at all⁴². That fact is even more striking because the *Toronto Star Weekly* reported on the six schools’ concerns, as was mentioned before. The most striking report is the one on King Edward school from 23.3. 1919⁴³ only three months after the strike. The report on Miss Hagarty’s class, in which the first strike had started

supplies background information and detailed account of the class activities. However, the flag dispute which had made this class very famous was totally ignored.

In this climate of refusal to recognize Jewish symbols and of ignoring their struggles the Jewish students were going through the public schools.

Conclusion

The history of the Jews and assimilation into public education, influenced and was influenced by both sides: Jews and non-Jews. The Jews were a main force to fight assimilation, which also affected Jewish education, and became one of the forces that resulted in the establishment of Jewish evening schools in the beginning of this century, and the Jewish day schools since the 1940's.

The story of the flag fights is unusual in the history of the public school system in Toronto and may be even in Canada. A strike is an extreme measure to be used by students and their parents. The "re-discovery" of this strike and struggle is not unique to Toronto. Students strikes were "rediscovered" also in Britain on a national scale:

The most dramatic and subversive act of resistance to schooling was the pupils' strike . . . This form of pupil protest was a collective response to severe provocation by teachers or education committees and was characterized by demonstrations and meetings to enlist both the support of children in neighbouring schools and parental sympathy and to encourage solidarity . . . However, because such strikes were a source of acute embarrassment to teachers and education authorities, they were often conveniently forgotten and omitted from . . . committee minutes and official school histories⁴⁴.

The British strikers were treated in a similar manner to the Jewish-Torontonian strikers. On the one side they were called "truants"⁴⁵ and pushed aside and ignored (e.g.: The Principal of King Edward school "was quite unaware that the boys were out"⁴⁶). On the other side they were perceived to be a threat to the social order of the society (e.g. "Jewish Flag to Rule Instead Of British?")⁴⁷

The situation of a schooling system which is and was dominated by Christian beliefs but which includes non-Christian sub-ordinate groups and purports to be a *public* system was the setting of these fights. All the "other" sub-ordinate groups were supposed to "melt" into the culture and assimilate. However, this policy failed in regard to ethnic and religious groups which refused to be melted or be assimilated. One of the very "stubborn" groups was the Jews, who are among the highest ethnic retainer groups. The fights in the schools reflected tensions which existed outside of the schools. The "flag fight" also spilled out of the schools; the city politicians and the Jewish organizations and parents were active in this dispute. The media played a very active part in the dispute, mainly by reporting in a very biased manner, but also by not reporting and ignoring the

dispute.

Since this dispute took place almost seven decades have passed. Toronto and Canada have changed drastically and the current national banner is “multiculturalism”⁴⁸. However, the Jewish community is still concerned with the schools “because of the efforts, covert and all too frequently overt, which they have experienced to convert them”⁴⁹. Thus, this ‘little local difficulty’ contains important evidence for a different history of communities of schooling and contemporary Canadian Societies. It demonstrates that “the Public” and the “Public schools” are in their history and present forms transferring a very specific context which excludes as well as includes. For example, *current* “Ontario education regulations require all public elementary schools to devote two 30-minute periods a week to religious education”⁵⁰. The provisions of the Ontario Government “puts our public schools in the position of being officially in favour of the Christian interpretation of the Scriptures . . . The teacher is obliged to teach the controversial doctrine of the divinity of Jesus as though it were a matter of incontrovertible fact”⁵¹. Again, the Public school system serves a specific public, and not everyone can be seen or heard there⁵².

NOTES

1. **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:** I would like to thank Mr. B. Gershenzon for his very useful help in translating the Yiddish newspaper clippings. I would also like to thank Dr. S. Speisman for his helpful assistance with the Archival material.
2. Kallen, E., *Spanning the Generations. A Study in Jewish Identity*, Don Mills, Ontario, Logman Canada, 1977. (p. 41).
3. Speisman, S.A., *The Jews of Toronto — A History to 1937*. Toronto: McClelland and Steward, 1979.
4. Jaenen, C.J., “Minority Group Schooling and Canadian National Unity”, *The Journal of Educational Thought*. 7 (2) (1973) (pp. 81-9).
5. *Toronto Board of Education. We are all Immigrants to this Place to this Place*. Toronto, 1976.
6. Jaenen, C.J., “Minority Group Schooling and Canadian National Unity”, *The Journal of Educational Thought*. 7 (2) 1973 (pp. 81-89).
7. *The Evening Telegram*, “School Boys Strike Ended” (21.12.1918). (p. 26).
8. *The Evening Telegram*, “Is Jewish Flag to Rule instead of British?” 8.1.1919. (p. 22).
9. *The Evening Telegram*, “School Boys Strike Ended” (21.12.1918). (p. 26).
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. *The Hebrew Journal*, “The Jewish Strikers Won”. (22.12.1918).
13. *The Evening Telegram*, “Bolshevism in Schools? Idea Riles Trustees” (9.1.1919). (p. 20).
14. *The Hebrew Journal*, “Jewish Boys are Striking because of the Jewish Flag”. (20.12.1918). (Yiddish)
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. *The Evening Telegram*, “Jewish Flag of Zion”. (23.12.1918). (p. 18).

18. *The Hebrew Journal*, "Jewish Boys are Striking because of the Jewish Flag". (20.12.1918).
19. *The Hebrew Journal*, "The Jewish Strikers Won". (22.12.1918).
20. *The Hebrew Journal*, "Zionist organizations are taking care of the Jewish Flag Incident". (23.12.1918).
21. *The Hebrew Journal*, "The Parents have to be Responsible to the Defence of the Jewish Flag". (9.1.1919).
22. *Ibid.*
23. *The Hebrew Journal*, "Don't Declare Hasty Strike". (8.1.1919).
24. Illegal leave.
25. *The Evening Telegram*, "Is Jewish Flag to Rule instead of British?" (8.1.1919). (p. 22).
26. *Ibid.*
27. *The Hebrew Journal*, "Don't Declare Hasty Strike". (8.1.1919).
28. *Ibid.*, and *The Hebrew Journal*, "The Parents have to be Responsible to the Defence of the Jewish Flag". (9.11.1919).
29. The six schools which were reported in the two newspapers as being involved in these strikes, were all located in and around the "Ward" (the downtown area in Toronto in which the Jewish immigrants were living in this period) and had prominent Jewish population. According to the *Toronto Star Weekly's* reports about these schools the King Edward School "nearly half the pupils are Jewish extraction" (*Toronto Star Weekly* [23.3.1919] "King Edward School has 175 names on Honor Roll"), and also in Manning Avenue School half of the pupils were reported to be Jewish (*Toronto Star Weekly* [10.11.1917] "Manning Avenue School a Model of Efficiency: Pupils are taught to do Research Work"). The report about Victoria Street school (*Toronto Star Weekly* [18.5.1919] "Victoria Street School Building is oldest in City — Was Built in 1855") stated that "seventy-five per cent are today little Jewish boys and girls from the Ward". In Ryerson school were 75 percent Jews (*Toronto Star Weekly*, [11.11.1916] "Ryerson School Doing Wonderful Work for Social Betterment of Pupils of Foreign Origin"). The report about Orde Street School stated that "the big majority of the children attending the school . . . are Hebrews" (*Toronto Star Weekly* [9.12.1916] "Open Air Classes for Tubercular Children Distinctive Feature of Orde Street School"). The *Toronto Star Weekly* ([9.6.1917] "Hester How School Carries on Program Laid Down by Five Women Whose Name it Bears".) reported that in Elizabeth Street School (or Hester How school) "the children are almost entirely of Hebrew percentage".
30. *Toronto Daily Star*, "Board of Education". (1.1.1919).
31. *The Evening Telegram*. "Bolshevism in Schools? Idea Riles Trustees" (9.1.1919). (p. 20).
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Toronto Board of Education*, "Management Committee Minutes (item #17). (8.1.1919).
34. *The Hebrew Journal*, "Canada has Only one Flag and no other Flags will be put up in the Public Schools". (10.1.1919).
35. *Toronto Board of Education*, "*We are all Immigrant to this Place*. Toronto. (1976).
36. *Ibid.*
37. *The Evening Telegram*, "The Flag of Zion". (16.1.1919).
38. *The Evening Telegram*, "Public School is no Place for Religious Emblem." The Jewish-Zionist flag was labelled as a religious emblem by the newspaper. However, the Jews who promoted it all around the world including Toronto stressed its *national* aspect. (18.1.1919).
39. *The Hebrew Journal*, "The Crime is of Both Sides". (10.1.1919).
40. *Ibid.*
41. *The Hebrew Journal*, "Two Cases of Influences and their Lesson." (27.12.1918).
42. Pennacchio, L.G. (1983) "The Defence of Identity: Ida Siegel and the Jews of Toronto versus the Assimilation Attempts of the Public School and Its Allies, 1900-1920". Paper

prepared for "The History of Women and Education in Canada", Ontario Institute of Studies in Education.

43. (*Toronto Star Weekly*, "King Edward School has 175 names on Honor Roll".) (23.3.1919).
44. Humphries, S., *Hooligans or Rebels?*. Oxford; Basil Blackwell, (1981) (p. 91).
45. Marson, D., *Children Strikes in 1911*. Oxford: History Workshop Pamphlets, (1973). (p. 29).
46. *The Evening Telegram*, "Is Jewish Flag to Rule instead of British?". (8.1.1919). (p. 22).
47. *Ibid*; and see also Humphries, S., *Hooligans or Rebels?*. Oxford; Basil Blackwell. (1981).
48. Palmer, H., "Reluctant Hosts: Anglo Canadian Views of Multiculturalism in the Twentieth Century". In *Multiculturalism as State Policy*. Second Canadian Conference on Multiculturalism, (1977). (pp. 81-110).
49. The Ontario Jewish Association for Equity in Education. Submission to the Commission of Inquiry into the Role and Status of Private Schools in Ontario, Toronto. (1984) (p. 9).
50. *Globe and Mail*, "Norton asked to Drop Religious Teaching Rules". 18.3.1985. (p. M1).
51. *Canadian Civil Liberties Association*, Submission to the Minister of Education. (14.3.1985), (p. 2).
52. Corrigan, P. (1986) "In/Forming Schooling". In D. Livingston (ed.) *Critical Pedagogy and Cultural Power*, Begin and Garrey (forthcoming).