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DAVID ROME AS HISTORIAN OF CANADIAN JEWRY*

No one at all interested in the Canadian Jewish community and its history can avoid the work of David Rome, whose many publications—most prominently the forty-plus volumes of the new series of *Canadian Jewish Archives* he has written and edited in the past two decades—are and will remain “must reading” on Canadian Jewry. Given the growing importance of this field of study, it is well worth our while to attempt to understand some of the factors which have influenced Rome’s work as well as to investigate his own sense of the meaning of Jewish history in the modern world.

I

David Rome was born in 1910 in the city of Vilna, the centre of an Eastern European Jewry in ferment and transition. Jews were emerging there as elsewhere in Europe from an essentially pre-modern, traditional society to a modern one and basic changes were becoming evident in all aspects of life and thought. Not least is this transition evident in Jewish conceptions of history and its meaning. The centuries-long development of rabbinic Judaism, which dominated pre-modern Judaic thought, saw Torah, with its essentially ahistorical world-view, as constituting an entirely satisfying and self-sufficient explanation of why things were the way they were. Sacred history, enshrined in the Biblical narrative, was quite enough to explain the vicissitudes of Israel in the postbiblical era as well. The coming of moder-

nity meant the dethronement of Torah and its attempted replacement by history. Thus the leaders of Reform and of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement which arose at the beginnings of Jewish modernity in the early nineteenth century, argued that it was to be the masters of Jewish history and not the masters of Torah, who would determine what Judaism should mean in the modern age.¹

The historical development of Jewish Studies thus stems from the attempted dethronement of Torah. But the new Jewish learning of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, like the older Judaic learning, encompassed some disciplines while leaving others aside. Looking for legitimation in the context of the contemporary German academic world, Jewish scholars saw their own field of study largely in terms of a subset of the field of Semitic philology.² Thus there were parts of the intellectual heritage of the Jewish past that were given great emphasis, such as the history of Jewish Biblical interpretation. That enterprise needed but little justification. Other aspects, however, were given relatively short shrift.

One of these aspects was Jewish history in the post-Emancipation era. Practitioners of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* tended to look down on the recording of contemporary Jewish events as mere journalism. In a classic adumbration of this attitude, Alexander Marx, professor of Jewish history at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, felt that Jewish history after 1800 essentially constituted current events.³ Moreover, if modern Jewish history in general had to fight for its place in the sun of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the history of North American Jewry had an even more uphill fight to be considered “historical.” For if the prime definition of Jewish history was that of scholarship and suffering, what was one to do with a North American Jewry which possessed neither scintillating Judaic scholars nor any notable record of persecution?⁴

The beginnings of North American Jewish historiography in the late nineteenth century thus received but little support and encouragement from the community of “Jewish” scholars or

from mainstream American historians, at that time but little interested in ethnic or immigrant history. Marginalized from both sides, the pioneers of North American Jewish historiography persisted in their self-appointed task first of all because they conceived of the creation of a field of American Jewish history as a refutation of anti-Semitic accusations that the Jews had done nothing to help make America. The answer the pioneers of American Jewish historiography gave was, of course: we were here from the beginning. In a context in which “having a history” meant being of significance to society, it appeared well worthwhile to the pioneer North American Jewish historians to create their own field.

Because of the initial relative lack of support on the part of the academic world—both in universities as well as in specifically Jewish institutions, North American Jewish history before the Second World War was basically the province of amateurs—some very talented and others less so. It was not even taught in Jewish institutions such as rabbinical seminaries, where “Jewish studies” in other, more acceptable forms did flourish. This left the door wide open for filiofetism, the uncritical celebration of one’s ancestors, to dominate the publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, almost the only major organization in this era dealing in a continuous way with North American Jewish history.

II

The first people more than casually interested in the history of the Jews of Canada were Jews engaged in journalism. Occupied as they were with the vagaries of daily Jewish existence in the Dominion of Canada, people like Benjamin Sack⁵ and Israel Medres⁶ in Yiddish, and A.M. Klein⁷ in English, strove to understand the context in which the Canadian Jewish community had developed and thus turned their eyes toward the past.

The formation of the Canadian Jewish Congress in 1919 gave a further spur to the development of a Canadian Jewish

consciousness and hence to attempts to understand that community on the basis of scholarly investigation. It will thus be no surprise that, aside from journalists, the first attempts to deal with Canadian Jewish studies in a serious way came from men connected with the Canadian Jewish Congress. H.M. Caiserman, from the beginnings of Congress, sought to create an archive which went beyond the immediate needs of the organization itself⁸ while Louis Rosenberg pursued his pioneering social-scientific studies of the Canadian Jewish community as a “Jewish public servant” working for Congress.⁹

Canadian Jewish studies in this pre-World War II era, like American Jewish studies, was almost totally a Jewish affair, born of perceived needs for Jewish communal advocacy on the part of Canadian Jews with the vision to see that scientific study constitutes the best advocacy.

With that background in mind, we can now turn to David Rome and understand his work in context. Though he went to university and acquired a graduate degree, he did not come to the study of the Canadian Jewish community through the university. He came to it through a career in Canadian Jewish journalism in both Yiddish and English with such newspapers as Vancouver’s *Jewish Western Bulletin* and Toronto’s *Hebrew Daily Journal*. From his journalistic career, he moved on to become Canadian Jewish Congress Press Officer, and still later, head of Montreal’s Jewish Public Library. David Rome, in short, had become a Jewish public servant like Caiserman, whom he greatly admired.

Rome arrived on the public scene at a time when the portentous events of the Holocaust were threatening to overwhelm world Jewry and when, in Canada, the position of the Jewish community was widely perceived as threatened by open anti-semitism.¹⁰ While exerting his efforts to do what could be done to help Jews in need, he also kept a sharp eye out for the documentary evidence needed in order to tell the story of the Canadian Jewry he served.

David Rome’s greatness is to be defined in terms of his

development and exploitation of the Geniza¹¹ of Canadian Jewry—the archives of the Canadian Jewish Congress. These archives, founded by Caiserman, have been built up by Rome and by those he inspired to follow in his footsteps. The thousands and tens of thousands of documents found in the Canadian Jewish Geniza comprise the raw material available to construct the history of the Canadian Jewish community.

There are both virtues and limitations inherent in working on Geniza documents.¹² The virtues are many. Most particularly one can see and put together documents, which have gone unseen and unnoticed by others, to create a dynamic picture of the past. The drawbacks include a tendency to concentrate on individual documents, because of their fascination, sometimes to the exclusion of a larger vision. David Rome never succumbed to the fascination of his documents to the exclusion of a larger vision of Jewish history. His “*Essay on Modern Jewish Times*”¹³—a characteristically modest title for what for other scholars would constitute a major monograph—demonstrates this, as we will see.

What was Rome’s vision of Canadian Jewish history? The first thing that must be said in this regard is that Rome in a very real sense wrote Jewish history as “journalism.” As a Canadian Jewish journalist, he had learned to follow the story and learned equally that stories are all about people. This becomes quite apparent from a perusal of his first published book on the early Jewish settlers of British Columbia. There he wrote:

By now we have mentioned every member of the Victoria Jewish community of 1858 whose name has come down to us. It was a remarkable group of men containing future mayors of the major cities of the province, members of the legislature, founders of industries, shipping men, manufacturers, pioneers, miners, real estate men and actors. The unusual quality of the group can be fully appreciated only by a comparison with the achievements and records of any similar

group chosen at random from any Jewish community in Canada.

Another observation that can already be made is the close bond between these Jews, clearly conscious as they and their neighbours were of their Jewish descent and nationality, and the communal enterprises of the budding city. For an abundant moment in Canadian history a fertile and happy equilibrium was established which is of significance to our whole nation and which established a lasting tradition in the province.¹⁴

A second significant element in David Rome's vision of Jewish history was that he approached Jewish history with the awe and reverence with which one would approach a religious text. For Rome, as for many modern Jews, Jewish history constituted a religion which could substitute for the traditional Judaism of the premodern era. Thus, in his "Essay", he wrote:

The survival of Judaism in the twentieth century is significant in the totality of Jewish history. It sheds a light on the mystery of Jewish eternity and on the nature of the Jewish people and on its spiritual heritage.

It were best to establish the miraculous character of this survival so as to legitimize the sense of supernatural—or supernatural—terminology in considering the current events of our times. It is not frequently in the annals of mankind that a generation can document contemporaneously the workings of the unusual in its own sphere quite without relationship to causality.¹⁵

While Jewish history was a form of religion for him, he realized full well that Judaism the religion was itself a source of much that was true and beautiful. Nonetheless, his appreciation of Judaism as a religion could not and would not disguise his

sorrowful but firm rejection of the Torah of traditional Judaism as a true guide for the modern Jew. As he stated:

In the 1880's eastern Jewry exploded with creative answers. The one institution in Jewry that significantly did not come up with a new answer was traditional, orthodox Jewry which—as we have noted—had in the past been the sole motivating agency of the people, constantly adapting and reforming its institutions in accordance with the calendar of time...It is from this moment of break in the life chain of creativity that Hassidism—with all orthodoxy—loses its position in Jewish life.¹⁶

David Rome's vision of modern Jewish history drew on his Eastern European origins as well as on the North American and Israeli Jewish communities which rose during his lifetime to become the new vital centers of Jewish life. Pre-Holocaust Eastern Europe was looked upon by Rome as the "heartland" of modern Jewry, whence came the great *elan vital* of twentieth century Jewry. In his lifetime, Rome witnessed a transfer of Jewry from the old heartland to the new heartlands under the impetus of the Holocaust, which cast its shadow over Rome as over all Jewish historians of his generation.

There is yet another side to David Rome the historian. He spent a great deal of his time and energy explaining Jews to others, especially to French Canadians.¹⁷ Once again, his considerable scholarship was at the service not merely of the rapprochement policy of the Canadian Jewish Congress, but also of his own considerable passion to create understanding and harmony among all Canadians.

III

David Rome spent a lifetime exploring the Geniza of Canadian Jewry. Not the least result of this lifetime's work was his sharing of his knowledge of "where the bodies are buried" in this

field. Just one example of many which could have been given come from Louis Levendel, who says this about Rome's influence on his book on the Canadian Jewish Press:¹⁸

My book...would not have been possible without his considerable assistance and guidance. David spent hours with me in his CJC office as well as at his home over a number of evenings and the weekend...[H]e expended much energy from gently persuading to bullying me to head in certain directions. And in most cases, I later concluded, he was on the mark.¹⁹

Finally, I have to say that I, too, was shaped in part by David Rome's guiding hand. Coming to Canada in 1979, I was a scholar with a professional interest in American Jewish history but with no more than a superficial acquaintance with Canadian Jewish history. In his contacts with me over the years, he constantly nudged me in the direction of Canadian Jewry and awakened in me an appreciation for the riches and significance of the Canadian Jewish experience. Insofar as my scholarly career has turned its attention to the study of Canadian Jewry, it is largely due to David Rome's careful and patient cultivation of my interest.

ENDNOTES

*This essay was originally presented as a lecture to the annual meeting of the Canadian Jewish Historical Society in Montreal on May 28, 1995. It is being published essentially as it was given, with some editing and the addition of footnotes. A comprehensive study of the work of David Rome, of blessed memory, remains a desideratum.

¹Yosef Haim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle and London, 1982), pp. 77ff.

²Paul Ritterband and Harold S. Wechsler, *Jewish Learning in American Universities: the First Century* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1994), pp. 1-10.

³Mordecai Waxman, ed. *Tradition and Change: the Development of Conservative Judaism* (New York, 1958), p. 9.

⁴Ira Robinson, "The Invention of American Jewish History," *American Jewish History* 81 (1994): 309-320.

⁵On Sack, see Gerald Tulchinsky, *Taking Root: the Origins of the Canadian Jewish Community* (Toronto, 1992), p. xiii; Richard Menkis, "Myth, Historiography and Group Relations: Jewish and non-Jewish Québécois on the Jews and New France," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 33,2 (1991): 25-29.

⁶Zachary M. Baker, "Montreal of Yesterday: a Snapshot of Jewish Life in Montreal During the Era of Mass Immigration," in *An Everyday Miracle: Yiddish Culture in Montreal* ed. by Ira Robinson, Mervin Butovsky and Pierre Anctil (Montreal, 1990), pp. 39-52.

⁷Zailig Pollock, *A. M. Klein: the Story of the Poet* (Toronto, 1994), index, s.v. "history."

⁸Bernard Figler and David Rome, *Hannaniah Meir Caiserman: a Biography* (Montreal, 1962), p. 262.

⁹Morton Weinfeld, introduction to Louis Rosenberg, *Canada's Jews: a Social and Economic Study of Jews in Canada in the 1930s* (Montreal, 1993).

¹⁰Irving Abella and Harold Troper, *None Is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933-1948* (Toronto, 1982).

¹¹A "Geniza" is a place where, traditionally, Jews deposited documents which had the name of God written on them and which therefore could not be thrown out. The most famous Geniza was located in Cairo where, for nearly a millenium before its "discovery" by western scholars in the nineteenth century Jews deposited their used documents and books. The cataloguing and publication of the contents of the Cairo Geniza has lasted now over a century and still remains unfinished.

¹²Gerson D. Cohen, "The Reconstruction of Gaonic History," introduction to Jacob Mann, *Texts and Studies* (New York, 1972), p. li.

¹³David Rome, "An Essay on Modern Jewish Times" is appended to Figler and Rome, *Hannaniah Meir Caiserman*, pp. 317-494.

¹⁴David Rome, *The First Two Years* (Montreal, 1942), p. 30.

¹⁵Rome, "An Essay on Modern Jewish Times," p. 328.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 379.

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¹⁷Jack Jedwab, “The Politics of Dialogue: Rapprochement Efforts Between Jews and French Canadians, 1939-1960,” in Ira Robinson and Mervin Butovsky, eds., *Renewing Our Days: Montreal Jews in the Twentieth Century* (Montreal, 1995), pp. 42-74.

¹⁸Louis M. Levendel, *A Century of the Canadian Jewish Press: 1880s-1980s* (Ottawa, 1989).

¹⁹Louis Levendel to Ira Robinson, May 15, 1995.