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THE CBC “VENTURES IN CITIZENSHIP” BROADCAST OF 9 NOVEMBER 1938 (*KRISTALLNACHT*)

On the night of 9-10 November 1938, Nazi Germany unleashed a furious attack on German Jews. During this hate-filled “Night of Broken Glass”—*Kristallnacht*—Jews were beaten and murdered; their property was plundered, and synagogues were trashed and burnt. Antisemitism was at the core of the Nazi movement, and *Kristallnacht* showed the extent of the hatred. The events of *Kristallnacht*, a night of horror never to be forgotten, foreshadowed the Holocaust.

While this assault was in progress in Germany, many time zones to the west in Winnipeg the Propoisker Hebrew Association was meeting peacefully on a late autumn Wednesday evening.¹ But instead of getting on with regular business, the members gathered around a radio and listened to a programme on the national network of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), launched as a crown corporation just two years before. The programme they heard celebrated the contribution of Jews to Canadian life and was part of a series called “Ventures in Citizenship.” After an introductory broadcast that set the scene, the series focused on the role of various cultural groups in Canadian life and examined issues relating to the country’s ethnic diversity. The series had thirteen half-hour programmes, was produced at CKY

Winnipeg by John Kannawin, and was heard nationally at 8 p.m. Central Time on successive Wednesday evenings from 28 September to 21 December 1938.² By coincidence, the programme on Jews was scheduled for the fateful night of 9 November. It featured Jewish music, began with a message from Rabbi Joseph Hertz, chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Empire, and closed with words from Rabbi Solomon Frank of Shaarey Zedek Synagogue, Winnipeg.³

How was it that such a programme and such a message should have been heard on *Kristallnacht* in Canada, a country which was not yet altogether comfortable with diversity in general, or with Jews in particular? The answer is to be found in the career of Robert England, who spearheaded the “Ventures in Citizenship” series. England was born in Portadown, County Armagh, Northern Ireland in 1894 and came to Canada just before the outbreak of the Great War of 1914-18.⁴ He began his Canadian life doing farm work in Saskatchewan but soon registered as an extramural student in English, Greek, and philosophy at Queen’s University. Commissioned as an officer with the Saskatchewan Rifles, he went overseas in 1916 with the 203rd Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. He served in France with the Royal Canadian Regiment from 1916 to 1918 and saw action at Vimy Ridge, Hill 70, and Cambrai. Twice wounded, he was awarded the Military Cross for heroism at Cambrai.

When he joined the army, England described himself as a Methodist and a student for the ministry.⁵ But after the war, he attended normal school in Saskatoon and then taught at Slawa Rural School, near Hafford, Saskatchewan in a predominantly Ukrainian district. He subsequently worked in London, England and Winnipeg for the colonization branch of the Canadian National Railways. In 1936-37 he was director of extension and associate professor of economics at the University of British Columbia, and from 1937 to 1939, he served as economic adviser to the Winnipeg Electric Company.

England was a prominent veteran, an accomplished speaker, a committed adult educator, and a keen student of colonization, cultural diversity, and nation building in Canada. He was well connected to the dynamic Winnipeg Jewish community. On 12 December 1937, he attended the annual meeting of the Jewish Orphanage and Children's Aid of Western Canada and on another occasion addressed a Shaarey Zedek Synagogue congregational dinner.⁶ His extensive bibliography includes *The Central European Immigrant in Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1929); *The Colonization of Western Canada: A Study of Contemporary Land Settlement (1896-1934)* (London: P.S. King, 1936); *Discharged: A Commentary on Civil Re-establishment of Veterans in Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1943); *Contemporary Canada: A Mid-Twentieth Century Orientation* (Toronto: Educational Book Company, 1949); and *Twenty Million War Veterans* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1952).⁷ He collected his essays on the decade of the Great Depression in "Thoughts of the Thirties," but the manuscript was never published.⁸ In 1980, *Living, Learning, Remembering: Memoirs of Robert England* was published by the Centre for Continuing Education of the University of British Columbia.

England believed that "God has written a line of His thought on the cradle of each race"⁹ and that the demographic diversity of Canada exemplified this truth. "Particularly in Western Canada," he wrote in 1938, "we are rapidly reaching a position when in point of population every race and creed will be a minority group relatively to the total. Our cultural life must come to the rest of equilibrium like the stresses of a great bridge. It is to be a peace of pressures nicely adjusted to bear the burden of our society. The specific force is to be used in aesthetic form—fitted neatly to purpose. Here is the art of a true civilization. Stone[s] rejected by the builders in Europe have become the heads of corners of our structure."¹⁰ England admired the "Canadian Mosaic," and he wrote a glowing review of a 1938 book by John Murray Gibbon with that title.¹¹

He was an optimist about the future of Canada as a democratic and diverse country but considered education for good citizenship essential to maintaining the harmony of the Canadian demographic mix. The Canadian way, he wrote in his essay, "Contributions to Citizenship," was based on the "principle of political autonomy combined with cultural differentiation." He advised:

In these days, when totalitarian and authoritative concepts are so prevalent, it is important to emphasize again in Canada the nature of the democracy which is ours. We adhere to that parliamentary form which has its origin in Northern Europe and which implies freedom of assembly, of speech, of the press, of religious affiliation and practice with legal safeguards for the maintenance of individual rights to life, liberty and to such pursuits as may be reasonably carried on without injury to society. The separation of the executive and judicial powers, and the submission of the executive to legislative authority constituted by traditional democratic methods of adult franchise, secret ballot, political parties and persuasions have grown up as a technique every part of which has been fought for and is jealously guarded.... In so far as a minority aims at human betterment and the attitude of the good neighbour, its aims are in line with those of the good Canadian. But a good neighbour means one who consents to reasonable community control, co-operates with those about him, conserves what is best in the institutions of his neighbourhood, and contributes what he has in him to the well-being of his fellows. Every minority then must seek to persuade and must give rather than get.¹²

The key to achieving all this was a well-functioning public school system, which had been "the great engine of Canadian Democracy."

Not surprisingly, England was alarmed by the rise of Nazi Germany and feared that another war, which would test

the mettle of multicultural Canada, was imminent. And it was in this spirit that he approached the "Ventures in Citizenship" series, which he undertook at the request of the CBC as a public service. "I agreed to do it," he told one correspondent, "if it could be done without charge and if they would give me the help I thought was needed, so that the programmes will be very much a composite effort of quite a number of people including representatives of various groups that we have in Winnipeg."¹³

The first programme introduced the intended exploration of Canada's ethnic richness and was built around a conversation between two fictional characters—Brown, a "typical Canadian," and his English friend, Willoughby, who was visiting the Canadian West. Over lunch, they discussed "conditions in western Canada with particular reference to the racial origins of the population, cultural standards, British tradition and so on." Brown's offer to show Willoughby around began "a cultural Odyssey," which lasted "throughout the series" and went from ethnic group to ethnic group. Brown and Willoughby were accompanied on their travels by Wood, "a skeptical, practical sort of person," and Professor McAllister, "a pedant who nevertheless...[had] some very sound ideas."¹⁴ The four parts were acted by England, W.H. Darracott (who collaborated in the making of the series),¹⁵ R.E. Guy, and Professor H.R. Low of the University of Manitoba.

Unfortunately, there is no complete set of scripts from "Ventures in Citizenship" and no recording of the broadcasts. There are, however, working documents relating to the series in England's papers at the National Archives of Canada. These include England's draft introduction to the programmes:

Charles Lamb, once, in speaking to a friend, said of another man, "I hate that man." "But," said his friend, "you don't even know him." "Of course, I don't," said Charles Lamb, "how could I hate him if I knew him." That has been the thought behind the planning of this series of broadcasts. The aim of these programmes will be to tell in part of the contributions being made

to Canadian life and citizenship by our neighbours of varied racial origin. We are accustomed in Canada to precepts of tolerance. It is our fate that our Dominion is shared. Confederation has laid upon us the duty of reciprocal culture—English and French—in a unique way. This great venture, therefore, of seeking unity while shunning uniformity, of combining freedom and order, means that the Canadian citizen must ever be a good listener—and bend an attentive ear to the claims and aspirations of many minority groups....So in this series, by discussion of points of view, by song and story, we will endeavour to get glimpses of what our neighbours have it in their power to contribute to a united Canada....[W]e have done our best by co-operation and consultation with committees of representative groups to bring before you this drama of Canadian nationhood. And now—“Ventures in Citizenship.”¹⁶

After the first broadcast, England heard from Garnett Neff, a lawyer in Grenfell, Saskatchewan, that while the discussions started by the programme would be “quite useful and helpful,” no speaker had “touched the very essence of the problem of assimilation.” Neff recalled “Instances ... where second, and in some cases, third generation Canadians of European stock are boldly proclaiming Nazi principles. These are not isolated instances and, therefore, create the impression at least that the difference between European and our own British stock is fundamental and creates the doubt whether education and environment can overcome it.”¹⁷ In reply, England noted that, while it had been “very difficult in the opening broadcast to deal with all the aspects of the problem of assimilation, particularly that aspect of it which deals with the mental attitude towards European ideologies,” the series would move on to this topic. “We hope as we go through the series to emphasize the contribution which the various groups can bring to Canada in cultural matter[s] rather than the propagation of ideas and ideals which

fit in the European pattern. As we go along, you will see how we have attempted to deal with this subject. I may say to you privately that I have a large number of German friends in Winnipeg and find that many of them feel humiliated by the tone and temper of Hitler's speech. As you can readily see, it was antagonistic to the Mennonite peace point of view. It is possible that this past crisis will have served notice on a great many people as to the urgency of creating Canadian unity."¹⁸

England's reference here to "this past crisis" was to the events leading to the Munich agreement of 29 September 1938, which mandated the transfer of the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia to Nazi Germany. "I am very relieved," he wrote of this key episode in international relations and in the appeasement policy of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, "that war has been averted but am very unhappy about what has happened to Czechoslovakia and to British prestige, but my information about continental Europe is such that I feel our best plan is to preserve our sanity and democracy on the North American continent. There is little doubt that Mr. Chamberlain has the support of a large number of quiet people who hate war, but of course we regret that we have to be associated with the carving up of a friendly power at the dictate of Hitler."¹⁹

After the broadcast of 2 November, England received encouraging words from his old friend, New Brunswicker Milton Gregg, winner of the Victoria Cross in the Great War and now sergeant-at-arms in the House of Commons. "I'm not a radio fan," Gregg enthused, "and the regular fare of hooey gives me a pain in the neck. Your broadcast was the first one I've ever heard that caused little ripples of satisfaction in being a Canadian [to] run up and down the spine. More power to you!"²⁰ Gregg offered to have the Dominion Command of the Canadian Legion circularize its branches throughout the country to publicize the series and encourage members to write to the CBC supporting the effort being made through the programmes on behalf of "a more cohesive and united Canada." England welcomed this offer from "Groggy" but noted that the timing might be late.

In fact, the next broadcast, the historic “Jewish Contribution” programme of 9 November, had special interest for Canadian veterans, because England chose to highlight the heroism of Myer Tutzer Cohen, a casualty of the Great War and winner of the Military Cross.²¹ In researching Cohen’s career, England consulted Colonel C.B. Topp, whom he had known at Cambrai and who was now chief pensions advocate with the Department of Pensions and National Health, the branch of the Government of Canada that administered veterans benefits in this period. “I have agreed to do a number of broadcasts for the C.B.C.,” England told Topp, “and it occurred to me that I might at a certain point tell the story of Lieutenant Cohen. You will remember that he was killed at Hill 70. At this time when anti-Semitic propaganda is rife, this story might be told with effect.”²²

Using information provided by Topp,²³ England crafted a remembrance of Cohen in prose that remains fresh and compelling:

I want...to recall tonight in a few words the short military career of one whom I knew. I served with the Royal Canadian Regiment which was brigaded with the Princess Patricia’s, the 42nd and the 49th Battalion. During the winter of 1916 I met from time to time a young Officer serving with the 42nd Battalion, Royal Highlanders of Canada....His name was Myer Tutzer Cohen, a resident of Toronto, who had enlisted at Dundas in 1915. I can well remember the chaffing of him by his fellow officers for his wearing of the kilt. The Brigade Commander, later Sir Archibald Macdonell, was greatly distressed at the way in which this young Jew wore his kilt and used to say to him, “I can never let you call yourself MacCohen until you learn to wear your kilt properly.”...On the night of September 29th, 1917, Lieutenant Cohen with a party of one N.C.O. and seven men carried out a patrol on the front opposite Méricourt during which he encountered two enemy patrols, both of which he attacked and destroyed, capturing three prisoners from each.... Cohen and his raid-

ing party were placed at the head of the Battalion on the march back to rest billets at the end of the tour and as they marched past General Macdonell called out, "You can call yourself MacCohen now."...[L]ater, in hospital, I was to learn that Lieutenant Cohen was killed in action at Passchendaele. Fellow officers tell me that when his body was found it was clear that he had put up a very gallant defense....

The name of Lt. Myer Tutzer Cohen is to be found in the Roll of Honor in the Memorial Chamber of the Peace Tower in Ottawa—but there is another place where his name is remembered. In the Church of St. Andrew and St. Paul, Sherbrooke Street, Montreal, there is a magnificent memorial window, said to be one of the finest in Canada, dedicated to the 42nd Battalion. In the window, above the head of David, the Warrior King, is a six-pointed star of David deliberately inserted in honor of Lieutenant Cohen—a tribute to the memory of a gallant young Jew who, in sharing the high and chivalrous traditions of a proud and great regiment, gave all he had for Canada.²⁴

By the standards of 2004, some of this—especially the "MacCohen" references—is jarring, but there can be no doubt about England's sincerity of purpose and inclusive perspective.

Nor can there be any doubt about the good will created by the 9 November programme. In the days following the broadcast, as the mass media of Canada and the world attempted to come to grips with what had happened in Germany on *Kristallnacht*, England received high praise, not least from the Propoisker Hebrew Association of Winnipeg.²⁵ Also from Winnipeg, Max Mains, manager of the Foreign Language Press Agency, thanked England for words that had brought "great delight to me, and I am sure to many sad Jewish hearts.... Your thorough understanding of our people and their loyalty to Canada and their readiness to give their life for British

Institutions has been so ably demonstrated in this broadcast, that it is of the greatest value to Canada at the present.” The story of Myer Tutzer Cohen would “bring a vivid realization to Jew and Gentile alike” and thereby “cement the foundations for ‘The New Canadian.’” Mains asserted that “thousands of Canadians of Jewish blood...[were] ready and willing” to follow Cohen’s example.²⁶ In the same spirit, Alderman M.A. Gray of Winnipeg told England that the programme was “the finest radio broadcast and the best Jewish programme I ever heard.”²⁷

From the Bank of Nova Scotia Building in Montreal, England received congratulations from Royal L.H. Ewing for “the dignified and thrilling way” he had “described young Cohen’s efforts with the 42nd.”²⁸ In another letter from Montreal, Miss I.C. McLennan, “sister of the late Lieut.-Col. Bartlett McLennan,” wrote to C.P. Topp, who had himself heard the broadcast about Cohen “with a great deal of interest and pleasure.”²⁹ Miss McLennan was “much pleased ... with Mr. England’s narration of Cohen’s fine ‘story’—it was so simple, direct and restrained.” She continued with the “hope [that] many heard it. I telephoned the only Jewish people I know,” she wrote, “my furrier and the family of a Rabbi, whose son won a travelling scholarship we gave McGill. Do congratulate Mr. England—he emphasized just the right points, didn’t he.”³⁰ From Speers, Saskatchewan, W.G.Scott, who had served with Lieutenant Cohen and had known him “quite well,” told England that he was “liable to be singled out by Hitler as public enemy no. 1” for his broadcast. “Never mind,” this correspondent advised, “you could still call quite a few 42nd and Pats to help.”³¹

Yet another letter of appreciation came from Myer Averbach, executive secretary of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Western Division, Winnipeg. “Such a fine expression of good-will,” he wrote, “is of particular meaningfulness today.”³² “From what I can gather,” England replied, “the programme has done a good deal to help the good relations which exist in Canada between Jew and Gentile. I am indeed glad to have been able to be of some service in this work of

good will."³³The most poignant letter of all came from Rose F. Cohen ("Mrs. Irving C.") of Apartment 10, 330 Avenue Road, Toronto, the sister-in-law of Myer Cohen, who asked for a copy of the programme for the lieutenant's mother.³⁴ In December, 1938, while the "Ventures in Citizenship" series was still in progress (the 14 December programme, on the French-Canadian contribution, was scheduled to be broadcast from St. Boniface Cathedral), England offered celebrated journalist J.W. Dafoe, now serving on the Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations, this assessment of the impact of the programmes: "Our mail as a result of these broadcasts indicates that there are to be found many Canadians of all races who are deeply interested in the unity of Canada. This attitude is more widely spread than provincial leaders guess."³⁵

As documented by Irving Abella and Harold Troper in *None Is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933-1948* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1982), Canada had a most shabby record in the 1930s in its policy towards Jewish refugees seeking to escape Nazi oppression. Obviously, the coincidence of a radio programme favourable to Jews broadcast in Canada on *Kristallnacht* to a limited audience should not be allowed to obscure or detract from this fundamental reality. The "Ventures in Citizenship" broadcasts were intended to promote national unity in the face of the "gathering storm" in Europe. In this regard, they foreshadowed a larger, government-endorsed public relations campaign during the war. The latter had as its purpose drawing immigrant and ethnic groups in Canada into the common war effort, while keeping a lid on domestic nativism lest it corrode wartime unity.

The favourable Jewish response to the broadcast of 9 November 1938 was likewise in keeping with a pre-war campaign in the Canadian Jewish community to fight anti-semitism. Led by a strengthened Canadian Jewish Congress and B'nai Brith, this campaign drew upon American models. It promoted the view to Canadians at large, English and French alike, that Jews were valued citizens who contributed signifi-

cantly to the common good. England's perspective in "Ventures in Citizenship" correlated nicely with this effort and anticipated the government wartime effort on behalf of national unity. In both cases, past and present "contributions" were emphasized and differences downplayed. The broadcast of 9 November 1938 did not, however, deal with the urgent matter of Jewish refugees, and there is no evidence in England's papers regarding his attitude to the refugee question. His purpose was to foster good inter-group relations within Canada and prepare the country for the stresses of war. This was a limited objective, but in a decade in which antisemitism flourished in Canada, England's was a voice for tolerance and understanding.

The broadcast about Canadian Jews heard on the CBC on *Kristallnacht* is a footnote to Canadian history, but it is a footnote that illuminates major events and trends. Perhaps the same may be said of Robert England and Myer Cohen, little-known Canadians whose lives intersected great moments of history. England died on 14 June 1985, and his ashes were scattered at Royal Oak Burial Park in Victoria, British Columbia.³⁶ Cohen died on 3 November 1917 and lies among the fallen of the Great War in plot 34, row A, grave 15, Poelcapelle British Cemetery, about eight kilometres northeast of Ypres, Belgium.³⁷

NOTES

¹National Archives of Canada (NAC), MG 30 C 181 (Robert England Fonds), vol. 6, file 4, Slotin to England, 10 November 1938.

²*Winnipeg Free Press*, 28 September 1938, p. 2. For further information about the series see successive Wednesday editions of this paper.

³*Ibid.*, 9 November 1938, p. 2.

⁴For his career see NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 6, file 13, "Curriculum Vitae: Robert England," and his *Living Learning Remembering: Memoirs of Robert England* (Vancouver: Centre for Continuing Education, University of British Columbia, 1980).

⁵NAC, RG150 (Ministry of the Overseas Military Forces of Canada Fonds), vol. 2913, "Officers' Declaration Paper," "Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force."

⁶See NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 4, file 1, "Annual Meeting of the Jewish Orphanage," and file 8, "Personalism."

⁷There is a copy of his bibliography in NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 6, file 13.

⁸See NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 3, file 24.

⁹NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 3, file 24, "Canadian Mosaic."

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹John Murray Gibbon, *Canadian Mosaic: the Making of a Northern Nation* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1938).

¹²NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 4, file 1, "Contributions to Citizenship." Punctuation has been added here and elsewhere in the interest of readability.

¹³NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 6, file 4, England to Markham, 8 October 1938.

¹⁴*Winnipeg Free Press*, 28 September 1938, p. 2.

¹⁵For Darracott's role, see *Winnipeg Free Press*, 9 November 1938, p. 2.

¹⁶NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 6, file 5.

¹⁷NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 6, file 4, Neff to England, 29 September 1938.

¹⁸NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 6, file 4, England to Neff, 4 October 1938.

¹⁹NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 6, file 4, England to Markham, 8 October 1938.

²⁰NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 6, file 4, Gregg to England, 3 November 1938.

²¹For the role of Jews in Canadian military history through the Great War, see "The Jew in the Military Life of Canada" in *The Jew in Canada: A Complete Record of Canadian Jewry from the Days of the French Régime to the Present Time*, ed. Arthur Daniel Hart (Toronto and Montreal: Jewish Publications Limited, 1926), pp. 503-11. I am grateful to Gerald Tulchinsky for this reference.

²²NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 6, file 4, England to Topp, 29 September 1938.

²³NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 5, file 5, Topp to England, 14 October 1938.

²⁴NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 6, file 4, “Ventures in Citizenship: The Jewish Contribution.” The window was the work of James Ballantyne of Edinburgh, Scotland, and was inscribed, “They sought the Glory of their Country, they see the Glory of God” (NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 5, file 5, Topp to England, 14 October 1938).

²⁵NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 6, file 4, Slotin to England, 10 November 1938.

²⁶NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 6, file 4, Mains to England, 10 November 1938.

²⁷NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 6, file 4, Gray to England, 10 November 1938.

²⁸NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 6, file 4, Ewing to England, 10 November 1938.

²⁹NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 6, file 4. Topp to England, 14 November 1938.

³⁰NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 6, file 4, McLennan to Topp, 10 November 1938.

³¹NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 6, file 4, Scott to England, 18 November 1938.

³²NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 6, file 4. Averbach to England, 16 November 1938.

³³NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 6, file 4, England to Averbach, 22 November 1938.

³⁴NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 6, file 4, Cohen to Kannawin, 11 November 1938.

³⁵NAC, MG 30 C 181, vol. 6, file 4, England to Dafoe, 8 December 1938.

³⁶*Times-Colonist* (Victoria, British Columbia), 17 June 1985, p. B11. I am grateful to Patricia E. Roy, Department of History, University of Victoria, for this reference.

³⁷NAC, RG150, vol. 1841, Jackson to Matthews, 20 June 1955.