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**Removing the Stain: a Jewish Volunteer's  
Perspective in World War Two**

Joe Jacobson was a personable, athletic, and ambitious young man from upper class Westmount. A third generation Canadian, he was the only Jew on McGill's 1938 intercollegiate champion football team. After graduating in commerce, he would set out to assume his place in his father's office equipment business. Conscious of his social status, and ambitious to make his mark in Canadian society, Joe was highly sensitive to the public image of the Jew. He knew it was unhelpful to his own aspirations, but also came to see it as a stain on the honour of the Jewish community to which he belonged. By 1940, Joe had come to believe that the war not only offered Jews an opportunity to remove that stain by their own actions, but indeed demanded that they do so. He seized that opportunity with enthusiasm and conviction, and he expected others to do likewise in order to vindicate the Jewish community's place in Canada.

What commands our interest in this particular young man and his views? Between July 1939 and January 1942, Joe Jacobson recorded in detail what he saw and did, who he met, what was happening around him, and what he thought of it all. He communicated much of it to family and friends, in 239 letters over that two and a half year period, and he kept some of it to himself in several diaries and notebooks. His father Percy also kept a diary throughout the war: a record of daily events on the home front in Montreal and of his own hopes and anxieties.<sup>1</sup>

This exceptional record reveals much about how its creators saw the Jewish situation and antisemitism in Canada, and how those perceptions framed Joe Jacobson's own attitudes and imperatives in wartime. Whether or not the Jacobsons were "typical" or representative of Montreal's uptown Jewish community, they were most certainly products of it. They shared the mindset of many who considered themselves amongst the leaders of the national Jewish community: prosperous but anxious, and acutely aware of the hostile currents in 1930s Canada and the unfolding catastrophe in Europe. With the aid of archival, secondary, and family sources, I examine the basis and development of Joe Jacobson's ideas as he encountered different Jewish communities across Canada before and during his training in the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), and in his subsequent military service in England.<sup>2</sup>

## Montreal

Montreal was home to the oldest and largest Jewish community in Canada in 1939. It consisted of three main elements: the old-stock, uptown Jews of Westmount, the much more numerous and recently arrived working class crowded into the city's industrial garment district and, in between, the modestly successful middle classes in Notre-Dame-de-Grace and other suburbs.

Westmount's Jews – businessmen, professionals, and factory owners – were affluent, self-made people. Whatever their degree of religious commitment, and many were only moderately observant, their Judaism was a private matter for home and syn-

agogue. Jews at home, and Canadians in public life, they saw (or at least presented) themselves more as a faith community than an ethno-cultural one. Previous generations had abandoned the Jewish life and Yiddish culture of the old countries, and they themselves had no interest in recreating that past in Canada. The Jews of Westmount were sympathetic to the budding ideals of Zionism, but mainly as a haven for the persecuted Jews of Eastern Europe. They did not see themselves "in exile," but rather in a new world in which they very much wanted to belong. They had made Canada their place and modernity their ideal. They were proud of their heritage as founders and leaders of Canadian Jewry, and directed their philanthropy chiefly to the building of Jewish institutional and communal life in Montreal.<sup>3</sup>

Prim, proper, and discreet, the uptown Jews were unexceptional in English Montreal, perhaps to the point of blandness. They had conformed in many ways to its public norms and, being Anglophile by disposition, they were also inclined to adopt its outlook and prejudices. For many this was more than just accommodation to gain acceptance, as some had already achieved in parts of Montreal's business and professional fabric. It was an embrace of the English-speaking world's ideals and accomplishments, in their eyes the pinnacle of civilization.

The uptown Jewish community had high expectations of its sons. They should do well in school, make something of themselves, raise a family, and be good citizens. They should succeed in the professions and prosper in business, they should not marry until they could do this, and they should marry within the faith.

One of those privileged sons was Joe Jacobson, freshly graduated from McGill University. By all accounts Joe would fulfill his community's expectations. Although quick to assert his individuality, he was not by inclination a non-conformist. Joe's parents, Percy and May Jacobson, both of them Canadian-born, were progressive in outlook: high-minded and public spirited, touched by a measure of intellectual snobbery. Members of the city's Reform synagogue, they were only minimally observant, but they were acutely conscious of the precarious situation of Jews at home and abroad as the war began. Percy, of Anglo-Jewish lineage, was a businessman and a man of letters: author of several CBC radio dramas and chair of the Montreal chapter of the Canadian Authors Association. May was much attracted to the ideals of progressive education and ran a children's bookstore.

1939 was not the best of times for Montreal's Jewish community. In an era in which it was still common to speak of the English, French, and Jewish "races," there was perceived to be a "Jewish Problem" in Canada, and not least in Montreal. Even the prosperous and successful uptown Jewish community was feeling vulnerable and anxious. In the wake of the Great War and the Russian Revolution, Canada was seized by dread of anarchy, revolution, and Bolshevism. Immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe, including a large influx of Jews, were perceived as carriers of these

“diseases”. Montreal’s Jewish population had increased nearly tenfold in the previous forty years.<sup>4</sup> The uptown Jews had decidedly mixed views about their relations with the more recently arrived working classes in the garment district. There was apprehension that the public image of these Yiddish-speaking newcomers, and their reputation for radicalism, would reflect badly on the uptowners and undermine their hard won status, such as it was.

While other ethnic and religious groups experienced discrimination and prejudice, none was subjected to the same level of international political vilification that was deliberately fomented by Nazi Germany in the late 1930s. A small but vocal segment of Canadians, both English and French, admired Hitler and his policies of Jewish exclusion and repression. Nor did the views of such prominent American antisemites as Henry Ford, Charles Lindbergh, and Father Coughlin go unnoticed or unapplauded in Canada. Jews were increasingly, and in public conversation, alleged to be dominating, controlling, parasitizing, or subverting Canadian life, rather than contributing to it. As fears of war were added to those of Bolshevism, even Jewish loyalty and commitment were coming under scrutiny.

Although antisemitism was only a marginal political force in Canada, its menace lay in its appeal to latent attitudes in the country. Precisely because antisemitism was not institutionalized as in Germany, it was less predictable. It might be encountered in polite society, the streetcar, the lunch counter, the locker room, the classroom, or at work. It might be expressed as hostility or discrimination, jokes or jibes, or casual but unabashed expressions of disdain and contempt. Even if infrequent, it was unsettling.

The uptowners managed to live their lives largely within circles where being Jewish was accepted or overlooked. But that comfort zone could not encompass the entire world of work and leisure. By 1939, personal relationships across communal boundaries, once taken for granted, seemed to have an edge. Percy, who by name and appearance was not obviously Jewish, and who routinely conducted business in Montreal’s corporate head offices, sometimes encountered such awkwardness from people with whom he had otherwise cordial relationships. Soon after the outbreak of war, Percy commented on a mutually embarrassing incident triggered by a gentile associate’s ill-considered remark about Jewish business practices:

This I am afraid is the attitude of most Christians today. What are we going to do about it? Only one thing. We must have even higher standards of conduct than our Christian fellows, we must bend backward in being even more fair than they are.<sup>5</sup>

### **Joe Jacobson**

Joe Jacobson was a product of this Westmount Jewish milieu. In his teens, he engaged

in synagogue youth activities, and his parents sent him to a summer camp in Vermont that catered to well-off Montreal, New York and Philadelphia Jews. At McGill he joined Zeta Beta Tau, the Jewish fraternity house. Yet, as an avid athlete living in a gentile neighbourhood, Joe routinely associated with non-Jewish boys.<sup>6</sup> In his last year of high school, the athletic staff characterized Joe as "... a sure tackler in football and one of the few Jewish boys who stood out in hockey."<sup>7</sup>

Joe had not seriously engaged with Judaism or Jewishness in his teens. He was Jewish through his community, by association and habit rather than conviction. In a community that saw itself as a faith group, Joe was not a religious Jew. His family was unobservant in practice and skeptic in faith. Sufficiently separated from his European roots, and with no real knowledge, experience or connection to Yiddish and *Yiddishkeit*, Joe did not see himself as culturally Jewish. In the social categories of the day, he and his family were neither immigrants nor foreigners, even if they were of a different "race"; a term Joe himself used on occasion.<sup>8</sup> Whatever was left – habits of mind, a way of being, a system of ethics – were surely matters of the private sphere, in no way incompatible with his Canadian identity. Taken together with his father's English up-bringing and his community's Anglophilia, Joe's Anglo-Canadian and Jewish sensibilities seemed uncomplicated. Joe was, in his own mind, a Canadian who happened to be Jewish. He neither wanted to be different in that larger world, nor made to feel different. And most of the time he wasn't.

Joe Jacobson emerges, from the diaries he kept in his late teens, as preoccupied with self-improvement and finding his direction.

I have been going to college all year presumably to learn to think. Most of my thinking has been done on the ice, football field, ski trails, or dance floor. But very little real thinking, reasoning and concrete original deductions. I have spent an extremely enjoyable year, but ... I don't feel I am going ahead. ... I met a lot of people, but I doubt if I gave anything to any of them (except a few laughs) or got anything worthwhile in return (outside lipstick). ... there are many things that worry me. Little things, habits, customs that I should correct and the all important one of using the old bean.<sup>9</sup>

During his second year at McGill, Joe befriended three young men outside of his Westmount circle, from more modest circumstances in Notre-Dame-de-Grace. One of them, Monty Berger, a fraternity brother and the son of a rabbi, was a self-conscious and committed Jew attracted to the ideals of Zionism. That friendship provided the intimate space for sharing the experience of entering adulthood as Jews in a largely gentile world. It broadened Joe's awareness of life beyond his comfortable Westmount circle, as well as his Jewish sensibilities.

Ecstatic as Joe was to be playing on the championship football team in November 1938, he could not shut out the situation in Europe. His family had opened their house to Austrian refugees passing through Montreal, bringing home to him that, as he recorded in his diary, "a tragic story ... is being written into the world's history, as tragic as any ever suffered by the Jews."<sup>10</sup> The Jacobsons, perhaps like many uptowners, were more attuned to the unfolding catastrophe engulfing the assimilated Jews of Germany than to the travails of the recently arrived, Yiddish-speaking working classes crowded into the Main a few miles away. For Joe, that part of Montreal was a far away country of which he knew nothing, as Neville Chamberlain had said of Czechoslovakia only a month earlier.<sup>11</sup>

By the summer of 1939, Joe seems to have figured out what his own sense of Jewishness and the larger ambience of antisemitism might mean for his ambitions. He had by then set his sights beyond earning a decent living in the niches that had opened up for Jews in the liberal professions and business at that time, as many of his contemporaries seemed content to do. His father's business, with its connections in Montreal's corporate world, could be a stepping stone. Limited as his experience of Canada then was, he sensed its newness and potential; a project under construction. He wanted to be, and believed Jews could and should be, among the nation's forward-looking builders and leaders. Status conscious though he was, Joe was also inspired by progressive notions of civic improvement and responsibility he learned through his parents' involvement in literary and civil liberties circles.

Yet the social consequences of being Jewish were inescapable. Whether regarded with hostility, suspicion, or sympathy, Jews were somehow different, and this fact of their persona was always observed and frequently commented on. Joe understood that part of being Jewish very clearly. Learning to deal with casual insult and unpleasant encounters was part of growing up. How one responded was a matter of individual experience and disposition.

To navigate his way in the gentile world of Canada in 1939, Joe needed more than just good marks and professional qualifications. He knew he had the upbringing, charm, drive, and intelligence to realize his ambitions and to take his place in the society of which he sought to be a part. He was also aware of what his athletic prowess brought to the table. He had both leadership abilities and the ethos of team play. Having already excelled in football and hockey, he was confident that in future he could also excel in wider fields, as a Jew in gentile society.

Yet however much he wanted and expected to be both Canadian and Jewish, not all of his fellow citizens shared this view. This was the problem of antisemitism, alarmingly prevalent and unavoidable. Joe was quite aware that the image of the Jew in Canada was not a good one, and that this had consequences much greater than inconvenience to his aspirations. He regarded antisemitism as profoundly irrational.

He seems to have acknowledged that adverse stereotypes had to have come from somewhere, but that as a people, Jews were no less honourable and virtuous than any other. Joe's strategy for combating antisemitism was therefore to demonstrate Jewish honour and virtue through his own actions and demeanour.

Realizing his ambitions appeared to Joe to be complicated not so much by his Jewishness as such (which he neither concealed nor denied), but by the antisemitism that so deeply offended him. This Joe was determined not only to overcome but to eradicate. Once again athletics may have provided him a model. Because Jews were widely perceived as unathletic, Joe's own sporting achievements were a means of challenging the stereotype. He cannot have been unaware of the then-widespread image of the Jew as small in stature, frail and awkward in body, lacking in physical grace and energy, and timid in spirit.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Joe shared his father's view that, in the circumstances, Jews needed to exhibit higher standards of conduct than gentiles, and bend over backwards to do so.

Joe came home from summer camp in 1939 ready to embark on a career in business for which he had been educated, and in which he had a ready-made place. Within days he was confronted by the prospect of enlistment, for which he was also well-suited. His father already knew the choice to be made:

For several days now, in fact ever since the war, I have had Joe on my mind. He is twenty one and must make his own decision. I know that he can't keep out of it. First of all we are Jews and Hitler's persecution of the Jews will go down into history along with the stories of the Spanish Inquisition. Second of all even if he felt war was wrong and realized the wickedness of destroying the youth of the world he couldn't stand by and see his friends fight for him. And third as a graduate of McGill with a fine record in the classroom and on the field, he would lose caste in his own eyes as well as with his fellow men. Then again he is just the right age and his physical fitness is par. ... I am desperately sorry for my boy, I know he hates war and hates fighting. He is a gentle nature and has an awfully lot of good sense. God Bless the boy.

Joe's two best friends, lads about his age, came over in the afternoon and of course talked about the war. They are both intelligent and wide minded ... They are quite disillusioned about everything but they know that they are trapped, they know they must do their duty and they agree that the menace of Hitlerism is not mere propaganda but is borne out by actual facts. They feel, like I do, that when Hitler began his persecution against the Jews the civilized nations of the world attempted no interference. And when the purge of Jews was at its height and they were flung out into the world no country went on record as being willing to afford asylum for them.<sup>13</sup>

Joe Jacobson's perspectives on his own Jewish identity, on his obligations as a citizen, and on antisemitism, would henceforth evolve in the context of a nation at war, and of the changes that war would bring to Canada's social and political climate.

## Preston

Canada's declaration of war on 10 September 1939 did not deflect Joe Jacobson from pursuing his career plan, beginning with a job in Preston, Ontario, a manufacturing town of about 6000 people southwest of Toronto.<sup>14</sup> Preston Furniture Company Ltd. was the main supplier of wooden office furniture to Percy's office equipment business in Montreal. Joe was anxious to get started in his new job and make a good impression. He declined to delay his departure from Montreal on account of Yom Kippur, and he recorded putting in a full day's work in the factory that day, shortly after he arrived.

Joe found the sixty-odd factory workers<sup>15</sup> with whom he toiled to be generous, hospitable, and self-reliant. But he also claimed that nearly half were foreigners – Poles and Germans – none of whom in his estimation would voluntarily enlist. Of one man from Austria he commented:

He is definitely like most of the foreigners here not much of a Canadian although he has his papers. He is good material for agitators.<sup>16</sup>

Joe drew the same sharp distinction between Canadians and foreigners that Anglo-Canadians then generally did, and perhaps in doing so reconfirmed his own status as he saw it. Percy commented:

Letter from my son Joe today ... made me feel rather proud of the lad. He has adapted himself so quickly to hard manual labour and seems so eager not only to learn the desk business but to understand the various types of men he comes in contact with. He seems to like them all which I guess means that they like him. He is probably the only Jewish factory worker in the whole district. I think he will prove a good ambassador of our people.<sup>17</sup>

[Joe is] forming many friendships amongst all classes perhaps he will give the natives a more liberal minded attitude toward the Jews than they now have. After all Joe went to college, played on all the teams, has read quite a little and besides has a nice appearance and pleasant manners. He is by no means unique in his own environment but he evidently is unique in Preston.<sup>18</sup>

Before he even arrived in Preston, only days after the war began, Joe got an earful about Jews. On the morning train from Toronto, he had



... decided to get a better sampling of Ontario public opinion [regarding the war] so I started a chat with the trainman – a burly looking fellow. He got wound up in short order and told me that he was at a veterans' meeting the other night where they numbered 1200. They decided that the Jews would not be allowed to be left behind to profiteer and that they would be rounded up by the soldiers themselves and be forced to fight. He went on in that vein in such strenuous fashion that I was extremely glad to break up his story of only 3 Jews out of 10,000 volunteers joining up in Ontario last week, by leaving the train as we arrived in Galt.<sup>19</sup>

Evidently the burly trainman was not alone in his views. Joe was an avid reader of *Saturday Night*, the national weekly current affairs magazine. He was thus unlikely to have missed the full-page article on the topic of Jewish enlistment that appeared a couple of weeks later, by the United Church's Dr. Claris Silcox, an leading opponent of antisemitism. Dr. Silcox acknowledged the reputedly low rate of Jewish enlistment in the previous war, and how it had contributed to anti-Jewish sentiments, but he asserted that contrary to common expectation Canada's Jews would most certainly enlist in the current war.<sup>20</sup>

Very likely it was then, within the first month of the war, that Joe saw clearly that he must before long enlist, and that he must do so not only as a Canadian, and not only to fight against Hitler, but to give a good account of himself as a Jew.

Preston had no long-standing Jewish community, and there were only about twenty Jews there when Joe arrived.<sup>21</sup> Whatever the townspeople thought about Jews was therefore more likely based on rumour and myth than on personal experience. Joe made no effort to conceal his Jewish identity:

... my former waitress at the hotel started complaining about all the work I caused her by making her get up in the morning. Since she knew I was Jewish I gave her a dollar tip just to shut her up before I left.

... Since by now my religion is known by most everyone and still looked upon with mingled feelings by many, I gave my good barber 50¢ and told him to keep the change and calmly walked out as they revived him with smelling salts. It's amazing what the old nickel will do when it's well placed ... However I know only too well what I am doing. From the stories the fellows tell me, the only Jews they know are the accented junk dealers. I will change that notion in Preston at least before I leave.<sup>22</sup>

For the many evangelical Christians in Preston, Jews were more a target for conversion and salvation than objects of suspicion for their business practices or as shirkers. Joe's presence in Preston was not only noteworthy, but for some at least, a challenge. Continuing on about how he was charting his course as a Jew in a strange town, he related that he was

... becoming either a missionary in a new community or a salesman on introducing a new religion in an old territory. That however produces numerous disadvantages. I have to show a broad mind and spoil a good Sunday by going to the ... Sunday school class in the very near future. Their most devout member reminds me of it every day. Then a fanatical [and persistent] rolly-polly insists that the only way I can be saved is thru Jesus Christ – backed up of course by biblical quotations. He fails to agree with me when I tell him that Christ was a Jew and Jews were saved long before he ever appeared, so I now have to dig up some quotations from the bible to prove my point. I think I ought to apply for a subsidy from the Canadian Jewish Congress or the like.<sup>23</sup>

Much of this he seems to have regarded with good humour or at least equanimity, because he was generally received with kindness and friendship. He was soon recruited to play for the town's hockey team. Overall, he wrote home that:

... It is comforting to feel that I have at last found a community that can really appreciate my true worth. No longer am I subject to insulting criticisms or barbarous insults such as I have received in certain cities.<sup>24</sup>

What insults, and in which cities, remains opaque in Joe's record, but evidently they had stuck in his mind and rankled.

Joe conveyed his encounters with Preston's Jews in a letter home:

Once they get to know you in a small town and get their horns into you, you're a goner unless you act firmly and speedily. It seems my old friend Mrs. Kerlosky, one of the two Jewish women in town, is a real Jew. ... The old dame took a fancy to me and evidently has been after her daughter to invite me up to a meal for quite a while. ... They have left word at least a dozen times ... I have a hockey practice at the same hour ... I decided to drop over to the Kerloskys and tell them the sad news and end the matter right there. But things just don't work out like that with Mrs. K. She could not understand my reasons. She locked the door. She said I was staying. She is one of those good old souls, bless her heart, that will not take no for an answer. I pleaded and appealed to the lovely daughter who rescued me on the condition that I come in after and try her mother's Kafilta fish (I can't even spell the lousy fish and feel sick when I think of the taste). Being desperate I promised, so there you are. Kerlosky and fish for Sunday supper. And I was all prepared to go out skiing for the afternoon. And to make a bad situation rotten I doubt that the Kerloskies are very highly thought of around town. Being a Preston snob of the worst order, I have no desire at all to pose as a social crusader and start patronizing the social outcasts around this district.

Since they are all outcasts as far as I am concerned I am content to leave them to themselves, and let them talk, chatter and gossip about themselves, and I will stick to my own form of living ...<sup>25</sup>

Joe also raised a theme that would recur in his diary and letters. Upon hearing the “Jewish Program” on a Toronto radio station one Friday evening, he found both its contents and the words of its sponsor, a second hand furniture shop, uninspired and parochial:

Sometimes I get extremely annoyed at our race of people and am inclined to believe that we bring upon much of our own trouble. We are not held in very high esteem around these parts because there are mostly junk dealers and the like around this district, so that these narrow-minded people have the idea that we are all accented and the like and are quite ready to believe and fall for any line which could lay all the present troubles on that elusive figment – the international Jew.<sup>26</sup>

Joe cannot have been unaware of his father’s vision of him as an ambassador for his people. But what did this role require of him? Who was he representing, and what was his message? Was he an ambassador for all Jewry? Or only those who shared and acted on his conviction that Jews could redeem their standing in public opinion by their deeds and behavior? For Joe, being an ambassador was more a matter of demonstration than representation. A man of action, he was out to change the image of the Jew, not reinforce it.

Joe had his own personal ambitions, and he was highly alert to who or what would help or hinder him in achieving them. From that perspective he evidently regarded Jews not of his class and convictions as an embarrassment best avoided, as he freely acknowledged in his remarks about the Jews of Preston and his own choice to be a “Preston snob”. And in Montreal, class and status mattered.

There were, of course, pitfalls in the ambassador’s role, as Percy was aware even if Joe might not have been. After a business trip to Preston the following year, he commented:

Upset at Preston because PRH who is one of my very good friends started to tell me how much good Joe had done for the Jews by his personality and character ... and he also said certain complimentary things about me ... we were the pet Jews but I could see by the way he spoke that he and his friends do not think very highly of Jews as a whole. I know too he reflects the views of the majority of the Ontario people.<sup>27</sup>

## Enlistment

All the while, Joe took a cautious approach to enlistment. He was not without income or employment as many young Canadian men then were, and he did not rush to army recruiting centres at the outset as many did. Within days of his arrival in Preston, he discovered that he could take a Canadian Officer Training Corps (COTC) course in Guelph, less than ten miles away, or apply for the Navy which he preferred. Whichever branch of service Joe would choose, he sought excitement and adventure along with opportunities for advancement and a commission. The Army was his last choice, and he reckoned he could avoid it if he had already made application to another branch should conscription be imposed. As his father Percy had confided to his diary (and very likely his son):

.... Joe has the makings of a first class man. God grant that he may be allowed to be of more use to this Canada of ours than holding a rifle. That he may be called upon to do something better for his Alma Mater than stick some poor devil in the belly with a bayonet.<sup>28</sup>

Over the winter, Joe and his best friends Monty Berger, Gerald Smith, and Herb Ross (having styled themselves as the "Pony Club") corresponded frequently, not least about when and in what capacity to enlist.<sup>29</sup> But with no immediate action on the Western Front, the immediate flush of recruitment had stopped. In April Joe wrote his father that he would like to get a management position at the furniture factory and remain there for the summer. But Percy didn't think that Joe could continue on that course:

... I fully expect that when large scale operations start on the western front (this may be occurring even now) there will be a call for more Canadian troops.<sup>30</sup>

News of those large scale operations by Germany against Norway and Denmark was arriving even as Percy wrote, soon to be followed by those against the low countries and France. Joe wrote in his regular Sunday letter home:

I follow the war situation very closely ... I might decide that it was about time I swung into full gear and get into a bit of action. The Navy is my first love but the air force will do in a pinch. However, we will follow developments until then. ... I am getting to feel very much as if I would like a couple of nice little pot shots at these loud mouthed Germans.<sup>31</sup>

This was a long way from the youth who in 1936 had written how he hated the prospect of war: "I don't want to go to any war, neither do the people," and later asserted that "war is a racket and those that gain by it are pulling for it."<sup>32</sup> Joe returned to Montreal on the 24<sup>th</sup> of May with his mind resolved. The luxury of staying on the sidelines was over. Percy commented:

Empire Day ... God Grant that it may not be the last. God Grant that this coming year may not see the disintegration of the British Empire. The crisis is upon us. The next few days will be vital to our continuation as free men.<sup>33</sup>

Percy did not exaggerate the crisis. Over the next five days, Churchill would prevail over the defeatists in his cabinet and commit Britain to fight to the end.<sup>34</sup> Joe wrote his friends a long letter explaining his decision to enlist, and exhorted them to do so as well. Among his reasons, he declared that:

... as a Jew I feel it my position to accept my share of the dirty work and take the same risks as our gentile friends. I don't give a hoot what the unemployed are doing or what the other guys are doing. I think it is my particular duty to accept my responsibility and uphold our side which I am in complete agreement with.

I feel it is important to have a military training. These are times when every young fellow should be in a position to defend his country. The ones that are in the greatest danger are the civilians, not the army men. ...

.... But don't get the idea that I am trying to pick a soft touch or a safe place. There are no safe places in war and I do not give two hoots in hell whether I am blown sky high by a bullet or live to rot away at the rusty age of ninety. There are lots worse ways of dying than by a bullet and there are lots worse things go on in this world than a little war. I am honestly itching for some real action. I have seen enough of our sloppy civilian life to make me look for a change.<sup>35</sup> (29 May 1940)

Joe could afford to be idealistic. His interviewing officer observed that Joe was: "keen to join though he doesn't need it to live."<sup>36</sup> He spent a week at an army camp near Montreal, and then on the morning of July 2<sup>nd</sup> he reported for air force duty at #1 Manning Depot in Toronto.

## Toronto

Within a week, the Air Force had won the heart and mind of this once reluctant warrior.

... Life in the service is extremely nice – we are treated as gentlemen inside and outside the barracks – we are receiving the best training possible for the job in hand and without a doubt we will carry on the tradition of our branch of the service.

Whether we come out with our skins on is immaterial. The point is that we will act with courage as our predecessors are acting – we shall set an example and inspiration for our successors – a National pride and feeling

shall evolve, the enemy will eventually be defeated, and we shall set about building a better society of our own for the future ... As far as the war is concerned we think and talk about it very little – it is not important to us at the moment. We are primarily interested in becoming the best pilots in the world – the larger issues depend on our success.<sup>37</sup>

All that was missing were Joe's best friends.

... I only have one regret – that is that Monty, Herby and Gerald didn't join up with me. We would have all had a riotous time and stuck together ...<sup>38</sup>

Joe's decision to enlist, made abruptly during the third week of May while both Monty and Herb were still in New York, set the Pony Club's conversation on a new course:

... Naturally the question has to do with the war – and signing up. ... The angle I wish to emphasize is the idea of doing something together. ... there is no greater chance for pals to have a marvelous time than in the air force.

You can bunk, eat, play, go out and do everything together – the officers are all young clean cut – efficient. There is almost total lack of red tape, prejudice and formality and routine which was so apparent in the army. It would be better than a summer vacation here for guys that go around together ...<sup>39</sup>

In mid-July, Joe went to Montreal on a weekend pass. He spent most of his time with Monty and Gerald. During the previous week, the Dominion Government had authorized the registration of all single men between the ages of 19 and 45 as of 15 July 1940. They would soon become eligible for compulsory military training and defence of Canadian territory.<sup>40</sup> Monty, who had just completed his journalism degree at Columbia University, wrote to Joe immediately after that weekend discussion about his own decision to return to Canada:

... Upon my arrival it only took a few hours to discover that things had progressed much further and much more seriously than I had any conception of. ... I guess I decided that the business has to be seen through completely and I have decided to interrupt my career for the duration. ...

From my observations here, most people think I'm crazy to have left New York. Most people are anxious to see the war won, but, like the Americans would rather see somebody other than themselves do it for them. My dad [*a rabbi*] has been flooded with phone calls and queries and weddings since yesterday because people married after July fifteenth will be considered as single for the purposes of conscription. It almost amounts to a wholesale panic. All his weddings until the end of September have been pushed ahead in one day for last night or today.

And they are not all Jewish by a long shot. Every notary in the city yesterday ran out of marriage licences. They went to small towns around here collecting what they could. One notary had a line-up of 100 couples waiting for licences. In that number only 4 were Jewish.<sup>41</sup>

Living and training among hundreds of young Canadian men from across the nation seems to have heightened Joe's self-consciousness as a Jew.

[I] chum around exclusively with Hy Abrams. We knew each other back home ... We know friends in Toronto – we go out with them classy like – eat at the best restaurants, visit the golf club – ride in nice cars and generally insist on the best – we are looking for some nice girls with cars, class and inexperience – we do everything on a high level. ... We both look Jewish, conduct ourselves like gentlemen no matter where we go, and generally are a credit to our people, country, and service.<sup>42</sup>

A month later he began dating the daughter of a well-to-do Toronto Jewish family. They would maintain this relationship at a distance when he went west and, later, overseas. Joe apparently made it his business to know who was Jewish within his own ranks. He told the Pony Club that of the 550 men in his course at Initial Training School in Toronto, eight were Jewish.<sup>43</sup> As always, however, the Pony Club conversation was about excitement and adventure, as well as honour. Six months later, he was still regretting the missed opportunity of serving together in the Air Force:

... we missed the boat and the opportunity of our lives to do something worthwhile together – something that would have made the Jewish community sit up and take notice.<sup>44</sup>

Not only had Joe become an enthusiastic warrior for his country, he had also become adamant that Jews, and most especially those closest to him, should take up the sword in the coming struggle without excuses, without reservation, and to their utmost capacity. After promoting a vision in which the Pony Club would become some kind of “regiment of chums” (in fact completely impossible in the context of the RCAF), Joe wrote:

Mr. Walker told Bernie Tritt to join up a home defense course because the govt were going to force firms to fire all single guys who are not doing anything.

Naturally, the Jews here are all flocking to the Non Permanent unit.<sup>45</sup> It's a scandal – they are sluts – I would like to run them thru. Whatever you guys do – do it voluntarily. I would hate to see you guys classified with these yellow bastards here. It really makes my blood boil to see how the Jews are behaving here. Win, lose or draw 80% of them deserve what they get – and they will get it.<sup>46</sup>

What is striking in Joe's correspondence is his preoccupation with what Jews should be doing, but in his estimation were not doing. Why had he taken the honour of the Jewish people on his own shoulders? Why had he become so assertively self-conscious in those first weeks in Toronto? Joe's letters from Preston make clear that he took seriously his father's view that Jews had to do better than others to vindicate their place in Canadian society. By actions not words, Joe would show the world that Jews were no less willing or able than others to fight for their country and their freedom. By the summer of 1940 he was in no doubt about what was required to remove the stain on Jewish honour. He expected all young Jewish men to disprove the slurs and suspicions by their actions. He was both outraged and ashamed by those who, by not doing so, risked confirming the stereotypes and letting down the side. Joe would not be an ambassador for those who did not match up to his ideals. The closer the members of his circle, the more demanding he was of them, thus the intensity of the Pony Club's internal debates.

## The West

In September, Joe Jacobson was sent to Regina, Saskatchewan to train as an air observer. How did he navigate himself as a Jew in his new environment? Shortly after arriving he wrote home:

... You mentioned something about trying to find a family for me for the holidays. Well it's very thoughtful and all that but I would rather have things left as they are. We are all in the same boat out here, being mostly from the East and as a result we stick together all the time.

I am quite contented to stay with the boys, and have no desire to get mixed up with any families. Then most important of all I have no time. ... I simply can't take the weekend of the holidays off much as I would like to. It is the week of our exams to see which of us are to be kicked out and I don't want to take any chances. So although it would be nice under most circumstances, this time I would prefer leaving the holidays go by themselves.<sup>47</sup>

There may have been more to Joe's lack of interest in observing the high holidays with a local family than he let on. Three months into military training, comradeship and unity of purpose with his air observer class were paramount. Having no strong urge to religious observance, he did not want to separate himself from his classmates for that purpose. Much less did he wish to associate himself with people who would, he surmised (perhaps based on his experience in Preston) pressure him to visit regularly, but might be of a type that would not redound to his credit. Later on he described a Saturday night incident at a downtown Regina night club, where he encountered a woman whom he described as a divorcee type, "New Yorkish," "yelling about Montreal, etc.," along with two local women who



... wanted me to meet their lovely daughters, eat their meals, visit them, etc. Tactfully, but forcibly I slipped away – they were bad enough for me without getting mixed up with their daughters.<sup>48</sup>

Yet there was one other Jew in his class, Mark Abramson of Ottawa, although Joe never mentioned him in his correspondence. Mark almost certainly did observe the Jewish holidays that fall. He was five years older than Joe, and of modest background. His parents, then deceased, had emigrated from Poland. Mark had graduated from high school and had taken a year of university correspondence courses before assuming a job as a salesman at a downtown smoke shop. Although his instructors rated him as of above average intelligence and competent in his work, they also commented that he had “adopted an insubordinate attitude out of class towards his NCOs” and, later in his training, described him as a “noisy talkative type.”<sup>49</sup>

Whether or not these uncomplimentary remarks were warranted in Mark’s record, he likely appeared too stereotypically Jewish for Joe’s taste.

This episode cannot simply have been a matter of personal like or dislike, but rather more likely one of class and status. A year later, after Hy Abrams was killed in operational training in England, Joe commented to the Pony Club:

... We never thought a great deal of [him]. But he showed he had guts and stuff in the pinch. He took the hardest and most dangerous course. He got what fifty percent of my pals got. But you have to admire and respect men like that ...<sup>50</sup>

Hy had come from up-town Montreal, however, whereas Joe likely put Mark in the same class of people as those he had sought to avoid in Preston, and so did not go out of his way to associate with him. Playing the ambassador role for the Jewish people was no longer a priority for Joe. He had already proven himself in his new situation, and what mattered now was getting his observer wing.

Regina differed greatly from Montreal and Toronto, as indeed Prairie society as a whole differed from that of eastern Canada. Joe was excited about what he perceived as the optimistic spirit and outlook of the new West:

One thing noticeable about people and their thinking out here is the expansiveness and broadness of their thoughts. Since the communities out west are much smaller than in the east, and since they are also a lot more dependent upon one another’s success, there is considerably more community spirit and mutual co-operation than in the east.<sup>51</sup>

People in most towns out here absolutely accept people for what they are. There is no social or racial distinction amongst them. It’s the person that

counts and they can't do enough for you. ... out here you have the real backbone of our country. The easterners are too wealthy, soft and spoiled. Out here they just can't be counted out, 10 years of drought, one good year and no chance to sell, and they are still optimistic, still happy – still not kicking.<sup>52</sup>

In Joe's estimation, however, and to his dismay, the Jews of Regina did not seem to be part of that new West.

... The farmers and railway men are more worldly minded and conscious of present conditions as they live by a worldly and essential product. But the ordinary merchants are absolutely cut off. Amongst that class, unfortunately – are the local Hebrews. From what I have seen and heard it seems that there are very few first class families amongst the Jews – I have heard of none and it seems that we have a singularly poor reputation out here as all the bad elements and none of the good are present. Added to that the local boys are showing typical non-combatant leanings towards active service – so with the lack of Jewish recruiting and other war service activities, they have little to show for themselves.<sup>53</sup>

In contrast, Joe had all along monitored the progress of the uptown Montreal Jews who had enlisted around the same time he had – Hy Abrams, Furneau van Geun, Mike Jacobs, Bob Cummings, Moe Usher, and his cousin Lionel Silver – and he had written his family from time to time about how they were doing. They were still his crowd, and in his eyes they were much to his own community's credit.

Near the end of his time in Regina, Joe wrote home setting out his views on the city's Jewish community, to whom his presence was already known. He told the Pony Club, while relating his latest Saturday night escapade in town:

... I came up with a find – a blond Norwegian who looked like Sonja Henie<sup>54</sup> only she was a lot more cheerful and a lot easier for me to get at. ...

So we stretched out and this sensible young lassie feeling kindly disposed towards me became engaged in various topics of conversation. During the discussion we got or at least she got around to the Jewish problem of Regina. ... I told her previously my nationality because she asked, and [she] told me about various Jewish boys she had been out with. ... she pointed out frankly what I had discovered myself about the Jewish people of this community – there are no first class families – quite a few well off ones – the Jews are really cliquey in this town and fairly generally disliked. The ones I met I detested – also there is supposed to be all of 4 boys from Jewish Regina in the forces – which is no doubt too low – but not what there should be.

... Out west we are held in very low repute. At least out east there are some

top notch Jewish leaders, but out here there are just a bunch of “Jew boys” of the low class so they have only the bad side to look at ... It is all very disgusting and discouraging and despite the charming company and the girl’s natural fondness for me I went home a very sober and pensive young fellow. In or out of the air force *the same spot still exists* (my italics).

In his dismay that the stain was not being eradicated, Joe went on to propose a radical solution

... It bore out my old contention that it will be the job of us Jews to exert some sort of discipline and control over our own people if we are to be allowed to live – because no matter what way you look at it – we are not a hell of a lot of help to our country or community. We supply a gang of radicals that try to change the form of govt by the worst methods possible – armed revolution and when allowed to have complete [in]dependence and freedom in one of the few remaining countries of the world – we are not doing a great deal to help fight a life and death struggle.

Unless we mend our ways very shortly it is going to make little difference who wins the war from our standpoint. We are going to get stepped on by our own countrymen and we will have deserved it.<sup>55</sup>

The next day Joe reiterated this view to his parents:

I think that before long there is going to be but one alternative for us. We will have to take over and exert complete control and discipline over our own people and force them to do their fair share towards helping our country. It is really disgusting when you think of how large numbers of uneducated pikers from our own race are trying to live off the fat of the lamb and in so doing they drag us all down to their own level. That is a serious problem that our Jewish leaders will have to get working on and in a hurry or we will find ourselves ghettoized in every country in the world.<sup>56</sup>

Whatever Percy thought about Joe’s uncharitable views of Regina’s Jewish community he did not record directly in his diary, nor is it disclosed in their subsequent correspondence. But Joe’s letter seems to have prompted Percy to write Harry Batshaw, of the Canadian Jewish Congress, the following week:

... that it was of the utmost importance that every Jew put forth all his weight towards beating Hitler. Also pointed out that while our people were no worse in their business ethics than any other of the peoples in this world .. we should be constantly on our guard and improve our standards. I suggested education amongst our more ignorant masses with this aim ... develop greater honour and a keener sense of responsibility amongst our Jews.<sup>57</sup>

Percy's views, condescending and patrician as they read today, were probably not atypical in the uptown Jewish community at that time. Even Joe's bleak view of the prospect for Canadian Jewry may have been shared by some, whether or not they agreed on its cause or cure. But why did the often expressed view of Jews as clannish takers rather than nation builders, and as less than fully committed to the national cause, resonate with Joe, and why did he sail dangerously close to accepting it at face value? What might have accounted for Joe Jacobson's dim view of the Jewish community he encountered in Regina?

Joe was often a keen and perceptive observer, but he was not without the blinkers and prejudices of his own upbringing, class, and community. Unlike Montreal, Regina was a city of recent arrivals, with no long established elite of any ethnic origin. Only forty years prior, Regina had numbered a mere 2000 souls, almost all of whom were of British stock. When Joe arrived, there were nearly 60,000 residents, about one-third of whom were of various continental European origins.

Regina's Jews were still trying to establish themselves in a new world. Perhaps because they stood out as shopkeepers rather than as farmers and workers, they attracted bad press from some quarters, not surprisingly in the context of depression era politics in the rural west. Otherwise, however, they shared a place with the city's other ethnic minorities on the wrong side of a deep and not so subtle social division in Prairie society. Residents of British stock tended to view those with continental origins as foreigners, as a threat to Anglo-Saxon values and even, on account of their perceived penchant for radicalism, to society. There was substantial pressure through the schools and the media for conformity and enforced assimilation.<sup>58</sup>

The Jews of Regina were by origin and circumstances much different from those of uptown Montreal. Most had arrived either directly from Eastern Europe, or from nearby farming communities already in decline, with little capital and modest education. About half had been born in Canada, although almost none had come from the older Jewish communities in Quebec or Ontario. Most were self-employed in small family clothing, grocery and dry goods enterprises. A few had prospered in business. Regina had no university, so those who could afford to continue their education beyond high school left and seldom returned. Thus Joe found neither a familiar college crowd there, nor a class of successful professionals as in Montreal. In 1940, the Regina community seems to have been more concerned with war refugee relief than enlistment, perhaps because its members were not far removed from the eastern European Jewish experience of World War I.<sup>59</sup>

Joe came from a community that had long before chosen the path of integration. He was serving with men of almost exclusively Protestant British stock, a milieu quite familiar to anyone who grew up in Westmount.<sup>60</sup> So he may barely have recognized the divide, and he did not come to know those on the other side of it. That allowed

him to suppose that he had found a place without “social or racial distinction,” because within his own crowd none was apparent. What Joe did notice and admire about this new society was that, unlike either the gentile or Jewish communities back east, it placed little importance on old and established family origins. That did not mean he cared nothing for class and status – far from it – only that these should be based on personal merit rather than family lineage.

## England

Joe Jacobson made less frequent reference to Jewish obligation and behavior during his nine months of service in England. His encounters with British Jewry were with civilians, mostly of his parents’ generation and to many of whom he was related. Most important among them was the prosperous Kostoris family in Manchester, whom he visited frequently and whom he designated as next of kin for official purposes in England. He soon developed a close friendship with their niece Janine, a refugee from Belgium.

Yet, summing up the week ending 19 July 1941, while he was still in operational training, Joe commented:

Judaism – how that word has degenerated thru our own actions – we are held in universal disrespect with a few exceptions – every group, gang or crowd I am in – unconsciously looks on the Jew with no admiration – little respect – why? – because we have forsaken our fighting traditions – our fighting history and have become a grabbing – materialistic selfish people – I intend trying to inject a little fight & self-sacrifice into my race.<sup>61</sup>

It is not hard to guess what prompted this entry. Joe surely encountered casual contempt for “the Jew,” popping up like mushrooms after a rain in everyday conversation on air bases and pubs in Britain, as he had in Canada. Unexamined but often repeated jibes, generally by people who had never met a Jew and who might not even have borne malice towards any individual Jew, were habits of mind among many Britons. Jews were still widely regarded in England as foreigners, and the war had only accentuated popular suspicion of aliens and of anything that smacked of “un-British” appearance and behaviour. Jews had long been the butt of music hall jokes among the working class, and objects of disdain among the upper class.<sup>62</sup> Joe knew that references to Jews in the long canon of English literature, from Chaucer and Shakespeare to Eliot and Buchan, were rarely complimentary.

Wartime calls for national unity and sacrifice had the unintended effect of reinforcing stereotypes about Jewish behaviour, and so adding to popular antisemitic feeling. Jews were often alleged to be engaged in black market activities, pushing ahead into public bomb shelters, and shirking both army enlistment and wartime civilian la-

bour service.<sup>63</sup> Joe would have heard such things from people who had no idea that he was Jewish, and who would not have ascribed these characteristics to him personally.

Joe's response to popular antisemitism continued to be to assiduously distance his own behaviour from the stereotype, and so demonstrate that he as a Jew embodied the very opposite characteristics. Fond as he was of the Kostoris family, and as much as he appreciated their fulsome hospitality, he was also embarrassed by their ready access to goods in short supply, to servants when labour was being mobilized into factories and farms, and by how little the war seemed to have diminished their daily comforts. Joe's views on the reasons for anti-Jewish sentiment in society, and about how to change it, remained unchanged from his days in Regina. And in England, he knew, both as an athlete and as an airman, what mattered was how you played the game. If the Jewish people were going to be a light unto the nations, then in Joe's estimation they had work to do.

There may have been two particular reasons for the timing of Joe's comment. One is that he had brought some of his RCAF pals to visit the Kostoris mansion the previous weekend. Perhaps one of them had remarked on the family's comfortable situation in wartime in a way that Joe found disconcerting. But Joe was also a keen reader of the *Daily Express*, and so might have noticed the prominent item earlier that week about Marshal Timoshenko, Commander in Chief of the Soviet Army. The article lauded his abilities and innovations and noted ironically that, in standing in Hitler's way, he was neither pure Aryan nor even Slav, but that "half his ancestry belongs to Judea."<sup>64</sup> Although this claim is otherwise factually unsupported, it is what Joe would have read. And if he had, he might well have pondered the absence of Timoshenko's counterparts in Britain's aerodromes, as he seems not to have encountered any Jews in operational training.<sup>65</sup>

In October 1941, Monty Berger arrived in England as an air force radar technician, and Gerald Smith had enlisted for training in the same trade. Although Joe continued to make occasional jibes about Jewish radio-locators who were not at the sharp end of combat, the Pony Club debates of the previous summer had largely subsided. Who among his own circle was doing what was now much less immediate and less personal.

Joe was by this time reconsidering, or perhaps only beginning to consider, what his religion actually meant to him. He seems to have lost any interest in religious observance. There is no evidence that he ever availed himself of chaplain services on base, and his letters reveal no occasion or inclination to attend synagogue.<sup>66</sup> In response to one of his father's letters, he wrote:

You mentioned our religious training and upbringing. ... There is not much faith to be discovered in our religious institutions at the moment. I have

so far been rather disappointed in both the leadership and the inspiration supplied by our religious institutions. The matter of faith which you have and I have is something that has been gained and held on to quite outside the sphere of formal religious teachings and worship. At least mine has. Mine has come from the little I have seen and learnt in the world so far, the people I have met, the things felt.<sup>67</sup>

The day before Rosh Hashanah Joe wrote home to say that he had not sent out any greetings for the occasion because he “did not have the foggiest idea when the New Year was until it was too late.”<sup>68</sup> He replied to Janine’s New Year’s greetings by saying that he had “forgot[ten] all about the holiday so I wired neither my family nor yours – I hope you went to church – or do people still go to synagogue these days.”<sup>69</sup> His explanation seems ingenuous as he had already written home to say that he had received an invitation to supper at the start of Rosh Hashanah, but implied he would not be accepting it because “events and incidents have taken on a peculiar tone of late.”<sup>70</sup> Although he did not elaborate, he must certainly have counted among them the recent loss of some of his closest comrades in bombing operations against Germany.

Joe Jacobson recorded little more on this subject after he was assigned to a bomber squadron on regular operations in over enemy territory. Perhaps under the intensity of combat, what other Jews might or might not be doing, and what non-Jews thought about that, became less of an issue. Joe became preoccupied with the problems of bombing operations, the odds against his own survival, the larger purposes of the war, and the need for a more equitable post-war world.

On the night of 28 January 1942, twenty-three year old Flight Sergeant Joseph Alfred Jacobson failed to return from his 24<sup>th</sup> bombing operation over enemy territory. Months later, as the enormity of the Nazi extermination program was being revealed, Percy recalled that:

... Joe refused leave for the Jewish New Year and Day of Atonement because he felt that it was more important to pay some of his debts to the Germans than to celebrate the sacred days. He hated the Germans on two scores. What they had done to his people. What they were trying to do to the liberty which meant more to him than his life. He gave his life on both counts.<sup>71</sup>

## Conclusion

What accounts for Joe Jacobson’s evolving views? Some might dismiss the more extreme jeremiads of this latter-day Maccabee as those of a snob who had internalized the very antisemitism he condemned. His ideas were no doubt informed by his upbringing, his ambitions, and his pre-occupation with status. Yet, were it simply a matter of ingratiating himself to advance his ambitions, then the more obvious

course would have been to conceal his Jewish identity and leave insults unchallenged. Joe seems never to have sought invisibility to avoid hurt or insult. Cringing and timidity were not in his character.

Montreal's uptown Jews knew very well that they were fortunate in the extreme to be living in Canada in 1939, within the English-speaking world's bedrock of liberty, tolerance, and rule of law, whatever slings and arrows they still had to endure as Jews. Yet they also feared that their good fortune was at risk as never before, that they could no longer take for granted the good will of their fellow citizens or even, perhaps, the sturdy protection of the Crown's mantle. How to respond to this situation and what to do about it in self-defence were burning questions, whose answers could have important consequences for the welfare of all.

Joe's answers were not out of step with his community, which then placed a great deal more emphasis upon achieving equality of status than the right to be different. In accepting the presidency of the Canadian Jewish Congress in 1939, Sam Bronfman stated:

Canada is a senior sister in the British Commonwealth of Nations. We have, by and large, a good section of the whole community who are, or were originally from England, Ireland and Scotland. We as Jews, have a chance to build up a full position of citizenship and equality which is a privilege belonging to the citizens of the British Empire.<sup>72</sup>

For the Jewish establishment in Montreal, achieving that objective meant continuing on the path of integration in Canadian society, acting according to the moral and ethical standards of their fellow citizens, and even bending over backwards to meet exemplary standards. Likewise they should avoid behaviour that might offend other sensibilities and reinforce degrading stereotypes. For Joe, these ideas were integral in assuming the mantle of ambassador for his people, and for changing the public image of the Jew. In this view, antisemitism was the product of ignorance. As such it could be combated by reason and example. In peacetime, that would have been enough, but now Joe was coming to believe that there were additional obligations.

Joe's ideas were brought into sharper focus by the crisis of citizenship that war inevitably brings to those who for reasons of creed, colour, or origin are (or are regarded to be) at the margins of society. Military service was the ultimate test and proof of citizenship. For a Jew, to serve in time of war was not simply a matter of King and country, or of blood and belonging, but most importantly one of gratitude and loyalty. For its part, the Canadian Jewish Congress, aware that the community at large was under scrutiny, was exhorting all Jewish families to contribute to the war effort, and their young men to enlist. They should do so not only in response to the menace of Hitlerism but to demonstrate their patriotism and to do their part.<sup>73</sup>



There was nothing in Joe's own background that stood in the way of enlisting. The Jacobsons had none of the instinctive aversion to military service that many later Jewish immigrants from Czarist Russia brought with them.<sup>74</sup> They did not have a family tradition of militia service let alone career military service, and Percy had been too old for soldiering in the Great War. But May's cousin had volunteered and served on the Western Front in that war, and their nephew had enlisted in the British Army before the second war began.

The Jacobsons' stance on national military service was not in fact unusual in the larger Jewish world. Many emancipated Jews in France, Germany, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, as well as in Britain and America, had gladly embraced military service as a badge of citizenship, given the opportunity. Some with status aspirations had entered career military service in time of peace. Many more had volunteered in time of war, not only out of patriotism but for self-esteem, honour, acceptance, and dignity.<sup>75</sup>

By the time Joe entered Initial Training School in Toronto, he had taken the honour of the Jewish people upon himself. If the stain of antisemitism on Jewish honour and reputation could be removed by Jews' own efforts, then that was how he would perform his ambassadorial role. By the same token, however, he would sometimes disassociate himself from those who would not do likewise.

Further, Joe came to believe that to be both a Jew and a Canadian of high standing, the stain of antisemitism must be eradicated. Thus it was incumbent upon Jews to share equally in the duties as well as the rights of citizenship, and to display a martial spirit. Honour required them to demonstrate the virtues of steadfastness and sacrifice in adversity, and to avoid displaying the sins of timorousness, shirking, and ostentation.

By late 1940, and especially as informed by his experience in Saskatchewan, Joe had concluded that what Jews were and were not doing was no longer just a matter of honour but of the very survival of Canadian Jewry. Bad enough that there were individuals letting down the side in his own community, worse that there might be entire Jewish communities in other parts of Canada doing so. For Joe, the upheavals in the Pale of Settlement after his ancestors had emigrated – the emergence of Zionism, Bundism and radicalism – were remote. He knew little of the lives and backgrounds of Jews who were not like him, and sympathized less. That there were Jews in Canada who kept themselves apart from the mainstream, and who were not flocking to the defence of their country and its values in time of crisis, mystified Joe and gave rise to his moral panic.

Even before he left Canada, Joe Jacobson was convinced that he would be engaging in a mortal struggle for civilization: a total war in which there could be no partial or

limited victory. When he arrived in England in May 1941, the British Empire stood alone against Germany, the depth of American commitment was as yet unclear, and the Soviet Union watched from the sidelines. The precariousness of the situation served only to fire his appetite for the struggle. There was no moral ambiguity for Joe about this war, and he looked forward to bombing Germany and giving hell to the self-ascribed "master race". Joe's Jewish sensibilities had helped bring him into the war, but once he was overseas they had no significant impact on his experience of military life or battle except, as his diaries and letters make clear, for his ferocious and unyielding hatred of Nazi Germany and all that it stood for.

Joe Jacobson's anxiety to remove the stain of antisemitism on Jewish honour was unexceptional in the circumstances of 1940. His personal program for doing so was consistent with the views of the established Jewish community, even if his prescription for dealing with those he saw as undermining the interests of Canadian Jewry was less so.

Was his moral panic justified? Over the next five years, Canadian Jewish men would serve and die in proportions not greatly different from other Canadians, and with no less valour and distinction. Nor did it matter what part of Canada they came from, or when their families had arrived in Canada.<sup>76</sup> In Regina, for example, eighty per cent of young Jewish men of age eventually served. The roll of honour in the city's synagogue records the names of eight men, six of them buried overseas in air force uniform, a disproportionately high number for a small congregation.<sup>77</sup> These things happened without the leadership of Canada's Jewish community having to take anything resembling the radical measures that Joe Jacobson thought necessary in 1940. Whether the effect was to remove the stain that so concerned him is beyond the scope of this article, but certainly it was not enlarged.

## 1

Acquisition of the Percy and Joe Jacobson Collection (P0094) was recently completed by the Canadian Jewish Congress Charity Committee National Archives. In addition to Joe's letters, the collection includes six diaries and notebooks, along with 21 letters to Joe from his parents, a number from his friends, and his father Percy's diary. Unless otherwise indicated, I refer to items in this collection simply by author, destination, and date. It may be noted that the collection records an essentially male conversation. Being away from home, Joe rarely kept the letters he received. As a result, few of his mother May's letters (which dealt largely with family matters), and almost none of his girl friends' letters, have been preserved. The collection includes two of

May's diaries, but these were written after Joe was killed in action.

## 2

Joe Jacobson was my mother's cousin. This paper owes much to my extended conversations over many years with his sisters, Janet Smith and the late Edith Low-Beer, and with his friend Monty Berger, who collectively provided me with Joe's papers and who enlarged my understanding not only of Joe himself but also of his extended family and of conversations and mindset of Montreal's uptown Jewish community that were familiar to me in my youth. I am also grateful to Gerald Tulchinsky, Jack Granatstein, Tony Usher, Pamela White, and an anonymous reviewer, for their critical comments and encouragement.

**3**

Michael Marrus, *Mr Sam: the Life and Times of Samuel Bronfman* (Toronto: Viking, 1991), chapters 4 and 5; Gerald Tulchinsky, *Canada's Jews, a People's Journey* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 283-327, 371-400; Harold Troper, *The Defining Decade: Identity, Politics and the Canadian Jewish Community in the 1960s*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 39-79.

**4**

Louis Rosenberg, *Canada's Jews, a Social and Economic Study of the Jews in Canada*, Bureau of Social and Economic Research, Canadian Jewish Congress, 1939: 308.

**5**

Percy Jacobson diary, 22 September 1939.

**6**

English Montreal's schools were organized by denomination, and there were no ethnic neighbourhoods uptown. As Jews constituted about fifteen per cent of the city's west-end Protestant high schools (my estimate based on the graduation lists of Westmount and West Hill High Schools in the mid-1930s), the sports-minded played with, not against, their Anglo-Canadian neighbours.

**7**

*The Westmount High School Annual*, 1936:92.

**8**

Neither his use of those terms, nor even his perception of Jews as a race, were out of keeping with the times. See Ivana Caccia, *Managing the Canadian Mosaic in Wartime: Shaping Citizenship Policy, 1939-1945* (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 38-67.

**9**

Joe Jacobson diary, 17 April 1938.

**10**

Joe Jacobson diary, 6 November 1938. The event, perhaps partly fictionalized, is described in one of Percy's apparently unpublished essays, *Refugees are People*, undated but probably 1938 (CJCCNA, P0094).

**11**

If Joe encountered a ghetto mentality among some Jewish students at McGill, he had no doubt shunned it and them. The case of the noted human rights lawyer Morris Shumiatch-

er provides a useful parallel. A University of Alberta student in 1939, he is said to have "... distanced himself from other Jewish students, whom he saw as 'ghetto-ridden,' reasoning that any connection with them would impede his progress. 'Do you think that if I associated with the Jewish crowd I would be on the Student's Union,' he asked in a letter to his parents, 'or that my opinion ... would count for anything at all on the Campus, as I am glad to say it does? Certainly not!'" Carmela Patrias, "Socialists, Jews, and the 1947 Saskatchewan Bill of Rights", *Canadian Historical Review* 87.2 (2006): 278.

**12**

Peter Levine, *Ellis Island to Ebbets Field: Sport and the American Jewish Experience* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1992) chapter 1. This theme is also explored in the context of military service by Deborah Dash Moore, *GI Jews, How World War II Changed a Generation* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2004), chapter 1.

**13**

Percy Jacobson diary, 13 and 14 September 1939.

**14**

Now part of the city of Cambridge, Ontario.

**15**

Preston Furniture Company Ltd., *Census of Industry Return (Dominion Bureau of Statistics), 1939*. Cambridge Archives and Record Centre, City of Cambridge, ON, Percy Hilborn fonds, MG30 vol 1, A993.237.12.

**16**

Joe Jacobson letter to family, 15 October 1939.

**17**

Percy Jacobson diary, 3 October 1939.

**18**

Percy Jacobson diary, 4 December 1939.

**19**

Joe Jacobson letter to family, 19 September 1939. Many young men in southern Ontario were quick to enlist. For the atmosphere in Ontario at the outbreak of war, see Jason Braida, "The Royal City at War: the Military Mobilization of Guelph, Ontario during the First 18 Months of the Second World War", *Canadian Military History* 9(2), 2000:25-42, and Ian Miller, "Toronto's Response to the Outbreak

of War, 1939", *Canadian Military History* 11(1), 2002:5-23.

## 20

Claris Silcox, "Will the Jews Enlist?" *Saturday Night*, 7 October 1939: 5. Dr. Silcox attributed this blemished record to particular circumstances in Canada at the time, and contrasted it to the high rates of Jewish enlistment and valorous service in Britain, Australia, and Germany during the Great War. Silcox also commented on differences of opinion among Canadian Jews on the merits of forming a Jewish battalion versus fighting alongside their fellow Canadians, and advocated the latter option in the belief that fighting together in common cause would do much for mutual understanding and national unity. Although arguably a late convert to the cause, Dr. Silcox was then co-chair of the Toronto-based Committee on Jewish-Gentile Relations, whose purpose was to combat antisemitic propaganda. Michael Brown, "On Campus Support in the Thirties: Antipathy, Support, and Indifference" in L.R. Klein (ed.) *Nazi Germany, Canadian Responses* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012), 160-1, 173-74; Irving Abella and Harold Troper. *None is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933-1948*. (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1982), 57-58.

For a different view of Jewish participation in the Great War, see Rosenberg, *Canada's Jews*, chapter 26, "Jews in Canadian Defence Forces". Rosenberg found that Jews who were British subjects by birth or naturalization before 1914 served in at least the same proportion as other Canadians, and not least on the front lines in the infantry.

## 21

Louis Rosenberg, *Canada's Jews*, 310. Published information from the 1941 Census suggests little change.

## 22

Joe Jacobson letter to family, 5 November 1939.

## 23

Ibid.

## 24

Ibid.

## 25

Joe Jacobson letter to family, 28 January 1940.

## 26

Joe Jacobson letter to family, 3 December 1939.

## 27

Percy Jacobson diary, 26 September 1940. He was referring to Percy Hilborn, the owner of Preston Furniture Company Ltd., who was his chief supplier.

## 28

Percy Jacobson diary, 18 September 1939.

## 29

An acronym for Preston Ontario and New York (where Monty and Herb had gone for work and education in the winter of 1939-40). Gerald had remained in Montreal to look for work, and took COTC training. They circulated their letters among the three cities in a chain.

## 30

Percy Jacobson diary, 13 April 1940.

## 31

Joe Jacobson letter to family, 12 May 1940.

## 32

Joe Jacobson diary, 22 January and 16 March 1936.

## 33

Percy Jacobson diary, 24 May 1940.

## 34

John Lukacs, *Five Days in London, May 1940*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

## 35

Joe Jacobson letter to Pony Club, 29 May 1940.

## 36

Library and Archives Canada (LAC), RG24/27825, J.A. Jacobson Service File, *Interview Report*, Montreal, 11 June 1940.

## 37

Joe Jacobson diary, 7 July 1940. Joe's parents later included this passage in Joe's biography for *Canadian Jews in World War II, Part II: Casualties* (Canadian Jewish Congress, Montreal, 1948).

## 38

Joe Jacobson diary, 2 July 1940.

**39**

Joe Jacobson letter to Pony Club, 3 July 1940.

**40**

The *National Resources Mobilization Act* had been enacted in mid-June in response to the crisis in France. See Michael Stevenson, *Canada's Greatest Wartime Muddle: National Selective Service and the Mobilization of Human Resources during World War II* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 18-19.

**41**

Monty Berger letter to Joe Jacobson, 14 July 1940.

**42**

Joe Jacobson diary, 8 July 1940.

**43**

A proportion virtually identical to that of Jews in the Dominion population as a whole, although Joe was likely unaware of that statistic.

**44**

Joe Jacobson letter to Pony Club, 25 January 1941.

**45**

In fact, the Non-Permanent Active Militia, Canada's part-time volunteer force that would remain in Canada for training and for home defence, in contrast to the Canadian Active Service Force created at the outbreak of the war, from which the Canadian Divisions to be sent overseas would be drawn.

**46**

Joe Jacobson letter to Pony Club, 20 July 1940.

**47**

Joe Jacobson letter to family, 25 September 1940.

**48**

Joe Jacobson letter to family, 21 November 1940.

**49**

LAC, RG24/24714, M.L. Abramson service file, *Report on Pupil Observer*. He did however graduate with higher standing than Joe. Abramson received a field commission before the completion of his first tour of operations, and was promoted to Flying Officer before being killed in action over Germany in 1944.

**50**

Joe Jacobson letter to Pony Club, 2 November 1941.

**51**

Joe Jacobson letter to family, 22 October 1940.

**52**

Joe Jacobson letter to family, 2 January 1941.

**53**

Joe Jacobson letter to family, 3 December 1941.

**54**

Norwegian figure skater and several-time world and Olympic champion during the 1930s, and subsequently Hollywood film actress.

**55**

Joe Jacobson letter to Pony Club, 2 December 1940.

**56**

Joe Jacobson letter to family, 3 December 1940. How Joe came to these views is difficult to say. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police did not share them, stating in a security report of December 1940 that Regina's Jews were in outstanding support of the war effort and enlisting beyond their proportion of the population (cited in Tulchinsky *Canada's Jews*, 379).

**57**

Percy Jacobson diary, 14 December 1940. Batslaw, who Percy knew well, was a prominent member of Montreal's Jewish community and active in CJC and Zionist circles, although there is no record of him having an official capacity in the Congress at that time (pers. comm. Janice Rosen). He later became the first Jewish lawyer appointed to a superior court in Quebec.

**58**

Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies, a History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984); W.A. Waiser, *Saskatchewan: a New History* (Calgary: Fifth House, 2005); Phyllis Senese, "Antisemitic Dreyfusards: the Confused Western-Canadian Press" in Alan Davies (ed.) *Antisemitism in Canada* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992), 93-111.

**59**

*Our Heritage* (Regina: Beth Jacob Synagogue,

1989); Louis Rosenberg, *The History of the Regina Jewish Community*, n.d., unpublished MS, CJC organizational records fonds, Regina Jewish Cultural Centre, CJC 0001 ZD (CJCCNA).

#### 60

Of the 33 members of Joe's air observer class for whom there are data (Library and Archives Canada, *Service Files of the Second World War – War Dead, 1939-1947*), 26 were Protestant, four were Catholic, and three were Jewish. Only one was a Quebec francophone, and only four were of European ancestry other than British or French. All were Canadian-born except three from Great Britain and one from the U.S, although five of the Canadian-born were the sons of fathers who had emigrated from Great Britain. Twenty-six had resided in Ontario or the Prairie provinces at the time of their enlistment.

#### 61

Joe Jacobson Diary, 19 July 1941.

#### 62

Tony Kushner, *The Persistence of Prejudice: Antisemitism in British Society during the Second World War*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989); George Orwell, "Antisemitism in Britain" *Contemporary Jewish Record*, London, April 1945.

#### 63

Kushner, *The Persistence of Prejudice*; Sonya Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain, 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

#### 64

"A Jew in Hitler's Patch", *Daily Express*, London, 15 July 1941.

#### 65

Nor did he mention any during his tour of operations. There are no apparently Jewish names among the flying personnel of 106 Squadron during the period of Joe's service (5 August 1941 to 28 January 1942), although of course that is not definitive evidence (The National Archives of the United Kingdom, AIR27/832, *106 Squadron Operational Record Book*).

#### 66

Normally the local chaplain service would be notified of each new arrival's religious affiliation. The Jewish Military Museum in

London holds the Jewish Chaplain's cards from World War Two, on which they recorded their contacts with individual servicemen. There is no card for Joe Jacobson, although the Museum acknowledges that the collection is incomplete.

#### 67

Joe Jacobson letter to Percy Jacobson, 29 August 1941.

#### 68

Joe Jacobson letter to family, 20 September 1941.

#### 69

Joe Jacobson letter to Janine Freedman, 25 September 1941.

#### 70

Joe Jacobson letter to family, 18 September 1941.

#### 71

Percy Jacobson diary, 20 December 1942.

#### 72

Cited in Marrus, *Mr Sam*, 264. Bronfman went on to assert that Congress' objectives included "mak[ing] our people a better people", and went on to say: "It is the responsibility of Congress to see that the Jews are good citizens in their respective communities across Canada, and so to conduct themselves that they will gain the respect of their fellow citizens – the non-Jewish citizens. We have got to be just that much better to gain this respect." The English novelist Louis Golding was at that time similarly advising his co-religionists to be on their best behaviour (*The Jewish Problem* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1938), 193-204).

#### 73

Marrus, *Mr Sam*, 281-84, Tulchinsky, *Canada's Jews*, 371-72, and Abella and Troper, *None is too Many*, 69. Ernest Sirluck, who left his studies at the University of Toronto in 1940 to enlist in the army, later wrote about his reasons for doing so: "... at root they involved Jewishness: the sense that Jews had a special stake in this particular war and in the defeat of Nazism, that their tradition of avoiding combat service under the tsars was no guide now and that their behaviour in this war would profoundly affect their status in the future, that any effort to avoid military service or get into its low-risk branches ... would be closely monitored and unfavourably interpreted by

a suspicious and often hostile population, among whom the antisemites had said from the beginning that the war was being fought for the sake of the Jews." *First Generation, an Autobiography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 97).

**74**

Joe's maternal grandparents had left what is now Belarus for Canada in the early 1880s. Nearly sixty years later his still living grandfather took pride that four of his five grandsons had volunteered to serve in the Canadian Forces overseas.

**75**

Derek Penslar, *Jews and the Military* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 47-56.

**76**

Tulchinsky, *Canada's Jews*, 376-77. Of a sample of sixty men killed in air force uniform during the war, over seventy per cent were the first generation born in Canada, i.e. with both parents having immigrated to Canada in the twenty years prior to 1914 (*Canadian Jews in World War II, Part II: Casualties*, Canadian Jewish Congress, Montreal, 1948; Library and Archives Canada, *Service Files of the Second World War – War Dead, 1939-1947* – attestation papers; Peter J. Usher, "Jews in the Royal Canadian Air Force, 1940-1945," *Canadian Jewish Studies* 20 (2013): 93-114.

**77**

*Our Heritage*, 1989; *Canadian Jews in World War II, Part II: Casualties*, Canadian Jewish Congress, Montreal, 1948.