

Michael Friesen  
*Archivist, Ontario Jewish Archives*

**The Joint Public Relations Committee Series at the  
Ontario Jewish Archives: Some New Questions**

The Ontario Jewish Archives, Blankenstein Family Heritage Centre (OJA) is the repository of the vast collection of records that make up the Canadian Jewish Congress, Ontario Region fonds. Within this fonds are a series of records that were created by the Joint Public Relations Committee (JPRC). These records begin in the late 1930s and continue to the early 2000s, with the bulk falling between 1938 and 1978. They document the wide range of the Committee's activities, including its role in advancing human rights in the province of Ontario and the rest of Canada by extension.

### **A Brief History of the JPRC**

In 1938, the Canadian Jewish Congress, Central Region and the Toronto Lodge of B'nai Brith formed the JPRC to fight antisemitism in Ontario. As Montague Raiman would observe decades later, "Until 1938, discriminatory actions and defamatory statements against the Jewish Canadian community were tackled in an opportunist, piecemeal and uncoordinated fashion." Henceforth, the fight against antisemitism would proceed in a comprehensive and coordinated manner. Equivalent committees were set up in Montreal and western Canada not long after; these, in turn, were followed by the establishment of the National Joint Community Relations Committee.

Although the JPRC achieved some successes during the Second World War, notably the passing of Ontario's Racial Discrimination Act in 1944, it was not until after the War that the JPRC came into its own. The appointment of Ben Kayfetz as Executive Director in 1947 was certainly an important factor, but so was the changing zeitgeist.<sup>2</sup> "The war itself," James Walker writes, "had produced a sensitivity to racial issues, making the public more receptive, and legislators more inclined, to the legal protection of human rights in Canada."<sup>3</sup> The JPRC was aware of these changes and consciously sought to address all forms of racial and religious discrimination, rather than only those that directly affected Jews. Thus, working closely with allied Jewish organizations and other minority groups, the JPRC played a leading role in putting pressure on politicians to pass historic pieces of legislation, including the Fair Employment Practices Act in 1951 and the Fair Accommodations Practices Act in 1954.

The JPRC continued to play a leading role in the push for human rights legislation throughout the 1960s, but it also found itself having to contend with the growth of neo-Nazi activity in Ontario. Led by David Stanley and John Beattie, neo-Nazis began victimizing Jewish communities in Toronto, Sault Ste. Marie, and London, Ontario. Their actions included mailing antisemitic material to Jewish addresses and delivering hate speeches in public venues.<sup>4</sup> These developments culminated in the Allan Gardens Riot, which exposed deep divisions within the Jewish community in terms of how to best respond to neo-Nazi activity.<sup>5</sup>

The Committee went through several name changes over the next few decades. In 1962 it became the Joint Community Relations Committee, Central Region. In the late 1970s B'nai Brith and the Canadian Jewish Congress terminated their joint responsibility for the Committee and by 1991, it had dropped the word "Joint" from its name and became the Community Relations Committee simply. Finally, in 2011, the Committee ceased to exist with the dissolution of the Canadian Jewish Congress that same year.

### **The Records**

The material that makes up the Community Relations Committee series measures six and a half metres. Given the extent of the material, the best way to approach it is by examining its five constituent sub-series.

The first sub-series consists of meeting agendas, minutes, and notices. Reading these records, one learns about the considerations and debates that shaped the Committee's approach to a range of issues including, but not limited to, religion in public schools, cases of racial discrimination, and relations with other faith groups. The second sub-series consists of publications, speeches, press releases, and reports. If the first sub-series affords us a window into the Committee's decision-making process, the second sub-series shows us how it chose to communicate those decisions to the Jewish community and the broader public. The third sub-series consists of cases of antisemitism. In addition to containing some of the earliest records in the series, the third sub-series contains almost half a century's worth of documentation relating to instances of antisemitism in Ontario. This sub-series includes records pertaining to the trial of Holocaust denier Ernst Zundel. The fourth sub-series consists of research records. Among the topics the Committee researched are civil liberties, elections, Israel, religious education in the public schools, government funding of Jewish day schools, hate crimes and hate literature, war crimes and criminals, and small Ontario Jewish communities. Each of these topics has been organized into smaller groupings, making it easier for researchers to locate the material that interests them. The fifth and final sub-series consists of general office records. Of use to researchers interested in the history of the Committee are those administrative records dealing with staffing changes and changes in organizational structure.

### **Human Rights and Community Relations**

One of the best-documented topics in the Community Relations Committee record series is the JPRC's role in advancing human rights legislation. This role is reflected in each of the five sub-series, albeit in different ways. One gets a sense of how deep the JPRC's involvement was in the areas of civil rights and human rights by examining the Committee's agendas and meeting minutes of the 1940s and 1950s. To take

but one example, the activity report for a meeting held on March 30, 1949 includes a report on Brotherhood Week, an ecumenical initiative that took the forms of joint celebrations, radio programs, and even pulpit exchanges; an update on the Committee's participation in the Race Relations Institute held the previous month; information on the JPRC's role in assisting the CBC to air a radio program dealing with racial discrimination in employment; an update on the organization of an "Inter-ethnic Citizen's Council;" and another update on the legal subcommittee's meeting that month to consider the restrictive covenant in the Sarnia area. Of the eleven items on the agenda, at least half have some connection to civil rights or human rights.

The JPRC's commitment to human rights for all is also reflected in its communications. Beginning in the 1970s, the Committee started issuing community relations reports. Early issues address topics such as attempts to keep Black Americans from coming to Canada at the turn of the century. Noting that "Canadians like to think of themselves as 'better' than certain other countries in their attitude to blacks," the writing pulls few punches while describing the history of anti-Black racism in Canada. Perhaps to bring the matter closer to home, the writer notes, "There was later a similar pattern of exclusion applied to Jews in the 1920s and particularly in the 1930s."<sup>6</sup>

And yet, the Committee's broad scope could cause confusion. In a meeting held on July 24, 1962, the following question was raised for discussion:

"How far [should] the committee . . . go in taking action: – for instance, was it interested in the implications of all incidents involving Jews? Was it concerned with intra-Jewish questions? What, in short, was the scope and range of the committee and what matters lie clearly within its purview?"<sup>7</sup>

A lively discussion ensued that touched on everything from the "broad and basic issue of Jewish-Gentile relations" to action regarding fraud relating to kosher-food issues. While the question was not decisively settled, Ben Kayfetz, director of the JPRC, did clarify one point, namely, "that there can be no question of our legitimate involvement in the question of religious education in the public school, the enactment of anti-discrimination laws, and the like."<sup>7</sup>

But while the Committee's commitment to human rights was never challenged, tensions did emerge from time to time with other racialized communities. Following a successful period of collaboration on human rights legislation between Black Canadians and the JPRC in the late 1940s and 1950s, changes in both communities occasionally caused tensions. In a letter dated September 10, 1963, Ben Kayfetz writes a community member in Toronto with whom he had previously discussed "the desirability of the Jewish community making known in some way to Negroes what

it has done in the fight for human rights for all races." Kayfetz mentions how "the whole question of anti-Jewish feelings in some Negro circles ... has [recently] come to the fore."<sup>8</sup> Five years later, the National Joint Community Relations Committee recommended setting up a subcommittee "to study the Negro situation in Canada in its relationship to the Jewish community and to make recommendations (including the question of admission of extremists)."<sup>9</sup>

## COMMUNITY RELATIONS REPORTS

Vol. 1, No. 2

November, 1970

Published by the Joint Community Relations Committee  
of Canadian Jewish Congress and B'nai B'rith Central Region



Community Relations Session at a Regional Conference

### JUDGE CONFIRMS TAPED CALL "INSULTING"

Jacob Prins, so-called bodyguard of Canada's self-styled Nazi leader, has had a second bite of the apple, having appealed his case (unsuccessfully, as it turned out) to County Court Judge W.D. Lyon. Prins, it will be remembered, was the telephone subscriber who signed up for a code-a-phone message at his home. A member of the public had only to dial a certain number and he would be the recipient of a canned hate-message (the message in question was the description of a "fiendish" shochet practising his profession).

In June 1967 Provincial Judge Carl Waisberg found the message to be:

*"...grossly insulting to society in general, inasmuch as it deliberately, through falsehood and inconsistencies on its face, is designed to bring the segment of that society into disrepute and to incite hatred against it..."*

fining the accused \$50.00. (The Ontario Telephone Act forbids "grossly insulting" language on telephone lines.)

#### Case Appealed

However, Jacob Prins, using his rights under the law, appealed to a higher court and the case was heard *de novo*, as lawyers say, before County Court Judge W.D. Lyon on September 4, 1970.

Continued on back page

### HOW NEGROES WERE KEPT OUT

Some forgotten Canadian history is revealed by Trevor Sessing in a recent issue of Saturday night. In an article entitled "How They Kept Canada Almost Lily White" he exposes how this country's administration contrived — quite unofficially but nonetheless effectively — to discourage Negroes from the United States from coming to Canada.

This was the period at the turn of the century when under the guidance of Sir Wilfred Laurier our country was scouring the world looking for immigrants to fill up the great open spaces of the west and farmers were pouring in from the USA and Central Europe.

#### Subterfuge Used

Canadians like to think of themselves as "better" than certain other countries in their attitude to blacks. Sessing punctures this illusion by showing how directives were issued to civil servants, directives which while reiterating a non-discriminatory policy clearly suggested ways of eliminating Negroes. One means of doing this was for officials to provide an annotation on the form identifying the applicants as a Negro.

Officials located in American cities in the Mid West were placed in an embarrassing spot. Much of the procedure was carried on by mail. There was no way—short of asking and this was "not done"—of determining an applicant's colour by letter. At one point the Canadian government even went so far as to solicit the cooperation of Uncle Sam's local postmasters asking them the colour of persons posting letters. Regrettably, most of the postmasters cooperated. One of the facts that emerged in the article that these exclusionist practices were influenced by boards of trades and businessmen's groups in Edmonton and Winnipeg who had protested Negro settlement in the area.

There was later a similar pattern of exclusion applied to Jews in the 1920's and particularly in the 1930's pointed up by the writing and researches of Louis Rosenberg and the late Simon Belkin, a policy which never barred Jews specifically but made it extremely difficult for them to enter.

While tensions such as these do emerge, they are not the norm. In February 1975, Ben Kayfetz, Lou Ronson, and J. C. Horwitz met with Ed Clarke, President of the National Black Coalition of Canada, and his wife (the latter unfortunately goes unnamed). According to Kayfetz's account, the meeting was highly productive. Clarke demonstrated an impressive knowledge of the situation in Israel, bringing up Israel's Black Panthers who struggled for the rights of Mizrahi Jews. Kayfetz concluded his summary of the meeting by writing, "On the whole, it was a very rewarding meeting. We learned a great deal and this could be the beginning of further dialogue between the communities."<sup>10</sup>

The records quoted above open several potential avenues of research. How did the JPRC, and the Jewish community more broadly, respond to new social movements that emerged in the 1960s, like the Black Power movement? Did the JPRC's understanding of racism evolve over time to include an understanding of an institutional or systemic racism? In the course of its work did the JPRC encounter new forms of antisemitism, or were the instances of antisemitism much the same as the ones the Committee encountered in its earliest years?

These are only few examples of the questions that an encounter with the records of the Community Relations Committee series raise. No doubt, researchers will formulate their own questions. To view this collection, researchers can contact the Ontario Jewish Archives by email at [ojainquiries@ujafed.org](mailto:ojainquiries@ujafed.org) or by phone at 416-635-5391.

**1**  
Ontario Jewish Archives, Blankenstein Family Heritage Centre, Fonds 17, series 5-4-9, file 119, Historical capsule of Joint Community Relations Committee by Montague Raisman, [197-?].

**2**  
A complementary collection held at the OJA is the Ben Kayfetz fonds. Kayfetz was Director of the JPRC for twenty-five years and went on to become director of the National Committee.

**3**  
James Walker. "The 'Jewish Phase' in the Movement for Racial Equality in Canada." *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 34 (2002), 1-29.

**4**  
Ben Kayfetz. "Ontario Region." *Pathways to the Present: Canadian Jewry and Canadian Jewish Congress* (Toronto: Canadian Jewish Congress, 1986), 25-50.

**5**  
Franklin Bialystok. "Neo-Nazis in Toronto: The Allan Gardens Riot." *Canadian Jewish Studies*, 4-5, (1996-1997), 1-38.

**6**  
Ontario Jewish Archives, Blankenstein Family Heritage Centre, Fonds 17, series 5-4-9, file 109, Community relations reports, Nov. 1970.

**7**  
Ontario Jewish Archives, Blankenstein Family Heritage Centre, Fonds 17, series 5-1, file 21, Minutes of a special meeting of the Joint Community Relations Committee (Central Region) held on Tuesday, July 24<sup>th</sup>, 1962, at 8:30 p.m. at the Associated Hebrew Schools, 3630 Bathurst Street, Toronto.

**8**  
Ontario Jewish Archives, Blankenstein Family Heritage Centre, Fonds 17, series 5-4-1, file 82, Letter from Ben Kayfetz to John R. Devor, September 10, 1963.

**9**

Ontario Jewish Archives, Blankenstein Family Heritage Centre, Fonds 17, series 5-4-6, file 50, Letter from Ben Kayfetz to L. Herman, October 31, 1968.

**10**

Ontario Jewish Archives, Blankenstein Family Heritage Centre, Fonds 17, series 5-4-9, file 146, Letter of Ben Kayfetz to Rabbi J. Pearlson, February 7, 1975.