

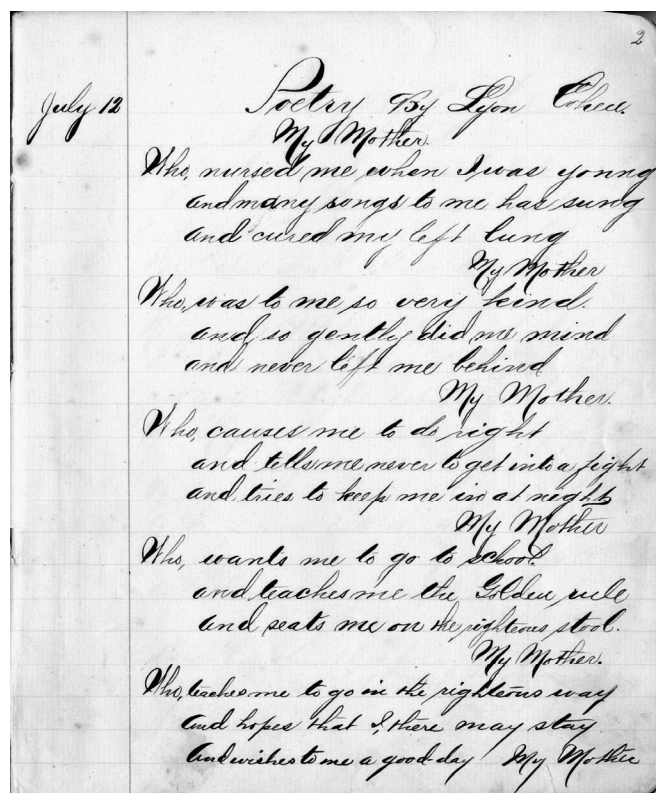
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The Diaries of Lyon Cohen

Lyon Cohen, a businessman, philanthropist, and community leader in Montreal, was elected the first Chairman of the National Executive of the Canadian Jewish Congress in 1919. Arthur Hart, in his book *The Jew in Canada*, recalls how he approached Mr. Cohen for the position, citing "...his unflinching good humor, his keen desire for fair play, his toleration and respect for the views of others, as well as his intelligent grasp of the vital aspects of every problem presented..." as reasons for which Cohen's name was put forward for Chairman.¹ Cohen's daily diaries, a brief portion of which Library and Archives Canada (LAC) holds, bear witness to Hart's glowing evaluation.

Born in Poland on 11 May 1868, Cohen was the son of Lazarus and Fanny (Garmaise) Cohen, emigrating to Canada with his parents in 1869. Lazarus Cohen became one of Canadian Jewry's greatest figures and Lyon inherited his father's mantle of leadership, becoming one of the great leaders of the Montreal community and the larger Jewish community in Canada. A man with a deep sense of commitment and responsibility, Lyon Cohen served as President and in other executive capacities of the Jewish Immigrant Aid Services, the Federation of Zionist Societies of Canada, the Shaar Hashomayim Congregation, the Jewish Colonization Association, the Baron de Hirsch Institute, the United Talmud Torahs of Montreal, and the Montefiore Club. In 1897 he co-founded with S. W. Jacobs *The Jewish Times*, Canada's first Anglo-Jewish newspaper. A well-known industrialist and businessman, Cohen was the President of the Freedman Company, one of Canada's largest wholesale clothing manufacturers, as well as President of the Clothing Manufacturers' Association of Montreal.

LAC acquired the Lyon Cohen fonds in 1976 from his son Horace Cohen. In addition to diaries covering the majority of 1923-1930, the fonds comprises eight centimetres of textual material consisting of personal notes, correspondence, poetry, a play, clippings, as well as a small number of photographs. The diaries themselves are type-written, with the majority of 1923 to 1926 on paper that looks to have been kept in binders, and the rest on loose yellow sheets, with many entries cut from other pieces of paper and stapled together.



Poem by Lyon Cohen,
1883. MG30 C141 / R2601,
volume 2.

Lyon Cohen's diaries contain descriptions of events in both his personal and business life, and of his community service. Brief entries are interspersed with those containing varying amounts of detail. The vast majority keep the reader at arm's length, never providing enough details to make the entries feel intimate. They are matter-of-fact, recording a meeting attended or a venue visited, but in general very little is written about how Lyon Cohen felt about the events in his life. It is notable, however, that he kept a record of his day-to-day dealings at all. It is safe to say that he was not intending to record his deepest thoughts, but perhaps used the diaries as a remembrance for himself. It is possible that he recognized the legacy he had built and wanted to ensure its memory.

One recurring issue throughout the diaries is the work done by the Jewish Immigrant Aid Services (JIAS) relating to Jewish immigration to Canada. Created by the Canadian Jewish Congress in 1920, Lyon Cohen was at the helm of JIAS from the very start, calling the meeting in Montreal that would create the organization. Though he was offered the presidency of JIAS, Cohen declined the position due to numerous other obligations, but continued to be closely involved with national operations.

In 1923, the Canadian federal government instituted a permit-based immigration program. JIAS was actively engaged in negotiating for increased admission of Jewish immigrants to Canada. By the time Cohen's diaries begin in any detail in 1924, and continuing until the end of 1926, Cohen wrote frequently of meeting with Ministers of Immigration or their representatives on behalf of JIAS, most often in regards to the quota for Jewish immigration. Generally the leader of these meetings, both as organizer and as main speaker, Cohen was well-respected by his JIAS colleagues as well as by politicians. In early February of 1925, Lyon Cohen, along with Sam W. Jacobs, Abraham Levin and Hirsch Wolofsky, travelled from Montreal to Ottawa for a meeting with the Minister of Immigration, James Robb. Their attempt to secure a concession for those not eligible for admission under the Orders-in-Council governing immigration to Canada was successful. Just over a month later, in March of 1925, Cohen was able to secure a separate immigration permit for a Miss Leah Levine as a favour to him based on his work on the immigration file:

March 20th - Friday

Miss Leah Levine called to get permit ~~to~~ secured by me from the Immigration Department as a special concession from the Deputy, Mr. W. J. Egan, on account of my general interest in immigration matters. Miss Levine, who had been trying to secure this permit for her four sisters for over a year, having exhausted every avenue, appealed to me about a month ago to help her. She informed me that during the time she was trying to get the permit, her mother had died, leaving the four young sisters alone without friends, in the old country. Her joy on receiving the permit was so great that she almost became hysterical. The satisfaction ~~and joy~~ which I derived from this work was compensation for the many trials, disappointments and abuse which have been showered upon me in connection with the quota.

Excerpt from diary, 1925. MG30 C141 / R2601, volume 1.

In mid-December of 1926, Cohen and a large delegation from JIAS visited Ottawa again to meet with the new Minister of Immigration and Colonization Robert Forke and Deputy Minister W. J. Egan over the question of a new concession for Jewish immigration. Cohen expressed his hope that, under the new Minister's direction, the need for immigrants in Canada could be partially addressed in the form of Jewish migration. He pointed out that Jewish immigrants, upon their arrival, were quickly and easily absorbed into Canadian life, assisted by relatives and Jewish organizations, and were not a strain on the Canadian government. After a period of discussion, the

Minister suggested that a smaller group from JIAS return to Ottawa within a few days to discuss how to meet the request of the delegation.² During this second meeting on December 16, they discussed, among other issues, the role of JIAS in handling immigrants eligible under the relevant Orders-in-Council. Cohen felt optimistic about his ability to convince the Department of an expanded official role for JIAS.

Dec.16 9.30 A.M. Met Mr. Egan to discuss 38 refugee rejections, due to various changes having been made. After representations, Deputy promised favorable consideration and re-statement.

10 o'clock - Met Deputy and Officers to continue discussions on new agreement. Present - Messrs. Jacobs, Heaps and Dr. Thorsen, Members of Parliament; A. Levine, A. J. Freiman, Haitrecht, Belkin and myself. Mr. Blair, Assistant Deputy for the Department, read memorandum on special quotas, which he had prepared for the Minister, opposing the principle. Mr. Egan, the Deputy Minister, stated that the Minister and the Department had decided against special privileges, but wished to help to solve our problem. Suggested by Mr. Jacobs that P.C.534 be extended to include married sons and daughters and married brothers and sisters. I was asked by the Deputy to explain to Dr. Thorson, the Jewish immigration question.

Mr. Egan said, in introducing me, that I was the father of Canadian Jewish immigration. - I outlined the whole problem. A discussion then ensued, led by myself. We remained in session all morning, adjourning at 1 o'clock. We re-assembled at 3 o'clock. Mr. Freiman and A. Levine, however, did not attend the afternoon session. Things did not look good at this juncture for us. We battled until 6 o'clock. The result, I feel, has been very satisfying. I feel that I was able to convince the

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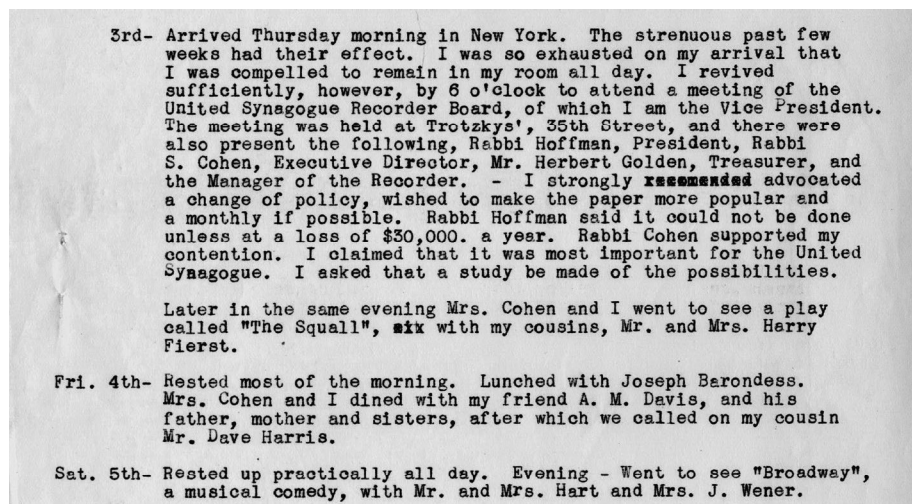
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Department that the J.I.A.S. should be accepted as a guarantee institution by the Government for such cases coming within the relationship which could not otherwise comply with the law. This, I feel, has given the J.I.A.S a new status. (This to be enlarged) I also made an appeal for special consideration under humanitarian grounds, and I am expecting consideration. Evening returned home.

Excerpt from diary, 1926. MG30 C141 / R2601, volume 1.

Cohen's work with JIAS on the immigration file continued until he stopped keeping a diary in 1930. From 1927 onwards, however, his active involvement with JIAS had lessened significantly, most likely due in part to new restrictive immigration laws that hit Jewish would-be immigrants particularly hard. His decreased workload and participation may also have been related to his health. Throughout his diaries he makes mention periodically of feeling ill or of needing time to rest. At the end of June 1924, his diary entries stop while he is on vacation. A newspaper clipping from the *Canadian Jewish Review* in September 1924 tells us that Cohen's vacation had been cut short due to "an indisposition brought on by heart strain and overwork."

In February 1927, following a particularly stressful month dealing with his usual roster of commitments as well as internal strife within the JIAS, Cohen goes on vacation to Palm Beach by way of New York. It is clear that recent activities have taken a toll on him:



Excerpt from diary, 1927. MG30 C141 / R2601, volume 1.

Lyon Cohen's last diary entry is on June 26, 1930. He is on the Empress of Scotland ship, sailing for Cherbourg, France, and recuperating from a particularly busy few weeks. We cannot know whether Cohen stopped the diary on this day because he no longer felt it necessary to record events in his life, or whether the diary was just one more thing on his daily to-do list that contributed to his near-constant fatigue. Was he aware that this was a crucial period in the history of Jewish immigration to Canada, and did he want to ensure that his contribution was recorded? No matter what the reason, Lyon Cohen's diaries provide a rare, albeit brief, personal portrait of an influential Jewish community organizer.

1

Arthur Daniel Hart, *The Jew in Canada* (Toronto: Jewish Publications Limited, 1926), 470.

2

Simon Belkin, *Through Narrow Gates* (Montreal: The Canadian Jewish Congress and the Jewish Colonization Association, 1966), 150.