

"Reflection" Morton Weinfeld

I never actively chose the field of Canadian Jewish Studies. The field chose me. . .

How could it be otherwise? I was raised in a traditional Jewish home in Montreal. My parents were Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust. I went to a Jewish day school through the end of high school and went to Camp Massad north of Montreal for ten years. Both were formative experiences. I still know all the Massad Hebrew words for baseball terms. . . Hebrew that no Israeli knows!

My undergraduate experience at McGill University continued as a kind of Jewish bubble. The late 1960s were times of intellectual and cultural ferment on campus. I was involved with Hillel, which at the time was a very popular and politically engaged student group. Jewish students produced two intellectual periodicals: one called *Strobe*, which was a Hillel effort, and another more radical magazine produced by the Student Zionist Organization, called *the Other Stand*.

McGill in those years was a hub of vigorous Jewish intellectual debate. I was fortunate to know a group of brilliant Montreal Jewish students and we would spend time "arguing the world." Shades of City College in the 1930s. . . Among this group of my peers were students like Bernard Avishai, Charles Krauthammer, and Norman Spector, who all later established public profiles as academics, public servants, or commentators in Canada and beyond. This group was as formidable a peer group as I have ever known.

So, my McGill years and certainly my Hillel involvement was like a floating Jewish studies experience, an ongoing seminar with debates on Jewish issues as well as the many controversies roiling campus life at that time. Imagine listening to Isaac Bashevis singer discuss his view on literature or having a post poetry reading midnight snack with Allen Ginsberg...

While at McGill I had a summer job as an intern for the pioneer demographer Louis Rosenberg at the Canadian Jewish Congress. This was a chance for me to immerse myself in Jewish statistical data, and clearly whetted my appetite for this kind of work.

I graduated with an Honours degree in Economics, but my passions lay elsewhere. After McGill I did a year at the Institute of Contemporary Jewry of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and then went to Harvard for a doctorate in sociology and education. My advisor was Nathan Glazer, and while I was there, he decided to offer a special course on the American Jewish community and asked me to be his TA. En-

countering American Jewish students at Harvard through this course was part of my intellectual growth and helped me grasp the unique character of American Jews. In a sense all my experiences up to then were a kind of fieldwork linking up to subsequent interests. My dissertation was a comparative study of Jews, Italians, and Slavs in Toronto. I was doing Canadian Jewish studies well before there was such a field. . .

When I began teaching at McGill in 1977, I was given the opportunity to develop any course of my choosing. So if a course on American Jewish life was good enough for Harvard, I thought why not such a course at McGill? So in 1977 I began to teach just such a course, and still teach it. Over the years I have probably had close to 4000 students. Interestingly, the percentage of non-Jewish students in my perception has grown steadily, now over half.

This course has always been half American and half Canadian in content, reflecting my own comparative perspectives. But as I began teaching, I quickly realized that there was very little material to offer students of Canadian Jewish life compared to American resources.

I suppose my biggest career achievement would be my role in helping to launch the field, via an edited book of original papers, *The Canadian Jewish Mosaic*, co-edited with William Shaffir and Irwin Cotler. This volume, like the field itself, was highly multi-disciplinary. Years later I co-edited *The Jews in Canada* with Robert Brym and William Shaffir, which was a collection of previously published social scientific papers on Canadian Jewish life.

At the same time, I was able to work with the late psychologist John Sigal on impacts of the Holocaust on survivors and the second generation, producing one volume and ten articles. Our work with non-clinical sample surveys found a high degree of resilience, which counterbalanced a prevailing negative survivor syndrome in the literature. I was also pleased that I was able to convince McGill-Queen's press to republish Louis Rosenberg's 1939 classic, *Canada's Jews*, in 1993.

Of course, there have been failures. In the 1980s I tried, with the collaboration of Montrealer William Abrams, to invigorate a journal called *Viewpoints*, as a Canadian Jewish intellectual outlet. It eventually became a supplement to the *Canadian Jewish News*. But it never developed a clear constituency, and only lasted a few years...

One of the great advantages of the field of Canadian Jewish Studies is the availability of Canadian census data. Jews were counted as a religious group, every ten years, and as an ethnic group, every five. This information, combined with data on languages spoken and place of birth, helped paint a very broad and also granular portrait of Jewish life unavailable in the United States. As I write, changes in the census wording

may make the ethnic question less useful for Jewish research and communal planning, as it may lead to a serious undercount, as was the case in 2016. On the other hand, the census officials may also undertake to provide more granular data on the Jewish religion question, with breakdowns in several subgroups within Judaism.

By contrast, the use of national sample surveys of Jews in the US yielded data in which much greater depth could be measured, on indicators of Jewish identity, community involvement, etc.

The field of Canadian Jewish Studies stands at the intersection of fields such as Jewish studies, Canadian studies and Ethnic studies. I have always felt that the Canadian Jewish case was worth studying for anyone seeking to understand the limits and possibilities of minority ethnic cultural survival in modern and post-modern societies. The tremendous pluralism within modern Jewish life has been for me a source of strength, not of weakness, despite regular friction. Both Haredi and secular/cultural Jews, and all variants in between, jostle with each other and offer a variety of options which can sustain particular identities while also partaking, for those inclined, in the universal elements of modern society. Tradition and modernity have their space and can create hybrid Jewish intersectionalities. This is true also in the United States.

An initial research focus was to analyze whether the greater Jewishness of Canadian Jews was due more to the warm cocoon of Canadian multiculturalism or to demographic differences relating to greater immigrant concentrations in Canada. In my view, the jury is still out. . . Of course, the same question can be posed for most other minority groups in both countries. While nothing is definitive, I tend to tilt toward the demographic explanation.

So Canadian Jewish studies and indeed the Canadian Jewish experience is frankly a kind of poster child for future possibilities where the particular and the universal can somehow co-exist. And of course, antisemitism has been relatively weak in both countries more so perhaps in Canada. Alas, it may be on the upsurge in the United States. . . Over the past decades both Canadian and American Jewish studies have tended to ignore antisemitism and focus on the social and cultural issues and the dangers of assimilation. That will change.

Can other minority groups learn from the Canadian Jewish experience? Can other countries graft Canadian multiculturalism somehow on to their own social and political systems? Jews have been a diaspora community for a very long time, and have picked up survival lessons along the way. Canadian multiculturalism emerged from a unique set of historical and political circumstances which shaped Canada's evolution. Comparative work remains essential.