

Roberto Perin

Jews and Italians in the Land of Milk and Honey?

While similarities abound in the trajectories of Jews and Italians in Canada, fundamental differences are also in evidence. Before the Second World War, these two groups constituted the most demographically significant ones in Canada's largest cities outside the British and the French. However, in the wake of large-scale post-war migration from the peninsula and a correspondingly weak flow of Jews arriving from abroad, Italians displaced the latter in the top spot, holding that position in Montreal, but ceding it to South Asian Indians in Toronto by the end of the millennium. Still, the mass movement of the two groups began roughly at the same time, in the early years of the twentieth century. Before that, embryonic communities dating back to the Conquest in the case of the Jews and the War of 1812 for Italians were well integrated, the first among English speakers and the second among French speakers. In the 1850s Moses Judah Hays became Montreal's chief of police and Abraham de Sola, professor of Hebrew and Oriental Literature, at McGill University. At the same time James Forneri held the chair of Modern Languages at the University of Toronto, while Paul Bruchési was appointed second archbishop of Montreal at the end of the century.

Mass migration greatly expanded and diversified these communities. The new arrivals used their hometown identities to expedite their integration in the new land. Jews founded *landsmanshaftn* and synagogues whose very names testified to their deep-seated local identity. As for Italians, *campanilismo*, a word derived from the belltower of the local parish church (*campanile*), is perhaps too often used to describe the narrow limits of their sense of loyalty. Be that as it may, boarding houses and mutual aid societies were often based on local identities. The first Italian parishes in both Montreal and Toronto bore names referring to cults predominantly associated with southern Italy where most immigrants originated. As well, Italian religiosity was very much focused on the patron saint of the town of origin which the parish clergy ignored at their peril. Local identities produced fractiousness within these immigrant communities, compounded by perceptions of superiority entrenched in segments of both groups. One could say that the further south one went in Eastern Europe and Italy, the less esteemed were the inhabitants: at the top were Lithuanian Jews and northern Italians, while the bottom was occupied by Romanian Jews and Sicilians. Factors relating to class and time of arrival, however, were also at play.

These centrifugal forces were, however, held in check. Immigrant elites had an interest, both personal and ideological, in containing them. As well, international events such as the Kishinev pogroms, the Messina earthquake, the First World War, the Third International, the Sacco and Vanzetti trial, as well as Zionist, Bundist, and anarcho-syndicalist ideologies appealed to a broader sense of identity. Activities and institutions specifically directed at the entire immigrant group, namely newspapers, health and welfare assistance, trade unions, theatre, sports, and other pastimes, all reinforced these centripetal tendencies. In this regard, one cannot but be in awe of the achievements of the highly literate and cultured Jews who transformed Montreal

into the Vilna on the St. Lawrence to borrow from the title of Kalman Weiser's evocative article. Only a third as numerous in Canada's major urban centres and with less formal education, Italians had to wait until after the Second World War to achieve a somewhat similar flourishing.

In the world of work, Jews and Italians occupied specific job niches, the former in the *schmatte* trade and the latter in construction. A smaller number ran small family businesses doubtless escaping the exploitative conditions imposed on their compatriots by Jewish, Italian, and Canadian employers, but subjected nonetheless to the tyranny of economic survival, especially during the Depression. In the larger industries, affiliates of US trade or industrial unions engaged in strikes and other action to improve workers' lives. This was not an option in small clothing and construction companies where the prevailing intense competition exerted a depressive effect on wages and working conditions. Ottawa's enactment in 1944 of an order-in-council protecting workers' right to organize and employers' obligation to recognize their unions paved the way to the spectacular labour conflicts in Toronto's construction industry in the early 1960s. Italians were in the forefront of the battle to unionize and create a safer working environment in the wake of the Hogg's Hollow disaster that killed five of their compatriots. These events show that a culturally driven analysis of labour activism, privileging some immigrant groups over others is deficient, for it is the material conditions constraining workers' actions that are ultimately more important.

In order to secure a better future for their children, many Jewish immigrants pinned their hopes on education. Their offspring's marked proclivity for the liberal professions, especially law, medicine, and dentistry, impelled universities, such as McGill, and hospitals to devise various techniques to restrict their numbers. For those who could afford it, obtaining a degree from a US institution became a way of circumventing such obstacles. By contrast, Italians seemed to follow another strategy linked to what historians such as Bettina Bradbury called the family economy whereby every member of the unit contributed however modestly to the economic wellbeing of the whole, often at the expense of further study. As a result, the second generation's achievements were less spectacular than those of Jews. In the postwar era, however, Italians responded eagerly to the state's heavy investment in schooling, obtaining university degrees in large numbers especially but not only in the vastly expanding education sector. They contributed to and benefitted from the growth of the Catholic school system, finding ready jobs especially in Quebec where the British element was in rapid decline.

Is there then no better home than Canada for Jews and Italians, to paraphrase David Koffman? As many of the contributors to his volume and for the same reasons, I am rather hesitant to say so, irrationally fearing that such hubris will unleash the fury of the gods. Immigration incontestably averted the horrors of the Shoah, certainly

produced economic and psychic security for most Jews and Italians, as well improving the lives of their children. And this despite the xenophobia and the antisemitism that was a banal fact of life in Canada before the age of multiculturalism and still haphazardly dogs Jews to this very day. Both groups produced in the second generation luminaries in the magistracy, medicine, education, the arts and sciences, and even honest and competent political leaders. Jews led the fight for civil liberties in this country, while Italians championed the cause of workplace health and safety. All this was achieved in the context of the Keynesian state, what the French term “Les Trente Glorieuses.”

Today, we live in a different world, which makes me skeptical of David Weinfeld’s optimism about the United States. I for one do not feel the same sense of commonality with US Italians that he displays toward US Jews. Already in 1986, filmmaker Denys Arcand foretold the decline of the American empire. Despite its economically and ecologically unsustainable lifestyle, most Canadians have hitched their wagon to this falling star. Ever the followers, politicians have aligned the country’s policies even more closely to those of the imperial centre. In this context, how much longer can Canada claim to be a promised land? Will we live to regret the choices made by our forebears?

Much more compelling is Pierre Anctil’s exasperated cry for Anglophone and Francophone specialists of Canadian Jewry to read each other’s work. Vitiating Italian Canadian studies as well, this dialogue of the deaf characterizes all aspects of the humanities and social sciences relating to Canada. It is one aspect of the broader issue of the relations between the two major linguistic groups, which is older than Canada itself, and constitutes a key element, along with the country’s relations to the United States, of the Canadian question. Although a breach appeared in the wall separating the two cultures in the postwar era, it closed again within a few short years. While this estrangement can perhaps be excused at the popular level, it is completely incomprehensible in academia. And yet, not only do scholars not read the works of their counterparts in the other linguistic community, they do not know them as individuals and have little hope of interacting with them within the associations of their discipline which are organized largely along linguistic lines. Today the reality of “the two solitudes” is still very much with us. Whatever the constitutional form Canada will assume in future, however, the two language groups cannot afford to ignore each other if they wish to survive as distinct entities within the North American continent.

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