

Reflections / Réflexions

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A Reflection on Canadian Jewish Studies

As a non-professional academic, I am honoured to have been considered as one of the pioneers of Canadian Jewish studies and to have been asked by the journal for observations about my involvement with the field. Writing this article breaks new ground for me for another reason as well. While I have written published a number of pieces, I have never published anything this personal. I see writing this article as an opportunity to give my reflections to a group of serious scholars at a time when some elements of history are being overlooked and even challenged.

My involvement with Canadian Jewish history started in the spring of 1963 with a phone call from Saul Hayes, Q.C., the senior executive of the Canadian Jewish Congress at its national headquarters in Montreal. I was twenty-five, a law student finishing my second year at the University of Toronto, recently married to Judy. In that phone call I learned that Rabbi Stuart E. Rosenberg, the senior rabbi at Toronto's Beth Tzedec Congregation, had been given a contract by McClelland & Stewart to write a history of Jews in Canada in time for the Canadian Centennial in 1967. Rabbi Rosenberg, a compelling speaker, had no background in Canadian history, never mind Canadian Jewish history. I was told that he had looked for secondary works he could rely on but could find only B.G. Sack's *History of the Jews in Canada* (1945) and had gone to Congress for help.

Mr. Hayes wanted someone qualified to do background research so Rabbi Rosenberg could have enough to get started writing his book. The actual outlines of what Mr. Hayes wanted Congress to get for Rabbi Rosenberg weren't very clear. I asked Mr. Hayes why he hadn't called B.G. Sack and was told Mr. Sack had not been available. Benjamin Sack was a hero. He had a minimal traditional education, had overcome muscular dystrophy to be a journalist and editor with the Montreal Yiddish daily, the *Keneder Adler*, for fifty years, and had written what was at the time the standard work on Canadian Jewish history. I have to admit I had three copies of Sack's book.

With hindsight I suspect Mr. Hayes was stuck. There were no academic Canadian Jewish Studies programs with personnel readily available in 1963. Yet he felt he needed something to get the rabbi started. I guess he had heard that I had a master's degree in Canadian History and took a chance. I can't imagine that at the time there weren't any other Canadians with a Jewish background and a postgraduate degree in Canadian history, but that was apparently the case. He asked me if I had any time available for a few months of research. Congress would pay me, and I would have to give a copy of whatever I could pull together to the rabbi as well as to Congress.

I jumped at the chance. Law school was on a break until my third and last year started in September. My summer job was a dream come true. I had always been fascinated by Canadian history. I collected anything that helped me understand it, whether books, artifacts, or paper. I was also very focused on being Jewish and treated as equal in a Christian country. I knew that some Canadian medical schools were only just

ending their Jewish admissions quotas. I knew that there were only one or two Jews in the dozen largest Canadian law firms, and that Jewish directors of Canada's banks or life insurance companies or large public companies were either non-existent or few and far between.

I was also fascinated by research. In 1960 I became a Canadian Studies Fellow in the Canadian Studies Program at the University of Rochester. As the only Canadian in the program, I worked closely with its chairman, Dr. Mason Wade, who had written what was at the time the standard history on French Canada. Professor Wade was a perfectionist about research. He worshipped primary sources and wouldn't accept less in anything submitted. After a year I elected not to stay in the doctoral program. My mother, who had survived a number of pogroms in Galicia around the time of the Great War (and lost her grandfather in one of them), wanted her son to be a lawyer. Probably more to the point, Judy and I decided to get married and to live in Toronto.

I was permitted to graduate with a master's based on a thesis that examined the Canadian nationalist concepts of Henri Bourassa during the early years of the twentieth century. Bourassa was an articulate, much admired, independent member of Parliament who had founded the journal *Le Devoir* in Montreal. He also hated Jews and had no reservations about putting his views into writing.

I delivered my report, "Documents Relating to Canadian Jewish History Prepared for the Canadian Jewish Congress," following the summer of 1963. It contained more than 200 pages of documents, summaries, and lists of sources. The project allowed me to contact all the known repositories of Canadian Jewish material in archives. At the time, David Rome in Montreal and Ben Kayfetz in Toronto were responsible for substantial collections of Canadian Jewish historical material for their respective offices of the Canadian Jewish Congress. Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto also had an archive, which was supervised by Heinz Warshower. The Public Archives of Canada had the papers of Samuel Jacobs, MP, and the earliest records of Shearith Israel Congregation in Montreal, and the Séminaire de Trois Rivieres had the papers of Moses Hart. The archives affiliated with the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio, held a surprising amount of Canadian material. I was able to locate many books, articles, and manuscripts written by or about Canadian Jews. I had access to Canadian newspapers on microfilm and microfiche and could copy relevant articles. A few of the pioneers of Canadian Jewry were still around and I was able to interview them. Such was the case with Ida Lewis Segal. I was also fortunate in being able to contact A.B. "Archie" Bennet of Principal Investments, a pioneer in Canadian shopping centre developments. He was also a pioneer as an editor during the later years of the *Canadian Jewish Times*, the first Canadian Jewish newspaper, founded in Montreal in December 1897. He loaned me his complete bound set of all its volumes, allowing me to mine its contents before I returned it to him the following year.

I know that my report was used by Rabbi Rosenberg in his volumes on the Jews in Canada, published in 1967, as well as by Abe Arnold of Winnipeg in his *Jewish Life in Canada*, published in 1976. A few years later David Rome made my day when he told me that my report had been used as the nucleus of the Canadian Jewish Archives.

I was exposed to antisemitism in the legal profession from my earliest days as a lawyer in training at the University of Toronto. In 1963, the same year that I completed my report for the Canadian Jewish Congress, I interviewed for an articling position at one of Toronto's largest law firms. After a long questioning period, the interview ended when my assessors discovered my relationship with a Jewish person. In 1966, I was called to the Ontario Bar after winning the prize in Company and Commercial Law, signifying that I had stood first in that subject among the lawyers in Ontario who had graduated that year. Yet, as I was to learn shortly afterward, when I sent my resume to virtually all of the firms who actually practised public securities work, I would not be employed by any of them.

Still, I wanted to keep current with my chosen field and offered to teach in the Company and Commercial Law Section of the Ontario Bar Admission Course. It was a public service. Instructors served voluntarily. I was accepted and taught a class of students for the 1970 term that involved a few hours a week over the course of a month or so. They were a bright group and as far as I knew they all did well. The following year, the chairmanship of the course changed. I was told I could no longer teach in the course as my credentials couldn't be verified because, notwithstanding my academic standing in the Bar Admission Course in 1966, I wasn't with one of the firms that practiced public securities. I asked them to check how my students in the previous year had done against students in the other classes. They didn't respond but said I could be a standby instructor, available in case another instructor didn't show up.

I went back to my law office at the time, Croll & Godfrey, and told my partner Hon. David Croll, a lifelong politician who was much older than I was. He said: "You hang in there. You can't quit." I went back to the Bar Admission Course management and told them I would agree to being a standby, and they agreed. But just as the course was starting, I learned that one of the classes had no instructor and I was allowed to teach as full instructor. I hung in as a teacher for four more years until it obviously became pointless. By 1975, bright young Jewish lawyers were being given jobs at Canada's largest law firms. And I wasn't going to practice public securities work.

Because of the restrictions on the path I had chosen, with Judy's encouragement I moved more toward using what skills I had learned in areas other than law. I had some experience in construction. My legal training fit well with my academic training and of the need for primary source documentation: Lawyers call undocumented statements "hearsay" instead of "secondary sources." I enjoyed research and loved history, particularly Canadian history connected to a building, an artifact, or a document.

Slowly at first, we started buying, financing, and restoring Ontario heritage buildings. Our biggest project was a 50,000-square-foot hulk of a building in downtown Toronto that had been through a serious fire and was owned by a large public company that was anxious to be rid of it. They gave us an option for a nominal deposit and allowed us a long period to see if we could do something with it. A plaque located on the front of one section noted that at one time it had been the head office of the Bank of Upper Canada, but that's all we knew.

Three years later it had turned into a fully occupied group of office buildings, one of which was the oldest surviving bank building in Canada, built in 1827, and another the oldest post office in Canada, dating from 1833. Both structures had been designated National Historic Sites by the Government of Canada. The overall project won a number of awards as the best restoration in Canada at the time. It was even more remarkable because we were operating on borrowed money and interest rates had gone through the roof. Our bank's prime rate was 11 percent when we started and reached 22.5 percent eighteen months later. By this time, I was no longer practicing as a lawyer as I had to devote all my time and energy to the project at hand. I had relied on my legal and historical research skills and Judy had relied on her intuition. It was she who discovered that a windowless wing of the block of buildings that had been used as a freezer was actually the first post office of the City of Toronto when it was incorporated in 1833 and had served as the government's post office in the city during the 1837 Rebellion. When it was all finished, we wrote *Stones, Bricks and History* to document the importance of the block of buildings as well as what our research had uncovered about the people who lived there.

For the next couple of years Judy and I were in some demand as speakers at a wide variety of events in different parts of Canada—some historical, some architectural. Only one was for a Jewish group, the Toronto Jewish Historical Society. At the end of our presentation, one member of the audience asked us a question: He asked us about the Jewish connection to the time period covered in our book, positing that there were no Jews in the area. I knew he was wrong, but I didn't have a ready answer. I had seen several Jewish names in the course of our research. For example, we had spent a great deal of effort documenting the function of the post office in Toronto during the 1830s. At the time, propertied people had a residence address within the city limits and would have come daily to their post box in the post office to pick up their mail. Others without post boxes would have had to come periodically to see if any mail addressed to them had arrived at the post office. Once a month the postmaster would publish a "list of letters waiting in the post office" in the local newspaper. We stumbled across many of these. There was often a "Jewish" name or two. I didn't know how to answer the question posed for us because I didn't know whether people with names that were possibly Jewish were Jewish in fact.

The question had a deeper implication as well. Were Jews guests who had come to a country created by others? Or were they involved in the creation of Canada from the beginning? That question got us started on a ten-year project that wound up with the publication of *Search Out the Land* in 1995.

In the 1980s, the starting point for a good deal of Canadian Jewish historical research was the arrival of Russian Jews in Canada from about 1880. There were isolated works of earlier periods based on documents in archives and other collections. But we felt there must have been earlier records of a different kind and not found in archives.

There were two sides to *Search Out the Land*, one historical, the other legal. This was reflected in its full title, *Search Out the Land: The Jews and the Growth of Equality in British Colonial America*. The first part was about finding the facts with a historical perspective. The second was about putting the facts in context. I'm a lawyer, and to me, "context" meant legal—the rights of Jews in pre-Confederation Canada in the context of the rights of others.

I had read about the Plantations Act, passed in 1739, which actually encouraged Jewish immigration into Britain's American colonies by removing from Jews what were euphemistically known as "disabilities," and acted as a prohibition on taking an oath of office. Prior to that, only members of the Church of England had been able in good conscience to take the oath. Anglicans were thus able to assume positions of military, civil, judicial, and religious authority, and all political offices except for elected assemblies, where swearing the Anglican oath was not a requirement. If Jews, Judy and I reasoned, were encouraged to come to British North America, where they could hold positions of authority, there were likely many more Jews present in the territory than people realized.

But many Jews remained undocumented. Our working thesis was that undocumented Jews either didn't want to be recognized, couldn't speak or write English, or were too poor to be noticed. We would have to look for them elsewhere. And we did. We started with genealogy, using charts with Canadian connections in Malcolm Stern's *Americans of Jewish Descent* and its later edition, *First American Jewish Families*. Then we would have to build a database for relationships with Canadian Jewish settlers. From there we went to Canadian land and title records, surrogate court records, cemetery records, and census records. The latter was greatly assisted by Glen Eker's summaries of Jewish names in Canadian censuses going back to 1850.

Based on those sources we were able to build a database in the form of charts with footnotes detailing family relationships of more than a hundred Jewish individuals who arrived in British North America by 1840. Profiles would show them to be overwhelmingly male and Ashkenazi, having left Europe because of its restrictions,

seeking freedom, both political and economic, in British North America. As there were few Jewish women, some early Jewish immigrants remained single, while most married non-Jews. Some of them had notable success. Many did not.

We had a good relationship with the management of the Dictionary of Canadian Biography project. David Roberts, one of its editors gave me access to the DCB's research information cards on many individuals who would otherwise have been missed. What I learned as well was that the DCB's process was to publish volumes with the biographies of individuals who died in the ten-year period covered by each volume, moving forward from the days of the French Regime. Unfortunately, I came to the DCB after their volumes were already up to the mid-nineteenth century, and several important early Canadian Jewish settlers had already been missed. It was too late to do anything about their inclusion, but I brought to their attention several individuals whose death dates had not yet been reached by current volumes and they let me include their biographies in subsequent volumes that had not yet been published.

Judy and I also had several major discoveries that resulted in much more than we had hoped for. One came at the Kingston Public Library. When the librarian asked what we were looking for, in my focused way I gave her a list of names I suspected were Jewish. Judy, whose approach is more lateral, asked the librarian about their general holdings and was directed to a nominal card index with names and citations of people mentioned in area newspapers going back to the early years of the nineteenth century. She found one reference on "the hanging of the Belleville Jew" that led us to the story of the hanging in effigy of George Benjamin of Belleville, onetime warden of Hastings County and subsequently Conservative member of Parliament of the Province of Canada for Hastings in the party of John A. Macdonald. We might have missed Benjamin because he had changed his name at least once and denied he was Jewish. That discovery in turn led us to Benjamin's descendants (one of whom remains a close friend) and enough documentary and physical evidence to write a short book, *Burn This Gossip*, in 1991. The best part of this "find" was a trove of letters between Benjamin and Macdonald that had been held in escrow in a lawyer's office, many years after the situation that caused them to be held, had been resolved. They are now in the Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections at York University.

Among other artifacts of the early period that I still have in my possession are George Benjamin's High Holiday *machzor*, printed in Amsterdam in the 1780s, entirely in Hebrew. While he was having each of his children baptized, he was writing their names and birthdates in the front- and rear-fixed endpapers of his *machzor*. I also have a *ceinture fleché*, the colourful sash with an arrow pattern worn by French Canadian fur trappers, obtained from the descendants of Henry Joseph and Rachel Levy also known as Solomons, who were married at Berthier, Lower Canada, in 1802. She was the daughter of Levy Solomons, a member of the consortium of five Jewish

men who controlled the Great Lakes fur trade in the early 1760s after the fall of New France. And I have a Passover Haggadah published in London in 1831, signed and dated in English and Hebrew on the front and back endpapers in two different years of the 1830s by Alexander Levy at Quebec. His bookplate indicates he was a person of substance, but we don't yet know anything else about him.

In the course of our research, we met many people, descendants of Canada's first Jewish settlers, who were themselves not Jewish. Without exception, they were proud of their heritage, and many wanted precious artifacts belonging to their ancestors and still in family hands to be used to help memorialize what their ancestors had done. Sadly, there is no Canadian Jewish museum, and the way it looks now there isn't likely to be.

Many of the universities in this country have established Jewish Studies programs and courses, covering a wide range of important subjects. Only a few focus on the research and teaching of Jewish history in Canada. The development of Canadian Jewish Studies courses at Canadian universities over the past several years is welcomed and not unexpected. I am particularly impressed with its growth and with the way new tools of information management have been incorporated into learning, reaching wider audiences, and giving new answers to age old questions over the Internet. Judy and I salute all of you and thank you for what you, your supporters, and enablers are doing.

The Rectories Act, passed by the Province of Canada in 1851, brought an end to Britain's use of adherence to the Church of England as a tool to control its largest colony in British North America. It came at the end of Britain's diminishing use of oaths to control colonial populations that began with the exemption for Jews in 1739. On July 11, 1851, during the debate on the Rectories Bill, Hon. Joseph Curran Morrison, who had introduced the bill as a minister of the government, said that Canada is "peopled ... with persons from all creeds and from all nations, and equally entitled to the favour and protection of the Government."

Somewhere in those words, there is an answer to the Jewish man who once asked us after a presentation about restoring Upper Canada's heritage buildings, why we should care. We had reasons for caring. You would expect that when a Jewish person decides to live in Canada he or she would want to know about the rights, degree of acceptance, and contributions of those who've come before. We wanted to know if Jews were latecomers to Canada or if we could consider that we were here from the beginning. We wanted to know whether we were treated equally with others or were subject to "disabilities," the official word for those in British North America who did not have equal rights.

My hope is that what we found through our research stimulates more questions and more answers.