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**RECONSTRUCTING JEWISH IDENTITY IN A
DISTINCT SOCIETY: AN INTRODUCTION TO LAVY
M. BECKER OF MONTREAL¹**

The following introduction to Lavy M. Becker is part of a larger study of the Reconstructionist Synagogue community that Becker founded in Montreal in 1960. The study includes both an intimate view of the community from the inside and a historical view of the changing social, cultural, and political landscape in which the community was born and has evolved. The project aims to create a dynamic portrait of this synagogue community and through it, to view a time period, from 1960 through to 1976. On another level, the study is a reflection on identities: personal, communal, and national, in a context where identities at all levels were in flux.

Lavy Becker is the central figure in the founding of *Dorshei Emet* (Seekers of Truth), originally named the Reconstructionist synagogue of Montreal. The community was brought into being, and its character shaped, thanks to Lavy Becker's personality and charisma, his negotiations with the Jewish Orthodoxy of his childhood and his determination to create a synagogue where he could truly be at home. But the Reconstructionist Synagogue of Montreal was just one dimension of Lavy Becker's life and work. From the perspective of identities, as will be argued below, Becker's early career and the deepening of his own sense of Jewish identification, engendered a strong drive to help make the Canada he was born into a more comfortable place for Jews to live in, fully and openly, as Jews.

The philosophy of Reconstructionism within Jewish life became an important element in the way Lavy Becker approached the collectivities with which he was most deeply involved: the Jewish and the Canadian. A brief overview will help to situate Reconstructionism² among the Jewish denominations and to place it in the broader picture of collective identities and community in the modern period.

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Reconstructionism is the newest and by far the smallest³ of the Jewish denominations. The Reform, Orthodox and Conservative denominations emerged in the nineteenth century in Germany, as a Jewish adaptation to Enlightenment ideas and political emancipation, in a context in which not only Jews, but Western Europe generally continued to engage in ongoing adaptive processes. The old collectivities centred on family, guild or religion were giving way to the modern nation-state, where all were meant to be citizens, living side by side in *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. On another level, the vast and powerful Christian and Moslem-centred empires had receded before the imperial reach of the nation states, among them Britain and France, whose influence in shaping Canada has been fundamental, in both the colonial and post-colonial eras.

The place of the Jew in the modern nation state was an important issue in France from the time of the Revolution. In Germany, the question of how to be both good Jews and good citizens of the modern German collectivity gave rise to currents of religious creativity, resulting in the Jewish denominations: the Reform movement, the Orthodox response to it, and the alternative approaches of the Historical School and Conservative movement.

The solutions Jews arrived at to the challenges of modernity differed depending on the nature of the societies that they lived in. In Eastern Europe, certainly after the Russian pogroms of the 1880s, the option of emulating the Russians or Poles who lived beyond the ghettos, and of assimilating into

their communities, was not a strong one. There was no way, for example, that the Jews could become part of the Russian aristocracy, there was not really a middle class to aspire to, the masses were not appealing to most Jews and, in any case, the Christian populations of Eastern Europe were anything but welcoming to the Jews.⁴

For Eastern European Jews, then, the alternatives were: to immigrate; to strengthen their Orthodoxy; or, to become part of a revolutionary movement, “some form of *secular* messianism or nationalism – Socialist, Communist, Zionist, Yiddishist.”⁵ Immigration to North America was the choice made by the parents of Reconstructionism’s founding thinker, Mordecai Kaplan, as it was for Lavy Becker’s parents.

The issues raised by modernization had already begun to challenge the Orthodox among the Eastern European immigrants before they left the old country. In America, such issues became acute, including the place of secular learning in Jewish life. Immigrants also had to decide what, if any, compromises to make with tradition in the process of making their way in a mostly non-Jewish society. For many, the Orthodox practice that they had grown up with began to lose its hold, and this was especially true among the second generation, the first to be born in the New World. Mordecai Kaplan belonged to this generation, having come to New York via Paris as a child seven years of age.

Kaplan’s grounding in the study of Bible, Talmud, and commentaries was stronger than that of many of his contemporaries, and his interest in these subjects carried a positive emotional charge thanks to his father, who studied with him as long as the senior Kaplan lived. However, Mordecai’s belief in the Mosaic authorship of the Bible and the historicity of the miracles began to weaken, through a difficult process that would eventually lead to his formulation of Reconstructionism, and that initially caused him pain.⁶ He confided to the journal that he began keeping as a young man, and that became perhaps his closest lifelong companion, his doubts about the veracity of

the Bible: "Oh God, what anguish of soul! It sometimes seems to me as if the whole thing were a mere cobweb. It's all a terrible phantasmagoria. But again in case it is all true and real I dread to think of the extent of my sin in doubting."⁷

Through his years of study at the Jewish Theological Seminary and concurrently at Columbia, Kaplan continued to wrestle with his doubts and focus his passionate mind both on Jewish content, including the cultural Zionism of Ahad Ha'Am, and on the work of secular thinkers, especially sociologist Emile Durkheim, Pragmatic philosophers John Dewey and William James, and the poet and critic Matthew Arnold.⁸ Kaplan came to believe that it was a mistake to categorize Judaism as a "religion," analogous to Christianity, as the German Reformers had done. He saw Judaism as an "evolving religious civilization," a much broader definition that placed important emphasis on the community of Jews overall and on the different sub-communities whose collective creativity had produced a heritage of languages, arts, law and sacred story and ritual. In order for the Jewish collectivity to continue to evolve, Jews had to live together as Jews, working, playing, studying in "organic communities" and not just meeting periodically in synagogues. He envisioned the whole of the Jewish people as a network of organic communities, each with its own character. As pictured in the first Reconstructionist logo, the network of Diaspora organic communities would all be oriented towards the central hub of Palestine, spiritual and cultural center of Jewish life.

In Kaplan's mind, there were two places where Judaism could be lived holistically as a civilization: Palestine and America, although in the United States, Jews needed to learn to live simultaneously in two civilizations, the Jewish and the American. Kaplan's American vision was like that of Horace Kallen, a Jew born in 1882 in Silesia and educated at Harvard, who became the leading exponent of ethnic pluralism in America. Kallen's "orchestra" metaphor portrayed each ethnic group as a different instrument, adding its special character to the harmonious whole.⁹ This vision did not catch on globally in

the United States, which chose to see itself as a “melting pot,” where a multitude of particularities would be forged into a unified common identity. Canada, on the other hand, began in the mid 1960s to see itself as a “mosaic,” a vision analogous to Kallen’s and Kaplan’s. Further, the whole notion of “living in two civilizations” was resonant in Canada, with its two founding peoples, in a way that it was not in the United States.

Kaplan’s Reconstructionist philosophy was well suited to Lavy Becker for a number of reasons. It was designed to address the questions that arose for people of Becker’s generation and background, coming from Eastern European Orthodox homes and making their way in a secular world where they were full citizens. As well, the notion of “organic community” was one that Becker would have understood intuitively, since Montreal’s Yiddish-speaking downtown Jews lived together multi-dimensionally in what could be taken as a model of this kind of organic community. Further, the goal of living fully, proudly, openly as Jews and also of being fully contributing members of Canadian society was one perfectly suited to Becker’s generation of downtown Jewish immigrants. This idea was not part of the British-era Canada of Lavy Becker’s youth, which was touched by anti-Semitism; it became a goal to which Becker was able to contribute, to help create a more inclusive vision of Canada.

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Lavy Becker was born in 1905 into Montreal’s downtown immigrant Jewish district. His parents had arrived two years earlier, part of the mass migrations from Eastern Europe that tripled the number of Jews in Montreal, changing the character not only of Montreal’s Jewish community but of the city and its ethnic balance as well.¹⁰

The years between 1918, when Lavy Becker became bar mitzvah and 1927, when he left Montreal to study and then work for a period of 18 years, were those during which Montreal’s Jewish immigrant community most intensively

constructed what Quebec sociologist Fernand Dumont would call its “référence,” its conscious sense of itself, created with the help of the different cultural products, from poetry and song to community institutions, that structure the identity of a collectivity.¹¹ This process was ongoing among Quebec’s francophones, as it was in English for the rest of Canada. That the process of national identity construction took place separately for the English and the French in Canada led to the situation captured in the famous title of novelist Hugh MacLennan’s *Two Solitudes*. Historian Gerald Tulchinsky subsequently introduced the idea that the Yiddish-speaking immigrant Jews, living in a concentrated area in downtown Montreal between the English to the west and the French to the east, constituted a “Third Solitude.”¹² This “Third Solitude” was never completely isolated and became less so as the immigrants learned English and then began to move out of the old neighbourhoods. Nonetheless, the downtown community was characterized by a unique intensity of Jewish life, religious, political, literary, artistic and institutional.¹³

The Jews who came to Montreal, for the most part from Russia and Poland, came from a world that was changing dramatically on many levels. How and even whether to continue to live as Jews, whether to join forces with the workers of the world and lose an outdated particularity, or to safeguard Jewish life and identity by realizing the millennial dream of return to Zion – and a myriad of variations on these themes – were questions that Eastern European Jews lived with and brought with them to Canada, along with the driving practical issue of how to live a decent life, make a living and care for and educate children. For the majority who were traditionally observant Jews, they also had to answer the question of how flexible they were willing to be with the rules of Jewish life in order to survive in a new place. All of these issues, the idealistic and ideological, the religious and the practical, were worked through in the specific context of downtown Montreal in the first decades of the twentieth century as the immigrants found their feet and

structured their community. It is this Yiddish-speaking community, intensely diverse but united through language, a shared past and shared community institutions, that remained the primary referent for the idea of “community” for Lavy Becker and others of his generation.

Early life Downtown

Lavy Becker’s¹⁴ parents immigrated to Montreal from Minsk via New York. His father, Ben Zion Becker, “a lovely gentleman with a long black beard and wonderful deep voice”¹⁵ made a living by performing a series of different functions for the community, as *shokhet* (kosher slaughterer), *mohel* (ritual circumciser) and cantor.¹⁶ Becker senior would not have had to compromise the injunction not to work on the Sabbath as others in the community did¹⁷ and his son Lavy claimed that up until the time when he arrived at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, “No one could have been more orthodox in halakhic observance than I.” Nonetheless, this was an open society in which the “solitudes,” English-speaking-Protestant, French-speaking-Catholic and Yiddish-speaking-Jewish, were not absolute, as one of Lavy Becker’s favourite stories illustrates. Lavy liked to tell this story as an illustration of what a good psychologist his father was, making it possible for him to go to the movies with a gentile friend on the Sabbath. It is an early instance of what Lavy Becker’s teacher, Reconstructionism’s founding thinker Mordecai Kaplan, would call “living in two civilizations”:

I remember during the period of time just before my bar mitzvah when we lived on Prince Arthur Street, a Christian neighbour asked me to go to a movie to see the ‘Perils of Pauline.’ For the five cents entrance fee we would also get an ice cream cone. But then that was Shabbat afternoon, and what do you do? Despite my father’s forbidding me to go, I must have been somewhat insistent, because he eventually arranged with my gentile boyfriend to give him the money in advance so that he could pay for me. We promised not to

take the streetcar (of course, we didn't have enough money for the fare), and so we walked down to the movie house on St. Lawrence Boulevard. I have never forgotten the fact that my father, in his intensity of Jewish life, nevertheless was able to understand the need for and make compromises with North American life.¹⁸

Throughout his life, Lavy Becker spoke fondly of his father. Another favorite story tells why and how Lavy came to be, in his words, a "shul person," a characteristic that was central to his decision to found the Reconstructionist synagogue. The story goes that on Saturday mornings, instead of waking him up with a brusque "It's time to go to synagogue," Lavy's father would knock gently on his door and say, in Yiddish, "Lavy, *ikh gay in shul* (I'm going to shul)...."

The love of his father and of shul, and the warmth associated with both, remained with Lavy Becker to the end of his days. In a 1996 interview, twenty years after he had handed over spiritual leadership of the synagogue to Rabbi Ron Aigen, he offered a lovely metaphor for the way in which his Orthodox past, through his father's prayer melodies, or *nusakh*, continued to be alive in the Reconstructionist community he had created:

Nusakh is very important to me. The nusakh that [Rabbi] Ron [Aigen] is using is my father's nusakh. He has added many more melodies, drawn from more modern developments, so that the nusakh has been enriched. When I make kiddush sometimes for the shul, on yontef, that is basically my father's kiddush. The way we bentch after meals, is my fathers bentching. My father's neighbours still tell me that they used to open their windows on the second and third floors so that they could hear our zemiros on Friday night, because of my father's musical capacity.

In Lavy Becker's day, Jewish children attended the English-speaking schools of the Protestant School Board. Jewish subjects were studied outside school hours. In addition

to this extra-curricular study, Becker's parents made it possible for him, at age fourteen, to go to New York, along with some of his friends to study Talmud for two years¹⁹ at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary.²⁰

When I was 14, they [Becker's parents] responded to my whim to study at the *yeshiva* in New York, although, at home, it made necessary drastic economies, which, being young, I did not understand. It was just as well. Those two years among my peers, similarly motivated, carried me over the hump of teen-age rebellion and strengthened my natural acceptance of a full Jewish way of life and my love of the tradition.²¹

When he returned to Montreal, Lavy went to study at McGill. It was Lavy's generation, the Canadian-born children of Eastern European immigrant Jews, who began attending McGill in increasing numbers starting in the early 1900s. Although these Jewish boys and girls grew up to make outstanding contributions to their society, in Lavy Becker's day, in the eyes of the Anglo-Protestant establishment,²² they constituted a "Jewish problem."

McGill University

In the period between the World Wars, the presence of the Yiddish-speaking downtown Jews bothered both the Francophone Catholics and the Anglophone Protestants, for different reasons. Although a lively scholarly debate continues as to the exact nature and extent of Quebec's past anti-Semitism, there is no doubt that the phenomenon existed, on different levels. The anti-Judaisms carried by the Church since early in the history of organized Christianity, including the characterization of the Jews as "Christ-killers," remained a part of the Church's teaching in Quebec, as is expressed in the opening lines of a poem entitled "Les Déicides" (c. 1898-99) by legendary Montreal poet Emile Nelligan (1879-1941):

Ils étaient là, les Juifs, les tueurs de prophètes,
 Quand le sanglant Messie expirait sur la croix;
 Ils étaient là, railleurs et bourreaux à la fois;
 Et Sion à son crime entremêlait des fêtes.²³

To this ancient doctrine-based anti-Semitism was added the contemporary reality in Montreal of a mass migration of Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants, who formed the first non-Christian immigrant group to Québec and were seen by some as threatening to the fragile French/English balance in the province.²⁴ In addition, in the interwar period, the first generation of Canadian-born, Eastern European Jews, Lavy Becker's generation, aspired to the same successes through small business and the professions as did the French Canadians, many of whom were also making the transition from rural life to the big city. Further, difficult economic times exacerbated tensions, leading to the "*Achat chez nous*" campaign that aimed to support native commerce and in the process to stop French Canadians from buying from Jews. The ground was fertile for the seeding of antisemitic propaganda and these were the years when Quebecer Adrien Arcand led a local movement modeled on fascism.

The narratives of identity for francophone Catholics in Quebec between the wars involved Jews as the very thing good Christians were *not*, according to millennial doctrinaire storylines and in line with new fascist propaganda, fuelled by contemporary practical considerations. For anglophones in Montreal and in the rest of Canada as well at this period, Jews were also the very opposite of what "we" were, though for different reasons. The prevailing Anglo-Protestant/British/Canadian point of view on the subject was expressed in the alarm felt by those in charge of McGill University, as the numbers of Jewish students began to rise steeply.

The "Jewish problem" had been discussed at McGill starting in the early 1920s. The Faculty of Arts had become the gateway to a series of liberal professions and well-paying jobs that had until then been the privilege of anglophone Protestants,

in medicine, as university professors or in commerce, administration and the applied sciences. Jews made up between 32 and 34 per cent of the student body in the Faculty of Arts between 1924 and 1926, a stunning statistic considering that they constituted just over 2 per cent of the population of Quebec during these years.²⁵ Pierre Anctil cites testimony concerning the views held by McGill Principal Arthur Currie and Dean of Arts Ira Allen Mackay as expressed through correspondence between the two in 1926. In a letter to Currie dated April 23, 1926, Mackay sets out his views on the Jewish Problem, in answer to Currie's request that he do so. Among his views is the following statement, which clearly places Jews as the excluded negative in the narrative of Canadian identity:

Indeed, our economic conditions being by nature what they are in Canada, the Jew is probably the least desirable immigrant who comes to this country. Canada needs scientific men of initiative and intuition, engineers, builders, agrarians and workers, while the population of the Jewish community is almost altogether engaged in the professions and in money lending and trading occupations. Obviously we do not need any more of this class in Canada. We already have enough professional men and far too many moneylenders and middlemen.²⁶

Earlier on in the same letter, Mackay confesses:

All the students who enter the University ... now enter, as you know, by crossing the threshold at the Dean's doorway, and I must confess I never see a new Jew crossing this threshold without muttering inaudibly, 'there goes another clean, wholesome, upstanding Canadian boy across the frontier to practice his profession in the United States of America.'

The solution arrived at to the Jewish problem at McGill was to limit the number of Jewish students attending the university. Limits were set starting in 1925 at different times and in differ-

ent faculties based on geography, on setting higher academic levels for the admission of Jews and through outright quotas.²⁷

Prior to the Second World War the narratives of identity, on both the English and the French sides of the Dominion of Canada, were structured so as to specifically include Jews as negative factors, part of the “foreign” element inimical to what “we” were all about. As Canada expanded westward (two new provinces, Saskatchewan and Alberta, were added to the country in the year Lavy Becker was born) policy-makers struggled with the tension between their desire to import immigrants who would efficiently and cheaply do the work of building the railways and opening new territory for agriculture – and the wish to bring in “the right kind” of people, who would maintain the British character of the country. Not only Jews, but also Italians, Blacks and “Orientals” were not considered to be the right kind. Lavy Becker and his generation, whose parents had succeeded in immigrating to Canada despite official disapproval, dedicated themselves to proving that such views of Jews were mistaken.

Lavy Becker studied at McGill from 1922 to 1926 and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree with honours in Psychology and Philosophy.²⁸ While at McGill he joined both the Philosophical and the Psychological Societies as well as the Jewish students’ club and “The Maccabean Circle,” all the while continuing to study Talmud and Hebrew alongside his secular studies. During his first year at university, he was among the founders of the (Orthodox) Young Israel Synagogue and was its first President.²⁹

Lavy Becker joined McGill’s Gymnastics Club, where he competed for the university as part of its intercollegiate team. The 1926 Old McGill yearbook portraits of the officers of the Societies to which Becker belonged show Jews among the Philosophical and the Psychological Society executives and representatives. But the gymnastics club shows Becker, muscular and composed with the McGill “M” on his white singlet, a lone Jew seated beside Finlay, McKay, Muller, Buchanan, Coleman, Ross, Caron, Delahay, McKyes, Cumine and two Consiglios. It

was here that young Lavy experienced the anti-Semitism of teammates uncomfortable with the evidence of his Judaism:

At McGill my father did experience anti-Semitism, on the gym team. He traveled with them to various universities and changed with them in the locker rooms. He wore an *arba kanfos* [a fringed undershirt worn by Orthodox Jews] and they weren't comfortable with it. They asked him please not to wear it. Then in his 4th year the team was going to travel further, outside of Quebec. The coach took him aside and asked if he would mind giving up his place to a first-year student headed for medical school. This new student would be spending many years with the team and Lavy had already been with them for three years so could he step aside to make room ... Lavy accepted, but he realized afterwards that the coach's "logic" didn't hold and that they were uncomfortable having him as part of the team now that they would be venturing further afield to compete.³⁰

Despite these experiences, a love of gymnastics remained part of Becker's character, expressing both a touch of bravado and the physical, practical dimension he retained all his life. His grown grandchildren relate how delighted they were as youngsters when their grandfather would stand on his head to entertain them, and they would scramble for the money that fell out of his pockets.³¹

Becker's decision to leave Montreal following completion of his undergraduate degree, to pursue rabbinical studies in New York, was an important life choice. Paradoxically, it was this move that also brought about a definitive break with the Orthodox practice of Judaism he had inherited from his father.

The Jewish Theological Seminary, the break with Orthodoxy, Mordecai Kaplan and Reconstructionism

In May 1926 Becker graduated from McGill and again journeyed to New York to study, this time for the rabbinate. He

wrote about his choice of the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary in a 1984 article in the *Reconstructionist*, part of a five-part tribute to Mordecai Kaplan. It would seem that Becker's father was in the same position as Mordecai Kaplan's parents had been a generation earlier, in not understanding that for some Conservative Jews, some aspects of halakhic observance were considered optional. As Jeffrey Gurock presents it,³² Kaplan's Orthodox immigrant parents and their peers hoped that the newly created Jewish Theological Seminary – whose President from 1901 to 1915 was Solomon Schechter, hence “Schechter's Seminarium” below – would give their children traditional Jewish training and at the same time equip them to speak to the young American Jews who were in danger of drifting away from the religion entirely, or gravitating to Reform, which was almost as bad in their opinion. They did not think that their offspring would be led astray, away from the path of Jewish law, and were not clear about the tenets of Conservative Judaism. Lavy Becker expresses similar sentiments in writing about the “confusion” of his father's generation:

My father's agreement that I should apply to Schechter's Seminarium in 1926 was as good an illustration as any of the confusion in Jewish life in America in that generation. No one could have been more orthodox in halakhic observance than I. Yet the Seminary was acceptable.³³

At the Jewish Theological Seminary, Becker was taught among others by Mordecai Kaplan and learned from him that it was possible to “tamper” with the traditional prayer service. Becker could perhaps have turned away at this point but Kaplan's experimentation with “alternative forms” appealed to him:

If I was impressed with Kaplan on first contact, I was disturbed by his reported behaviour on the Kol Nidrei eve of a few weeks earlier, as reported by Professor Ginzberg when our class met for the first time. He castigated Kaplan for attempting to change the text and music of Kol

Nidrei. In my orthodox naiveté, I could not understand how anyone could dare to tamper with the *mahzor*. I was to learn in the years that followed, under the influence of Kaplan and Ira Eisenstein (whose entry into the Seminary a year later brought me my closest friendship of a lifetime), much about alternative forms.³⁴

Lavy Becker was exposed to the stimulating teaching of Mordecai Kaplan in the years when Kaplan was preparing *Judaism as a Civilization*, the major work in which he articulated a framework for what he saw as a necessary re-visioning of Jewish life. The main tenets of Kaplan's thinking included the need to understand Judaism not just as a "religion" but as a "religious civilization" that has evolved through four major epochs: the Biblical, rabbinic, medieval, and modern (the curriculum of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College today includes as fifth, the Contemporary). A brilliantly diverse array of communities of Jews across time and place have produced languages and art forms, creative approaches to communal life and its institutions, law, poetry, prayer and song, all of which constitute a heritage contemporary Jews should be proud to assume.

Kaplan was determined to make it comfortable for American Jews to "live in two civilizations," the American and the Jewish. In so doing, as Noam Pianko argues,³⁵ Kaplan was advocating not just the reconstruction of Judaism but also a reconstruction of America along pluralist lines, in response to the debates about the relationship between nation and state that followed World War I. In Pianko's view, Kaplan appreciated the dangers of totalitarianism involved with equating one politically constituted nation with a single culture.³⁶ If it could learn to accommodate the Jewish people and their civilization, America would also be able to harbour other trans-national peoples with connections to European homelands.³⁷ This pluralist vision is not unlike the one that Canada was to articulate after World War II. The United States, on the other hand, cultivated the elements of a single shared culture based on what Robert Bellah called

the “Civil Religion” of America.³⁸ As Andrew Kim argues,³⁹ Canada’s essential linguistic and cultural duality precluded the establishment of a single national civil religion.⁴⁰ Although Kim sees this as a negative feature, it may equally be viewed as positive. As we shall illustrate below, Lavy Becker, as a Canadian, was in a position not only to understand Kaplan’s intent with respect to “living in two civilizations,” but also to do something about it.

After leaving the Jewish Theological Seminary, Lavy Becker went on to a short stretch as a professional rabbi at a pulpit in Long Island (1930-35), the first of the “four careers” into which he would later divide his life. After returning to Montreal in 1947, he would spend some time working in the family business (1947-69), his third career. The fourth was his long career as a volunteer, including the chairmanship of a multitude of Jewish organizations.⁴¹ In between the first and third careers were twelve years (1935-47) during which Becker was employed as a professional social worker. These years included his work with the Joint Distribution Committee in the American Zone in Germany, a series of experiences that remained the most profound of his career. Here Lavy Becker was able to use the practical and “people skills” that were his clearest gifts at a time when the need for these skills was intense.

Joint Distribution Committee

In 1947 Lavy Becker returned to Montreal after eighteen years in the United States, in order to take a job as Executive Director of the Young Men’s – Young Women’s Hebrew Association (YM-YWHA). Although he was keen to settle back into the city with his wife and two children, the job turned out to be less than fully engaging and so he accepted an ongoing invitation from the Joint Distribution Committee to work for them in the American Zone in Germany.⁴² Included in the Lavy Becker files at the Library and Archives Canada are several pages of remarkable notes that he clearly intended to write up for publication,⁴³ two in a series of what he called “synagogue vignettes,” that

offer testimony to the depth of feeling for Jewish life that his experience in Germany engendered.

The numbered, handwritten, foolscap sheets on which these “vignettes” were written graphically convey how moved Lavy Becker was by what he saw. In uneven handwriting he worked and reworked his story, striving to bring together on paper the physical details and emotional resonances that made these unprecedented moments remain so vividly with him. Almost every sentence had been crossed out and reworked many times. In the pages cited below, page three carries the title *Synagogue Vignettes*, underlined. In the left margin appears this list: Munich; Bergen Belsen; Alt Neue and/or Museum; Winnipeg; Regina. Drafts of the Munich and Bergen Belsen vignettes are worked out over the five pages and a version containing the main elements of each appears below.

Both vignettes remarked in different ways on the diversity of Jewish backgrounds among those gathered for prayer, differences that in Montreal and in the United States were the occasion for rivalry or clannishness but that here were a source of pride and richness. The outstanding feature of the vignettes is the sense of affirmation of Jewish life and the resilience of the Jewish people that they convey, following so closely upon such horrors, and the power of desire and hope turned towards Palestine.

The Munich vignette:

When I first saw the once magnificent mansion along the banks of the Isar in Munich, the long salon had a granite Eagle and Swastika on the prominent wall. Then the eager hands of Jews liberated from Dachau only a few months earlier, chipped the hated emblem off the wall and replaced it with an Aron Kodesh and tablets to transform this salon into a synagog [sic] that resounded, that first Shabbat in early 1946, with the warm familiar prayers of Jews from Poland, Lithuania, Rumania and at least one from Montreal.

The transformation of a Nazi baron’s home into a synagog was one kind of symbol, the Shabbat

service in the age-old tradition another symbol, the fervent prayers for return to Zion even via Aliyah Bet yet another.

For the liberated Jews who were now davening in their own shul – and what a shul – the first in Munich since Nov. 9, 1938, the infamous Kristal Nacht, the emotional depths reached were unfathomable. For this Western Jew it was an unforgettable experience.⁴⁴

The Bergen-Belsen vignette:

For those who survived it and other camps – the Bad House, the one furnace left standing as a fearful symbol – and the mounds with their signs – “5000 buried here” – “3000 buried here” etc. – these were ever present to stand as witness to an unbelievably horrible experience. Resilient, pulsating, looking to their future in Israel, these survivors built on its very site a fully organized community – self government, hospitals, schools, synagogues. Among the latter was one in which I prayed the first morning of Shavuot 1946. It was the synagogues of a Kibbutz Dati, organized in Poland, – [I had witnessed these Jews] moving together across borders in the black of night – through the Russian zone of Germany, to find temporary haven in Bergen Belsen while their next move was planned for them.

The synagogue structure was a Quonset hut – corrugated metal rounded from bottom of one wall to bottom of the other – no windows but at each door – enter at one end, exit at far end – long benches and tables for congregants. It was close, and dismal. But no synagogue service anywhere was so decorous, so beautiful, so warm as this Bergen Belsen, Quonset Hut Shavuot service. For me, it was one of the richest of experiences.

They honored me with Maftir and persuaded me to act as Chazan for Musaf. Born in Canada with

a Litvack background, I recited that Haftorah and led in Musaf prayer Jews from Poland resident in Germany en route to Israel. These superficial differences were completely erased by the common tradition and the Havara Sfardit⁴⁵ in which we davened – I for the first time.

Their horrible experiences a matter of the past, their eyes looking and very souls lifted to Israel and a new life, they sang of Matan Torah as I've never heard before or since.⁴⁶

After his time in Germany, Lavy Becker never again worked as a professional serving the Jewish community. Upon his return to Montreal he joined his two brothers in business and in 1947 began what he called his “volunteer career,” in which his major contributions to the Jewish and general communities in Canada and to the world Jewish community were made.

1959: Bicentenary of the Jews in Canada

Lavy Becker's “volunteer career” began when he returned to Canada from Germany. In addition to his work for the Reconstructionist Federation and Rabbinical College, the “partial list” in *Community and the Individual Jew* names twenty-two major organizations for which he was on the Board or Executive Committee including: Allied Jewish Community Services (Life Member, Board of Trustees); the Vanier Institute of the Family; the Council of Jewish Federations; the Canada-Israel Chamber of Commerce; the Canadian Welfare Council; the Foundation for Jewish Culture; the Jewish Teachers' Seminary of Montreal; the Jewish Telegraphic Agency; the Canadian International Human Rights Year; the Canadian Jewish Congress; and, the World Jewish Congress. The awards mentioned in the same source include Canada's Centennial Medal, the *Keter Shem Tov* from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, an autographed photograph with H.R.M. Elizabeth II, and the Bronfman Medal from the Canadian Jewish Congress.⁴⁷

When he returned to Canada, his feeling for Jewish life intensified by his experiences in Germany, Lavy Becker appeared determined to live fully and publicly in “two civilizations,” as a Jew and as a Canadian. A golden opportunity to do both at the same time presented itself when he was named on March 17, 1957, as convenor of a Special Committee of the Canadian Jewish Congress on the Bicentenary celebrations of the Jewish Community of Canada, to take place in 1959.⁴⁸

Although he would likely not have put it like this, Lavy Becker wanted to use the occasion of the Bicentenary securely to weave a Jewish strand into the Canadian narrative. This intention is clear in point “e” of his April 24, 1957, memo to the National Executive, where he focuses on the “intercultural” and public relations potential of the event, that is, the need to show Canada the importance of its Jews as well as to show Jews that they have a proud place in the Canadian nation:

As the 200th anniversary of the Jewish community in Canada also marks an important milestone in the history of Canada as a whole, it is suggested that the celebrations be planned not only for the Jewish community but also tie-up the various programmes with the total population of Canada and its history. In this connection the public relations aspect of the celebrations and intercultural relationships will have to be given special consideration.⁴⁹

The celebrations of 1959 were a success and they enhanced Lavy Becker’s profile as a skilful organizer and man of action. Once the significant achievement of the Bicentenary program was behind him, at age sixty-two, Lavy Becker set out to create a forum where he could express his lifelong affection for synagogue life, where he could continue to be a “shul person” in a way that was also fully resonant with his own understanding of and feeling for Jewish life. In doing these things, Becker also managed to continue his program of making it comfortable for Jews to live well and fully in “two civilizations,” the Jewish

and the Canadian, by building the first synagogue in what had been the Anglo-Protestant bastion of Hampstead.

1967 and “Teaching a Lesson” to Hampstead

The story of “Lavy’s Shul,” the Reconstructionist Synagogue of Montreal, later to be called *Dorshei Emet* (Seekers of Truth) and its evolution, is an engaging one that is told elsewhere.⁵⁰ Of particular interest here is Becker’s wish to situate his synagogue in Hampstead, as this would seem to have been a deliberate expression of his determination not to allow Jews to be discriminated against in the post-war world. Although the neighbouring “Model City” had advertised itself as “beautiful, restricted Town of Mount Royal,”⁵¹ Hampstead had been somewhat more discreet. Nonetheless, it was known that certain streets were closed to Jews,⁵² and Jewish children in Hampstead were not allowed into the public school.⁵³

The reason we’re in Hampstead is that I had become convinced, and so had a number of others, that Hampstead needed to have a lesson taught to it. They had kept Jews out of school, and they didn’t seem to be too welcoming. There was no synagogue. I said, and I convinced others, I’m happy to say, that there ought to be a synagogue in Hampstead.⁵⁴

The Reconstructionist Synagogue building that opened its doors in 1967 was deliberately modest, with a small kitchen and a polyvalent sanctuary with movable chairs that could be transformed into a social hall by moving the chairs to the sides. From the outside, Lavy Becker insisted on many occasions that the building echoed the Habitant homes found in rural Quebec, a noteworthy expression of his openness to the French Canadian reality.⁵⁵

The year 1967, in which the Reconstructionist Synagogue inaugurated its first home, was a high point in the life of the young shul community, as it was for Lavy Becker as its leader. For different reasons, the year was significant for the entire Reconstructionist movement, which held an important

conference in Montreal to coincide with the synagogue opening. The synagogue opening and conference were timed so as to allow delegates to visit Expo '67, the international fair that was attracting visitors from all over the world.

The dedication service at the synagogue included greetings among others from Hon. Pierre Trudeau, then M.P. for Mount Royal, who stated that were he "allowed" to become a Reconstructionist without converting to Judaism, he would like that very much! Dr Victor Goldbloom, representative for D'Arcy McGee and Quebec's first Jewish M.P.P., delivered an equally lively and heartfelt set of remarks, including the appreciative comment that his wife had come from a Reconstructionist background. Other honoured invitees included: Samuel Bronfman on behalf of the World Jewish Congress; Col. Dov Sinai, Consul General for Israel; and, Mordecai Kaplan. As part of the Eighth Annual Conference of the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Fellowships, held on the days before and after the synagogue inauguration, the historic decision was made to create the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, thus securing the status of Reconstructionism as a denomination.

For Canada, 1967 was a turning point, the year in which Centennial celebrations across the land were designed to enhance "Canadian unity," in a context where identities were in a state of flux among both the English and the French. Although the celebrations were a success in furthering a sense of Canadian identity in English Canada, they were completely inadequate in proposing an alternative to René Lévesque's new independence movement, the *Mouvement souveraineté-association*, launched at a weekend convention, November 18 and 19, 1967.⁵⁶ But the tensions associated with the growth of Quebec's independence movement were not predominant in 1967. Rather, a joyful mood prevailed in Montreal during that summer, known to the hippie generation as the "Summer of Love," but remembered by Montrealers, Quebecers, and Canadians as the summer of Expo '67. "Expo" was a brilliant showcase for the

host society and an exciting vision of what the community of nations could be.⁵⁷ The world's fair served as a source of immense pride to the host city, Montreal, and at the same time to Quebec's French-speaking majority and its sense of itself as a modern collectivity.⁵⁸ Pride in the success of Expo was shared as well by the rest of Canada and helped to give the Centennial celebrations international visibility.

The Canadian Interfaith Conference

In "For Canada's Sake: The Centennial Celebrations of 1967, State Legitimation and the Restructuring of Canadian Public Life," Gary Miedema wrote about the Canadian Interfaith Conference, of which Lavy Becker was Chair. Miedema characterized the work of the Conference as part of a "restructuring of Canada's public symbols and norms" by the government in the late 1960s and 1970s.⁵⁹ The "great flag debate" had finally been resolved in 1965,⁶⁰ when Canada let go of the British-influenced Red Ensign and adopted the Maple Leaf as its standard. Still, the attachment to Britain remained strong amongst Quebec's Anglophones and in the rest of Canada, and Anglo-Protestants still dominated Canada's elites.⁶¹ On the other hand, in a post-colonial world, the viability of incorporating British values and institutions as a central part of the identity for the former colony of Canada was waning. Canada's demographics had changed as well, with the influx of immigrants from Europe after the Second World War adding the category of "other ethnics" to the English and French, at the same time as the Aboriginal peoples were objecting with increasing strength to being left out of public life in Canada.

In this changing picture, and with the threat of Quebec separation increasing, the Canadian government hoped that "the force of spiritual unity among the Canadian people" might help "To achieve political, social and economic union – the kind of union we hoped to achieve in 1867."⁶² To this end, the Canadian Interfaith Conference was constituted to bring together "nearly all the organized religions in Canada" in order to plan common

religious events for the nation's 100th birthday.⁶³

Why was Lavy Becker selected to chair this important Canadian initiative? Certainly because he had amply demonstrated that he had the required skills. As both a rabbi and an accomplished administrator who had in addition developed a sense of Canada through his work on the Jewish Bicentenary, Lavy Becker was a good choice for the Chairman's role. Lavy recalled being contacted by Saul Hayes, with whom he had worked extensively at the Canadian Jewish Congress:

A Protestant lawyer from Westmount ... went to Saul Hayes, who was Executive Director of the CJC. He went to him as a person of substance, representing the Jewish community and said to him that he thought there ought to be a Jewish dimension, and could he find someone to represent the community at the Interfaith Conference. Saul Hayes called me.⁶⁴

The desire to include "a Jewish dimension," and more specifically the committee's choice of Lavy Becker as chair, may also have arisen from a need to moderate among Christians and to avoid the political problems associated with choosing a member of either one of the old established or one of the newer growing Christian denominations for that role. Of the thirty-four "member faiths" that were taken to constitute "nearly all the organized religions in Canada," thirty were Christian.⁶⁵

The Summary Report on the Canadian Interfaith Conference from April 1967 cited Chairman Becker in a passage in which we clearly hear his public voice. Here Becker projected a humanistic expansiveness that wanted to address not only all of Canada but "the whole world" and to demonstrate the power of interfaith cooperation. In this, he was part of the ecumenical spirit of the times that included the Second Vatican Council with its desire to heal the rifts of the past. Some forty years after Ira Mackay had confided his view to McGill Principal Arthur Currie that the Jew was "probably the least desirable immigrant to come to this country," the son of one of

these very immigrants was in a position to help define the content of ‘this great idea “Canada”’:

All seem to recognize the need to demonstrate to all of Canada – indeed, to the whole world – that since we have much in common, we must act in common. There seems to be a need to act in concert in telling the world that our goals are the same, even though our pathways in reaching for perfection may differ by virtue of our various traditions. Whatever may be our thoughts on other worldliness, we are as one in recognition that this world, this imperfect world, must be made a better one in which to live for all men here in Canada as well as in the various corners of the normal [*sic*] world. We must therefore find a method, a technique, a project, a series of events, through which to demand that this great idea “Canada” ... our organized faiths have failed to reach ... the Centennial gives us an opportunity to prove alert to human needs....⁶⁶

The extent to which it was important to Lavy Becker to be able to be clear about his Jewish identity and practice in public is evident from remarks he made within his own community at the Eighth Annual Reconstructionist Convention held in Montreal in May 1967. The Conference was divided among sessions that addressed issues of “Jews within the Jewish community,” on day one, and those that considered “The Jew in the General Community” on day two. It was in the latter context that Lavy Becker began his remarks with a reflection on the changes that had brought increasing numbers of Jews onto the faculties of Canadian universities and into executive positions in the corporate world. His question to his fellow Reconstructionists was whether the Jews who were taking on visible roles in the general community in increasing numbers were willing or able to “act as Jews” in public and whether the Jewish community was doing enough to support them. This excerpt offers a valuable “backstage” view of how Lavy Becker

thought about his public role and also gives a worthwhile synopsis of shifts in the position of Jews in Canadian society:

There have been some changes in the position of Jews in the general community in the last few years. Perhaps the best illustration of it is that which has happened at the universities in terms of the faculties. There are now large numbers of Jews who are members of the faculties of the universities. This has I think made possible a certain attitude on the part of Jews to the community, on the campuses and filtering through to the whole society ... I could also for example indicate that there are more and more Jewish executives in corporations than there have ever been in the history of our people in these past 300 years in the United States and 200 years in Canada. I refer to these, and there are other areas, to indicate that we have reached areas of acceptance as individuals that have never been open to us in the past. This is bound to create a set of attitudes on the part of individuals, who have "made it" in a sense, without necessarily having to be Jews. The question then becomes, what is their behaviour pattern when issues arise in which the attitude of a Jew becomes important? Do they behave in such a way so that the general community, about which we seem to be wanting to talk a little bit today, understands what the position of a Jew happens to be when an issue arises.

I received an invitation to attend a meeting of an organization on which I serve that meets in Ottawa, and the meeting was set for June 15th. I like to go to these meetings, they only take place once in two months, but I took a quick look at my *luach* because I had one in my pocket, being that kind of a Jew, and it is Shavuot and I can't go to the meeting. So I send a simple little note of regret saying it interferes with a Jewish holiday which I will be observing. The question we

sometimes have to ask ourselves is how many will go? Or how many will not go and not say why they are not going?⁶⁷

Lavy Becker's remarks as Chairman of the Interfaith Conference were part of the creation of a more inclusive narrative of Canadian identity, making room for diversity as part of 'this great idea "Canada."' His remarks to the Reconstructionists gathered for Convention aim to ensure that Jews take advantage of the opportunity available to them to live fully "in two civilizations" and not drop their Jewish practice. A different facet of the complex identity picture in Canada can be seen in the Saturday morning service Lavy Becker led on the occasion of the dedication of the Reconstructionist Synagogue on May 28, 1967.⁶⁸

Here we see that Becker was equally interested in keeping his own congregation, and also the Americans who came to the Reconstructionist conference, informed about the French Canadians and also the youth identity issues of the day. In leading the services, Lavy Becker made use of the *Canadian Interfaith Prayer Anthology* that he had edited. He was clearly very proud of the anthology and spoke of how it had been sent across Canada and, through the Canadian embassies, around the world. His choice of excerpts from the *Anthology* included one from page 23, in French. Here he argued for all of Canada coming to appreciate the French language, whether or not they understood the words: "And I do not mean this as a lesson in another language. I simply assume that all Canadians must, even if they don't understand it, learn to appreciate the rhythm and the roll of the French language. Let's read this one together...."⁶⁹ This lovely poem was then read by Lavy with feeling, after which he recommended a poem from page 37, "A Canadian Prayer for Young People of all Ages." It was one of a few poems in the anthology by and for youth and recalls the idiom of the day in its bold statement that, "We are not using phoney language because we are not praying to a phoney god."

It was as Chair of the Canadian Interfaith Conference that Becker attended a service in celebration of Canada's

Centennial on June 30, 1967 at Westminster Abbey in London, and then greeted the Queen when she came to Canada the next day. On this occasion, the front page of the *Sunday New York Times* for July 2, 1967, carried a picture: Lavy Becker in the middle, with Queen Elizabeth to his right in front, in profile, shaking hands. The caption read: “At Interfaith Service in Ottawa: Queen Elizabeth greets Maurice Cardinal Roy of Quebec. Behind him are Lavy N. [sic] Becker, Canadian Interfaith Conference head, and Bishop Timotheon. At the left is Prince Phillip.” Here indeed was a “symbolic restructuring,” to use Miedema’s phrase, of the Canadian narrative.

Conclusions

A profound re-configuration of the narratives of identity in Canada occurred over the period from when Lavy Becker was at McGill in the mid 1920s until 1967, when he chaired the Canadian Interfaith Conference. As a Jew, one of the minorities discreetly but definitively excluded from the British-era Canadian narrative, Becker was well-suited to take part in the construction of a more inclusive Canadian story, one that better reflected the changed character of Canada in the post-Second World War world. The Reconstructionist approach to Jewish life that Becker learned from Mordecai Kaplan and then made his own supplied a workable philosophy for fully embracing life as a Canadian and a Jew. As well, the ethics and sense of purpose that he shared with others of his generation from the downtown Jewish immigrant district, and that he deepened as he proceeded to construct the path of his life, equipped him well to serve his community – both the Jewish community and the evolving Canadian nation.

Notes

¹ The research of which this article is a part presents a portrait of the synagogue that Lavy Becker founded, seen in the context of its time. Today known as *Dorshei Emet*, this synagogue was affectionately known as “Lavy’s Shul” in the period when Becker served as its founding rabbi, from

1960 to 1976. See Sharon Gubbay-Helfer. *Lavy's Shul: A Canadian Experiment in Reconstructionism* (PhD diss., Concordia University, 2006).

² For a biography of Reconstructionism's founder see Mel Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: a Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993). An institutional history of the movement is included in Eric Caplan, *From Ideology to Liturgy: Reconstructionist Worship and American Liberal Judaism* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2002). For an introduction to the movement as it is today, see: J.J. Staub & R.T. Alpert, *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach* (New York: The Reconstructionist Press, 1985) and also the web site for the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, which includes links to audio resources, reading material and bibliographies: <http://www.jrf.org/>

³ In estimates based on the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Study in the United States, Reconstructionists account for between one per cent and three per cent of affiliated Jews.

⁴ See Gerson Cohen, "German Jewry as Mirror of Modernity," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 20 (1975): ix-xxxii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

⁶ Richard Libowitz, *Mordecai Kaplan and the Development of Reconstructionism* (New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), p. 12.

⁷ Cited in *Ibid.* p. 13.

⁸ Libowitz, *op. cit.* gives an excellent account of the thinkers who influenced Kaplan's development.

⁹ Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century*, p. 312

¹⁰ In 1901, thanks to this wave of immigration from Eastern Europe, Jews became the city's third largest ethnic group, after the French and Anglo-Celtic, a position they maintained each year until 1961, when the Italian population more than tripled in size and subsequently overtook the Jews in numbers. See Louis Rosenberg, *Changes in the Geographical Distribution of the Jewish Population of Metropolitan Montreal in the Decennial Periods from 1901 to 1961 & the Estimated Possible Changes during the Period from 1961 to 1971. A Preliminary Study* (Montreal: Bureau of Social and Economic Research, Canadian Jewish Congress, 1966).

¹¹ Fernand Dumont, *Genèse de la société québécoise* (Québec: Boréal, 1996).

¹² Gerald Tulchinsky, “The Third Solitude: A.M. Klein’s Jewish Montreal, 1910-1950,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 19 No. 2 (Summer 1984): 96-112. However, although her novel appeared before McLennan’s *Two Solitudes*, and so she did not use the term “solitudes”, the vision of three separate and separated entities was clearly articulated by Gwethelyn Graham, *Earth and High Heaven* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1944), p. 11: “Montreal society is divided roughly into three categories labeled “French” “English” and “Jewish” and there is not much coming and going between them, particularly between the Jews and either of the other two groups; for although as a last resort, French and English can be united under the heading “Gentile,” such an alliance only further isolates the Jews.”

¹³ Two collections that celebrate the life of this community are I. Robinson, P. Anctil, and M. Butovsky, *An Everyday Miracle: Yiddish Culture in Montreal* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1990); I. Robinson, and M. Butovsky, *Renewing Our Days: Montreal Jews in the Twentieth Century* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1995). As well, the number of masters and doctoral theses, in English and in French, devoted to different aspects of the life of this community continues to grow.

¹⁴ Apparently the name “Becker” entered the family as “Bodker” in the generation of Lavy’s parents. The original family name remains unknown. (Interview with Donnie Frank, Feb 10, 2003.)

¹⁵ As remembered by congregant Saretta Levitan. (Interview, September 13, 2000.)

¹⁶ Becker Senior was the second cantor at the Bnei Jacob synagogue in Montreal. For a study of Montreal’s Eastern European rabbis see Ira Robinson, *Rabbis and Their Community: Studies in the Immigrant Orthodox Rabbinate in Montreal, 1896-1930* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2007).

¹⁷ Reuben Brasloff remembers: “in those days, the Jewish working man had to work on the Sabbath. The clothing factories worked Saturdays until 1 p.m. My father did and so did I. You had to take a pragmatic approach.” (Interview, February 27, 2003.)

¹⁸ Lavy Becker liked to tell this story and did so on many occasions. This version was published in *Community and the Individual Jew*, edited by Ron Aigen and Gershon Hundert (Philadelphia: Reconstructionist Rabbinical College Press, 1986), p. 4.

¹⁹ *The Loving kindness of Lavy Becker*, video biography, DVD approx. 46 minutes (Iris Wagner producer, Memoirs Productions, 2004).

²⁰ Later to merge with Yeshiva College to form Yeshiva University

²¹ “Legacy and Love” from *Beginnings, Memories, Bar Mitzvah* (The Reconstructionist Synagogue of Montreal), p. 31.

²² It would be inaccurate to suggest that all of the English Protestants or all of the French Catholics were antisemitic. This is clearly not true. The McGill University Archives record other, more compassionate, positions than the one that prevailed, for example with respect to admitting Jewish refugees in general and refugee academics and professors in particular.

²³ “The God-Killers” // They were there, the Jews, the killers of prophets / When the bloody Messiah died on the cross; / They were there, mocking executioners, / And Zion mixed revelry in with its crime

²⁴ See Pierre Anctil, *Le Rendez-Vous Manqué: Les Juifs de Montréal face au Québec de l'entre-deux-guerres*, Québec: Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, 1988, pp. 14-15

²⁵ Rosenberg, 1939, Table 27, p. 41 cited in Anctil op. cit. p. 39. The position of Jews at McGill and at the Université de Montréal during the inter-war period is presented at length in Pierre Anctil’s *Le Rendez-Vous Manqué*, op. cit., upon which this section is based.

²⁶ McGill University Archives. RG2, Principal’s Office. File #445, “Jewish Students at McGill” Letter from Dean Ira A. Mackay to Sir Arthur Currie, Principal, McGill University. April 23, 1926. (see also note 22 above)

²⁷ Anctil, op. cit., pp. 68 ff.

²⁸ Aigen and Hundert, eds, op. cit. p. 193.

²⁹ This group first met in 1922 and submitted its Letters Patent in 1924: see Sara Tauben unpublished paper on Montreal synagogues prepared for Ira Robinson, copy in the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) archives and the CJC reference tool entitled, “Synagogue Finder.”

³⁰ Donnie Becker telephone interview February 27, 2005.

³¹ *The Loving kindness of Lavy Becker*, op. cit.

³² J.S Gurock and J.J. Schacter, *A Modern Heretic and a Traditional Community: Mordecai M. Kaplan, Orthodoxy, and American Judaism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

³³ “The Influence of Mordecai M. Kaplan, Z”L: part five”. *Reconstructionist* (July-August 1984), p. 25-26

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Noam Pianko, "Constituent Elements of Judaism as a Civilization" at the conference, *Mordecai Kaplan's Judaism as a Civilization: The Legacy of an American Idea* (February 8-9, 2004 Stanford University).

³⁶ Kaplan's American vision was very like that of Horace Kallen, a Jew born in 1882 in Silesia and educated at Harvard, who became the leading exponent of ethnic pluralism in America.

³⁷ Note that diversity at that time referred primarily to European ethnic minorities – today we have extended the scope of diversity beyond Europe.

³⁸ R. N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96 (1967).

³⁹ Andrew Kim, "The Absence of Pan-Canadian Civil Religion: Plurality, Duality, and Conflict in Symbols of Canadian Culture," *Sociology of Religion* 54, no. 3 (1993): 257-75.

⁴⁰ On the formation of civil religion in Quebec see the work of Louis Rousseau, for example : « La place du facteur religieux dans la naissance et le déplacement de l'image identitaire au Québec, 1840-1980 », IN Sorbets, Claude (dir.), *Valeurs de sociétés: Préférences politiques et références culturelles au Canada* (Bordeaux, Québec : Maison des sciences de l'homme d'Aquitaine, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2001), p.49-76 ; « La construction religieuse de la Nation » *Recherches sociographiques* XLVI, no. 3 (2005): 1-23.

⁴¹ "Four careers later, rabbi is still living the volunteer life," *Montreal Gazette*, May 17, 1986, p. J6.

⁴² Eiran Harris interview with Lavy Becker, May 15, 1989. Canadian Jewish Congress, Sc 1113.

⁴³ I have so far found no evidence that this project was realized.

⁴⁴ Eiran Harris interview with Lavy Becker.

⁴⁵ "Havara Sfaridit": the Sephardic prayer melody.

⁴⁶ Eiran Harris interview with Lavy Becker.

⁴⁷ Aigen and Hundert, eds, op. cit. p. 194-5.

⁴⁸ There are extensive files on the bicentenary at the Canadian Jewish Congress, a rich source awaiting further investigation.

⁴⁹ Memo from Lavy Becker to the National Executive of the Canadian Jewish Congress, April 24, 1957. CJC, file 602, box 64.

⁵⁰ See Sharon Gubbay Helfer, *Lavy's Shul: A Canadian Experiment in Reconstructionism* (Ph.D. diss., Concordia University, 2006).

⁵¹ Betty Sigler, "Montreal: The Bonds of Community,"

Commentary 9, no. 4 (1950), p. 351.

⁵² I do not have documentary confirmation to support what Saretta Levitan and others have told me: “Oh Sharon, of course *everybody knew* that Jews could not live on certain streets.”

⁵³ The CJCCCNAs have correspondence that gives details of the Hampstead schools issue. As well, the paper written by Danny Fry “For Professor W. Van Nus” (May 12, 1980), “A History of Hampstead 1914 - 1957”, and available from Hampstead City Hall, has statistics on Hampstead’s Jewish population and the dramatic shift that occurred starting in the 1950s.

⁵⁴ Lavy Becker interview given to Barry Lazar, 1996, in the context of a film made by Gary Beitel and Barry Lazar on the occasion of the 36th anniversary of the *Dorshei Emet*.

⁵⁵ This is an intriguing point, because the architect himself seems not to have made any such claims, stating rather that he had been inspired by the old Polish “fortress synagogues.” Nonetheless, Becker consistently referred to the plaster and stone facing, which had been designed that way so as to save money, in terms of the fieldstone buildings found in the Quebec countryside. Sometimes he called this “French Provincial,” at other times “Habitant.”

⁵⁶ *CBC Digital Archives*, http://archives.cbc.ca/IDC-1-74-870-5017/people/rene_levesque/clip4

⁵⁷ The changing nature of Jewish identity surfaced at Expo in a debate about the Israeli pavilion and whether it would be willing to include exhibits on *Judaism*. When it was not willing to do this because “Israel represented three great religions of the world, and it would not be right to show such preference for one”, a committee of Montreal Jews headed by Rabbi Wilfred Shuchat succeeded in putting in place a complementary “Pavilion of Judaism.” See W.R Shuchat, *The Gate of Heaven: The Story of Congregation Shaar Hashomayim of Montreal, 1846-1996* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000), p. 343-52. Lavy Becker was involved with the Pavilion as attested to by a document in the archives of the Reconstructionist Synagogue of Montreal, a citation to the Reconstructionist Synagogue by the “Foundation for Judaism” in recognition of volunteer and other related services on behalf of the Pavilion of Judaism at Expo 67, signed by Sam Steinberg, President and Wilfred Shuchat, Chair of the Program Committee.

⁵⁸ See Pauline Turin, “L’identité nationale exposée. Représentations

du Québec à l'Exposition universelle de Montréal 1967 (Expo 67)" (Thèse de Doctorat, Université Laval, 2003). As well, the independence movement and Quebec's sense of itself as a respected French-speaking collectivity were given an unexpected injection of support when French President Charles de Gaulle came to visit Expo and addressed the crowds outside Montreal City Hall on July 24, 1967. The culmination of his impassioned speech included the words "Vive Montreal! Vive Québec! Vive le Québec Libre!" (Long live Montréal! Long live Québec! Long live a Free Québec!"

⁵⁹ Gary Miedema, "For Canada's Sake: The Centennial Celebrations of 1967, State Legitimation and the Restructuring of Canadian Public Life," *The Journal of Canadian Studies* 34, no. 1 (1999.), p. 139-60.

⁶⁰ The Canadian Red Ensign was replaced by the red and white maple leaf flag on February 15, 1965.

⁶¹ See John Porter, *The Vertical Mosaic: An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965).

⁶² Georges Gauthier, member of the Canadian Centennial Commission, cited in Miedema, op. cit. p. 145.

⁶³ Ibid. p. 141.

⁶⁴ Interview with Lavy Becker, March 16, 1999.

⁶⁵ The non-Christians members were: the Buddhist Churches of Canada, Canadian Jewish Congress, Islamic Community, National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Canada. The Zoroastrians and a representative of Canadian Hindus joined late, and were not mentioned in official Canadian Interfaith Conference published material. Miedema, op. cit., p. 154-5, Note 12 (a complete list of member faiths is found here as well).

⁶⁶ Library and Archives Canada, , Lavy M. Becker Fonds, MG 31 H 81, Vol. 6, *Summary Report on the Centennial Interfaith Conference*. The source document is incomplete, perhaps due to problems in transcribing a recorded speech. What remains clear is Becker's confidence in seeking to enrich and extend the definition of Canada in the pluralistic and humanistic terms that characterized his own brand of Reconstructionism.

⁶⁷ Eighth Annual Conference of the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Fellowships held in 1967 in Montreal. A series of reel-to-reel tapes from this Conference were made and are housed in the Ira and Judith Kaplan Eisenstein Reconstructionist Archives in Wyncote, Pennsylvania. This excerpt is from the Shabbat afternoon (May 27) session,

starting at 4 p.m., a Symposium on the role of the Jewish community and the general community.

⁶⁸ From Mordecai Kaplan's diary, June 1, 1967, p. 64: "The most interesting feature of the Conference was the dedication of the new Reconstructionist Synagogue. The moving spirit in introducing Reconstructionism into the Montreal Jewish Community, which is predominantly Orthodox, has been Lavy M. Becker. He had studied at the Seminary and just barely missed getting the rabbinical degree, for reasons unknown to me. Although he made a career of business, he has been active in Jewish communal life, particularly through the Canadian Jewish Congress and vitally interested in the advancement of Judaism along Reconstructionist lines."

⁶⁹ Ira and Judith Kaplan Eisenstein Reconstructionist Archives, Tapes made of the Eighth Annual Conference of the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Fellowships held in 1967, Shabbat services, May 27.

