

Tulchinsky, Gerald. *Joe Salsberg: A Life of Commitment*. Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2013. xv+183 pp.

J.B. (Joseph Baruch) Salsberg was the most prominent Canadian Jewish Communist (and later ex-Communist) in the country. He was born in Lagow, Poland in 1902, and immigrated to Toronto with his mother and two sisters in 1913; his father Abraham had preceded them, in order to “establish himself.” They had joined the more than 18,000 Jews in Toronto by then, living mostly in the downtown area known as “the Ward.” By 1916 son “Yosele” had left school and was working in a factory.

Salsberg is now the subject of a biography written by Gerald Tulchinsky, professor emeritus of history at Queen’s University, who has made excellent use of a wealth of material, including Salsberg’s own archive, other primary sources and secondary literature, and has painted a fascinating picture of the life of this complex man.

At first a socialist Zionist, Salsberg spent two years in New York as national secretary of the Young Poalei Zion of America. (His devout parents were horrified by his turn away from traditional Judaism.) Back in Toronto in 1923, and moving further left politically, he became a trade union organizer. In 1926, he joined the Communist Party of Canada (CPC), his political home for the next thirty years. Tulchinsky describes in great detail the many strikes and disputes Salsberg was involved in during this period. An eloquent orator when addressing crowds in “florid and dramatic” Yiddish or slightly accented English, Salsberg was a “powerful” presence on the labour left in Toronto. He “did not eschew the use of violence” and was arrested more than once (64-65).

Though, as Tulchinsky notes, Salsberg took little interest in Marxist ideological disputations, he, like other Jewish Communists, believed that the solution to the “Jewish problem” lay in the advancement of socialism through world revolution: the Soviet Union, they declared, had emancipated its Jewish

population and had made anti-Semitism illegal. The Communist Party was, for him, “a vehicle for celebrating secular Judaism and cultural nationalism expressed through the medium of Yiddish” (25).

In the 1930s Salsberg entered electoral politics. After four defeats in municipal, provincial and federal elections, in 1938 he was finally elected an alderman in Toronto’s Ward 4, the area that included his own Jewish working class neighbourhood around Kensington Market. However, despite support from the liberal *Toronto Star*, which approved of his “humanitarianism,” he was defeated just a year later (59-60).

Once the Nazis attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, Communists enthusiastically threw themselves into the war effort. In January 1943 Salsberg recaptured his old seat on city council in Ward 4, beating a future mayor of Toronto, Nathan Phillips, and, more impressively, he succeeded at the ballot box in the August 1943 provincial election, and would represent St. Andrew riding in the legislature from 1943 to 1955. His victory “was very much an ethnic phenomenon,” Tulchinsky writes, because most of the city’s Jews lived in “the Spadina-College nexus” and Salsberg won some 90 percent of their votes (68). His win reflected the fact that, for most Jews, the Soviets were seen as the main hope of defeating Hitler and voting for Canadian Jewish Communists was, as it were, a way of showing support for the Red Army’s efforts. Salsberg won re-election in 1945, 1948, and 1951, a measure, Tulchinsky asserts, of the “widespread respect, even love,” for him among his constituents (78).

Salsberg had begun to wonder about the situation of Jews in the USSR, and even visited Moscow in 1939, where he was assured that nothing was amiss. Though “frustrated and puzzled,” but unwilling to quit the Communist Party, Salsberg kept his own counsel (63-64) – something he would later profoundly regret. By the late 1940s it was clear that things had gone terribly wrong. Jewish culture had been brutally suppressed, with writers, poets and scientists imprisoned and executed. Rebuffed when he sought to visit the Soviet Union,

in 1949 he brought his concerns before the party's leadership – who refused to listen. Still, he kept quiet and in public remained loyal to the party. In 1955, he managed to travel to Moscow, but was again fobbed off by party officials, who blamed much of the anti-Semitic activity on the former head of the secret police, Lavrenti Beria, executed two years earlier. That same year Salsberg lost his seat in the legislature.

Salsberg was not alone in his utter disillusionment when the dam finally broke a year later. In the months and years following the 1956 speech to the 20<sup>th</sup> Soviet Communist Party Congress by the new Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, outlining Stalin's crimes, thousands of Jews in Communist Parties in western countries quit the movement. The departure of the "class of 1956" made Jewish Communists an almost extinct species. Salsberg himself carried the fight to the party's political leadership, but it was an unequal struggle; the apparatchiks, led by Tim Buck, remained loyal to the Soviets and Salsberg left the party in May of 1957. Along with other Jewish ex-Communists, he formed the New Fraternal Jewish Association in 1959 as "a fresh forum for socialist thought and debate" (122). As the years went by, however, he turned into more of a mainstream Jewish intellectual, his politics similar to those of Labour Zionists – he was now a fervent defender of Israel -- and he became a familiar face at meetings of the Canadian Jewish Congress.

Why should we celebrate Joe Salsberg's life, flawed and full of political errors as it was? First, because he did an immense service to Canada while a Communist. In the Ontario legislature he was in the forefront of fighting for legislation against racial and gender discrimination in housing, employment, university admissions, and so forth – things that seem so non-controversial today that some readers of this book will be amazed to learn that these were seen at the time as radical, perhaps even "un-Canadian," proposals. He was, for example, the champion of the "Act to Prevent the Publication of Discriminatory Matter Referring to Race or Creed," passed in 1944. It was a precursor to the Ontario Human Rights Code, and

the first legislation of its kind in Canada. Salsberg also brought the issue of anti-Semitism into the wider public sphere, at a time when “Gentiles Only” signs could be seen at resorts and job ads might specify “Christians Only Need Apply.”

Secondly, following his disillusionment with the Communist movement, he became the secular version of a *ba'al tshuvah* and led a lengthy “second life” politically. A proponent of Yiddish, he became one of the founding members of the National Committee for Yiddish and Yiddish Culture of the Canadian Jewish Congress and wrote a regular column for many years in the *Canadian Jewish News*.

The world changed and Salsberg changed along with it. By the time he died in 1998, Joe Salsberg had made the transition from being a controversial politician to a man beloved by many – almost an “icon,” to employ that much overused term. J.B. Salsberg deserves this informative and well-researched biography as a tribute to him. The book provides a window to a Jewish community that was far different economically and politically than it is today.

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Vaugeois, Denis. *The First Jews in North America: the Extraordinary Story of the Hart Family, 1760-1860*. translated by Käthe Roth. Montreal: Baraka Books, 2012. xviii + 347 pp.

This book is a translation into English of Vaugeois’ *Les Premiers Juifs d’Amérique, 1760-1860, L’extraordinaire histoire de la famille Hart*, which was a winner of the 2012 Helen and Stan Vine Canadian Jewish Book Award in the category of History. Added to the translation of the French original is a preface by Herbert Marx and a short “Foreword to the English Edition”.

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