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Reflections/Réflexions

When and how did Canadian Jewish history become my primary research focus? The "when" is easy. It was when Irving Abella and I began the research that would become *None Is Too Many*. Since then, most of my research and writing has focused on the history of Canadian Jews. But the "how" I finally came to Canadian Jewish history is far less straightforward. In fact, throughout my undergraduate and graduate years, Canadian Jewish history was nowhere on my radar. This is not to say I was Jewishly disengaged. Just the opposite. I grew up in a Yiddish-speaking, working-class home in Toronto, then a city just beginning to shake off its well-deserved reputation as a dour outpost of Anglo-Protestant conformity. My parents, pre-war immigrants from Poland, were more traditional than religious. They were also ardently Labor Zionists. And, much as they appreciated being in Canada, I doubt they ever felt truly at home in Canada. Instead, my parents, economically pressed, insularly Yiddish speaking, Zionist and tentative of place—even after more than a decade in Canada—felt themselves outliers, not just to the larger Anglo-Toronto majority, but also to a postwar Toronto Jewish community enjoying increasing educational and economic opportunity as it trekked northward up-Bathurst-Street. My parent's sense of marginality rubbed off on me. During my less-than-stellar high-school years, I assumed aliya rather than university would be my future. And I came close. I spent the year after I left high school on a kibbutz in the Negev where I fully expected to remain.

But life takes strange turns. A bizarre series of events—a story unto itself—landed me not in the Negev but as an undergraduate at Pace College in New York City. In 1965, I completed a BA in history at Pace then headed off to do an MA in American history at the University of Cincinnati. While I never encountered a Jewish-content course at either school, living first in New York and then in Cincinnati afforded me street-level lessons in the different faces of Jewishness in America. Borrowing Lenny Bruce's notion that chocolate is Jewish and fudge is goyish, that if you live in New York you are Jewish even if you are Catholic and "if you live in Butte, Montana you're going to be goyish even if you are Jewish," New York to me felt familiarly and comfortably Jewish. On the other hand, Cincinnati, the American Eden for mid-19th century German-speaking Jewish immigrants and the institutional home of American Reform Judaism, seemed goyish by comparison.

Oddly, however, it was in "goyish" Cincinnati that I first rubbed up against American Jewish history, although at the time I would not have defined it as such. At the time I was interested in the tumultuous Populist/Progressive period straddling the late 1880s through to the First World War. I was especially intrigued by a then-growing debate among American historians of the period about the pressures for social, political and economic reform that compelled both the rural-based Populist movement of the 1890s and the more urban and technocratic Progressive movement that followed the turn of the last century. Alternative views of the impetus to reform are presented in Eric F. Goldman's 1952 study, *Rendezvous With Destiny*, and Richard

Hofstadter's 1955 *Age of Reform*. Goldman makes the case for an open and positivist American embrace of reform from the Civil War through to the New Deal that bespoke a fundamental liberal American worldview—moderate, centrist, incremental, and decidedly non-socialist and anti-totalitarian. Richard Hofstadter, on the other hand, finds a deeply anti-liberal and anti-intellectual streak among reform advocates that grew out of fears of status dislocation and gave rise to anti-immigrant nativism, anti-intellectualism, conspiracy theories and fear of things that go bump in the night. Much the same historical divide is reflected in Oscar Handlin's 1951 classic immigration narrative *The Uprooted* and John Higham's scholarly 1955 *Strangers in the Land. Patterns of American Nativism 1860–1925*. In these volumes the two historians squared off in arguing about the impact of immigration and source of nativism in America during the decades that straddled the turn of the last century.

Pressed for a MA thesis topic, I hit on a subject that suited my interest in the Populist/Progressive era while, at the same time, pivoted me toward American immigration history. I undertook a study of how the Anglo-Jewish press, voice of an older, established and English-speaking Jewish community, reported on the rise in nativist anti-immigrant sentiment and antisemitism that accompanied the wave of Eastern European Jewish immigration entering the United States in the 1890s. The primary research materials were at hand. Directly across the street from the University of Cincinnati is Hebrew Union College, home to the American Jewish Archives and an excellent collection of the American Jewish press.

My MA research convinced me of the critical role of immigration in nation building and I brought that interest with me when I came back to Toronto to do a PhD. To my surprise few if any in the University of Toronto history department shared my interest. When I was finishing my course work, I suggested to one of my professors that I was considering writing a dissertation on some aspect of Canadian immigrant history, maybe immigration of Jews into Canada. Out of concern for my future, he allowed that much as the topic was interesting, it was very unlikely to lead to a job at a Canadian university history department. Best to look elsewhere. Intent on staying with immigration, I eventually found a doctoral supervisor who reluctantly agreed that I could write, not about Jewish immigration, but about the estimated million Americans who immigrated north into the Canadian west during the Laurier years.

While the history department was unenthusiastic about immigrant studies, public interest in immigration and ethnicity was then on the rise. In 1969, while I was writing my dissertation, the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism issued its multi-volume Report and accompanying recommendations. While most of the Report centred on the French/English linguistic and cultural divide in Canada, Volume IV of the Report, *The Cultural Contribution of the Other Ethnic Groups*, addressed the historical and cultural place of Canadians of non-English and non-

French speaking origin. Importantly, Volume IV recommended that governments, federal and provincial, recognize their contribution to Canada and take steps to enhance the cultural integrity of immigrant and ethnic communities in Canada while ensuring that all Canadians, irrespective of origin or heritage, have full and equal access to opportunity free from discrimination and prejudice.

While the federal government worked on its response to Volume IV, so too did Ontario. As part of that process, Ontario announced a consultative conference, Heritage Ontario, to invite community input on how government might best reflect ethnic concerns in areas of provincial jurisdiction, especially education, culture and social service delivery. In late 1970, while awaiting my thesis defence, I joined the Heritage Ontario planning secretariat and was soon engaged in the secretariat's outreach to Ontario immigrant and ethnic organizations, including the Canadian Jewish Congress. I was also in almost daily close contact with key members of the federal Department of the Secretary of State team drafting Ottawa's response to Volume IV. All this was ground zero for what would in late 1971 become Canada's Multiculturalism Policy.

I came away from Heritage Ontario with hands-on experience of government Multicultural policy planning, a knowledge of ethnic community organization, priorities and the politics of pluralism in Ontario and Canada, but no job. I did, however, successfully defend my PhD thesis and sign a contract to turn my thesis into a book. A book in the works, I answered an ad for a temporary appointment in Canadian history at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education—interest in history of education in Quebec, the Canadian west or other relevant area. My application stressed my expertise in the history of immigration and immigrant schooling and the educational implications of the newly unveiled federal Multicultural Policy. To my surprise and financial relief, I was given a one-year contract. And, as if to prove there is nothing so permanent as a temporary position, I've remained at OISE for almost fifty years.

While I settled into teaching immigration-related courses at OISE, the North American Jewish world was caught up in prestige pride following Israel's victory in the 1967 Six Day War. North American campuses, including the University of Toronto, were not immune. Jewish content courses began to grow in number and attract students—Jewish and non-Jewish. While I never taught specifically Jewish content courses, all my courses included much that was of Jewish relevance.

While my course content overlapped Jewish studies, my research interests remained broadly fixed on the history of Canadian immigration. For example, shortly after accepting that one-year appointment at OISE, I was invited to present a paper on Canadian immigration to a small Toronto conference on the American-Canadian relations. On the same panel, and discussing issues of ethnic identity in Canada and the United States, was Robert Harney from the history department at the University

of Toronto. Later, over lunch in a Chinese restaurant, Harney and I got to talking about the absence of research into the history of immigration in Toronto and how this gap helped perpetuate a widely held notion that, until 1950s, Toronto was as a singularly stolid bastion of British civic virtue in which non-English speaking immigrants had little presence. But our lived experience told us that this assumption was wrong. Then and there, chopsticks in hand, Harney and I decided to read immigration into Toronto history. But where to begin? As if to demonstrate the important presence of immigrants in pre-Second World War Toronto, we decided to begin by collecting photo images of Toronto's immigrant past, the largest community of whom were Jews.

And there was much to collect. Harney and I started with photos originally taken as part of routine municipal and provincial activities. For example, we made our way through several thousand pre-Depression-era glass-plate negatives from the Toronto Roads Department that recorded the "before and after" of municipal street repairs. Photos taken in immigrant neighbourhoods often granted us candid images of immigrant street life including that of Jews. In addition to photo collections in the public domain, we also tapped private businesses, social agencies, newspapers and labour union photo collections. While these photographs were revealing, they most often afforded a gatekeeper's eye view of immigrant life—photos suggestive of alienation, poverty and exploitation. As a counterweight we sought images that spoke to the interior life of immigrants, images that showed something of how immigrants saw themselves. Much of those images came from immigrants themselves. With the assistance of friends and students, we were given privileged access to a large number of family-held photo collections—often lovingly preserved family albums entrusted from generation to generation, albums that celebrated the inner life of immigrants and their families, the largest share of whom were Jews.

After a two-year photo hunt and with thousands of images in hand, Harney and I called it quits—not because there were no more photos to gather. Just the opposite. We knew there were many thousands of photo images still out there. But we had accomplished our goal. We had ample evidence of a vibrant immigrant life in Toronto before the Second World War. In addition, during the course of gathering photos, we ran across other immigrant materials deserving of preservation—personal documents, organizational records, private letters and even diaries—revealing of the Toronto immigrant past, and if not secured a safe home, more likely to eventually end up in a landfill rather than an archive. Also, we encountered many pre-war immigrants who were anxious to share their stories with us, stories that stood testament to the richness of Toronto's immigrant past and stories, that if not recorded could be lost forever. In hope of encouraging public and scholarly interest in Toronto's immigrant past, Harney and I approached a publisher with the idea of a book-size photo essay—images alongside scholarly text—exploring Toronto's immigrant past.

The book, *Immigrants: A Portrait of the Immigrant Experience*, heavily in Jewish content, was released in 1975.

The response to *Immigrants* was gratifying. It became a Toronto best seller, winner of the City of Toronto Book Award and, more importantly, it sparked student interest in immigration and their own immigrant narratives. The book also had an unexpected spinoff—the Multicultural History Society of Ontario (MHSO). Following the 1971 federal Multicultural initiative and its own Heritage Ontario consultations, the Ontario government sought ways to publicly acknowledge the contribution of immigrant and ethnic communities to the life and history of the province. The government approached Harney and me for programmatic suggestions on how it might achieve that goal. As a first step, we advocated for a government-funded program to ensure the preservation of archive-relevant immigrant and ethnic group-related manuscript materials and oral histories—a task we believed should be assigned to the Archives of Ontario. To our surprise the government responded by creating the Multicultural History Society of Ontario and mandated to preserve and chronicle Ontario's immigrant past. The MHSO was housed on the University of Toronto campus. Harney, a tenured University of Toronto faculty member, assumed the position of Academic Director. Since I was then still untenured, I joined the MHSO's Board of Directors.

Under Harney's imaginative leadership, the MHSO quickly became a recognized centre of immigrant and ethnic research. And even as it built a following among internationally recognized immigration scholars, the MHSO reached out with immigrant and ethnic communities not just as objects of study but also as partners in the scholarly enterprise. This was especially the case when it came to the MHSO's archival initiatives. Building on the photo collection that Harney and I gathered, the MHSO offered itself as an archival repository for immigrant and ethnic-related personal and institutional manuscript records and photographs that the Archives of Ontario then regarded as outside its collection mandate. Reaching beyond manuscript material, the MHSO also became a hub for the collection and preservation of immigrant and ethnic oral histories. This included Jewish material and in 1983 I became a key player in organizing a first-of-its-kind conference exploring the North American Jewish experience bringing together scholars from Israel, the United States and Canada.

The MHSO's support for the study of Ontario's and Canada's Jewish past was not without controversy, especially when it came to the MHSO archiving Jewish manuscript material in which the MHSO was not the only game in town. At the federal level, the Public Archives of Canada, following on federal Multiculturalism Policy, initiated a manuscript retrieval program designed to gather ethnic materials judged to be of national significance, including Jewish materials. At that same time, the

organized Jewish community, seriously committing to the preservation of the Canadian Jewish heritage, also began systematically gathering Jewish archival material. What is more, the Canadian Jewish Archives in Montreal and more particularly, the Ontario Jewish Archives in Toronto, claimed they, not the Public Archives or the MHSO, had a proprietary right to Canadian Jewish archival materials. This became especially problematic when the MHSO was gifted the records of a leftist Jewish organization that specified it did not want its materials to go to the Ontario Jewish Archives.

To reduce inter-organizational friction, the MHSO and the Canadian Jewish Congress eventually agreed to an accord by which the MHSO allowed that it would not actively solicit for Jewish materials and, when approached with Jewish materials, it would direct the would-be donor toward the Ontario Jewish Archives. However, if a would-be donor remained intent on donating to the MHSO, the MHSO retained the right to accept those materials. I was very much involved in these negotiations and, in the process, I came to better understand the concerns of the Jewish archival community with regard to Jewish community control of and access to Jewish archival materials. Importantly, I also became personally acquainted with key Canadian Jewish Congress players in Montreal, Toronto and Winnipeg and their very different operations and collection philosophies.

All this was soon put to good use. In 1978 a chance acquisition of several Canadian Immigration Department documents related to the 1939 voyage of the *St. Louis* sparked my interest in Canadian immigration policy during the prewar years and how that policy impacted Jews in particular. In collaboration with Irving Abella, we began a research project that, if we could find enough documentation, we hoped would allow us to write an article on Canadian response to prewar refugees from Nazi Germany. We began with the Immigration Papers in the Public Archives of Canada but soon expanded to other PAC collections, to materials in the Canadian Jewish Archives and to document collections in other archival and private collections in Canada, the United States, Europe and Israel. As our collection of materials grew larger so too did our timeframe. We expanded our focus to include the war years and the postwar through to 1948. The eventual result was *None Is Too Many*. While *None Is Too Many* proved a landmark study in Canadian immigration history, to me it was more, much more. By conjoining my interest in immigration and ethnicity, my experience with government and the organized Jewish community and, most particularly, by allowing me to reflect on my rootedness as a Canadian Jew, *None Is Too Many* drew me finally and firmly into the study of Canadian Jewish history. And here I remain.