

Reflections / Réflexions

Ira Robinson

Reflections on My Journeys in the Field of Canadian Jewish Studies

I arrived in Canada from the United States on August 8, 1979 to take up a teaching position in “Medieval Judaism” in Concordia University’s Department of Religion. In my first-year teaching at Concordia, I completed my doctoral dissertation at Harvard University on Abraham ben Eliezer Halevi, a sixteenth-century kabbalist and messianic visionary. My wife and I also had our first child, who was born on June 5, 1980, the day of my Harvard Commencement, which I did not attend under the circumstances. None of this explains my involvement in Canadian Jewish studies. Many Jewish studies scholars in Canada have no particular connection with that area of study.

When I came to live in Canada, I knew more about Canada than the average American. I had visited Canada a few times: touring Expo 67, travelling through the Atlantic Provinces in 1969 (I remember seeing the Apollo Moon Landing in St. John, New Brunswick), canoeing in Algonquin Provincial Park, and riding the Polar Bear Express to Moosonee on James Bay in 1974. None of this can explain my eventual commitment to the field of Canadian Jewish studies either.

What begins to explain my journey toward the field of Canadian Jewish studies is my linguistic preparation. Beyond Hebrew, which I had studied for years,¹ I had also taken, practically on a whim, the Columbia-YIVO Summer Program in Yiddish in summer 1973. I was further prepared for coming to Québec by studying six years of French (grades 7–12) in the public schools of Worcester, Massachusetts. Worcester possessed a large and culturally active community of the Québec diaspora, and members of this community were my French language teachers. I found that by the end of high school I could read French fluently and make myself understood in that language. When my wife and I interviewed for our Landed Immigrant papers at the Canadian consulate in Boston, I was able to speak French with the Québec immigration representative. However, linguistic preparation is hardly a sufficient explanation for a scholarly career with an emphasis on Canadian Jewish studies.

A more substantial explanation for my journey of discovery of Canadian Jewry involves my academic interest in American Jewish studies. However, that interest itself requires explanation, especially in this era of narrow academic specializations. What was a graduate student engaged in the study of a sixteenth century kabbalist doing in American Jewish studies? To answer, I have to look back to the duality of my student life from the early grades. I attended the public schools of Worcester, MA at the same time as I attended Hebrew School, and later Hebrew High School. I got so used to this duality, that when it came time for me to go to college, I attended Johns Hopkins University for my B.A. and the Baltimore Hebrew College for my B.H.L., graduating simultaneously from both institutions in 1973.

When I began graduate school in the Department of History at Columbia Universi-

ty, I thought I would specialize in medieval Jewish studies. However, I also attended courses in modern Jewish history, and so encountered Professor Arthur Hertzberg, who took a liking to me. Perhaps it was because both he and I happened to be Johns Hopkins alumni, and perhaps it had something to do with my knowledge of Yiddish. In any event, Professor Hertzberg made me his research assistant and mentored me in several other ways.²

For a number of reasons, I left Columbia with an M.A. in Jewish history in 1975 and began to study for my doctorate at Harvard, but Professor Hertzberg gave me a parting gift that helped determine the course of my scholarly career. He had been commissioned to edit a volume of the letters of Cyrus Adler, one of the most prominent leaders of the American Jewish community of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hertzberg then had many irons in the fire and he did not think that he would bring that particular commission to fruition, so he sold the people who initiated the project on giving the editorial job to me, an untried graduate student. Thus, I was entrusted with preparing a two-volume edition of the Adler letters, which resulted in my first significant publication.³ To do the subject justice, I began intensive reading in the literature of American Jewish studies. I had never taken a course in either American history, or American Jewish studies previously, but most scholars of American Jewish studies of my generation also did not have a formal, graduate education in that field.⁴ I therefore wound up, at the same time, writing my doctoral dissertation on a kabbalist of the early sixteenth century and preparing a scholarly edition of the Adler letters.

Thus, I came to Montreal in 1979 with a scholarly interest in American Jewish studies as well as medieval Judaism, and a major scholarly project in that field in the course of completion. I was naturally curious about my new environment, including the controversies and politics of Montréal, Québec, and Canada in the tumultuous period leading up to the 1980 Referendum on Sovereignty-Association. During that period, I began to think of Canada as home. In gaining perspective on my new home, I have to give particular credit to CBC Radio, and especially to Peter Gzowski and his program, "Morningside," that introduced me to the intricacies of Canadian culture, history, and politics.

At that point, I had still not commenced thinking about, let alone researching, Canadian Jewish studies, but I was nonetheless noticed by a couple of people connected with institutions that fostered understanding of the Canadian Jewish heritage. David Rome of the Canadian Jewish Archives invited me to participate in a 1982 conference sponsored by Canadian Jewish Congress to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the legislation that established equal rights for Jews in Canada. When I protested to Rome that I had nothing to say to such a conference, he urged me to come and participate anyway. The second approach was by Claire Stern, a librarian at Montréal's

Jewish Public Library, who persuaded me to become active in the Library's manifold Jewish cultural programs, and ultimately in its leadership group (starting as a Board Member in 1989, I became president of the Library from 1996–1998).

The Jewish Public Library was a key component in my developing interest in Jewish Montréal, as I collaborated in the organization of two significant conferences sponsored by the Library: "Yiddish Montreal" (1988), and "Tur Malka: The Jewish Experience in Montreal" (1992). I edited the papers from both conferences in collaboration with Pierre Anctil and my Concordia colleague Mervin (Mesh) Butovsky.⁵ With Anctil in particular, these conferences began a fruitful scholarly friendship that has lasted over thirty years and has involved our co-organizing several conferences, co-editing several volumes and much else.⁶ I would also become heavily involved in a conference celebrating the Library's 100th anniversary in 2014.⁷

It was in 1981 that I first encountered the research focus that more than anything else propelled me headlong into the field of Canadian Jewish studies. In that year, I first came across the name of Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg, the subject of much of my research and publication. Library and Archives Canada had mounted an exhibition of rare books from its recently acquired Jacob Lowy collection of Judaica and Hebraica. The exhibition featured a book of Rabbi Rosenberg's Hasidic homilies entitled *Peri Yehuda*. The exhibition catalogue called him "Chief Rabbi of Montreal," and indicated that he was "best known for his Hebrew edition of the *Zohar*, aside from several volumes of legends, folkmedicine and sorcery in Yiddish." My review of the exhibition's catalogue, published in 1982, was my very first contribution to Canadian Jewish studies.⁸

Rabbi Rosenberg piqued my curiosity. On the one hand, I was attracted to kabbala and particularly to its popularization, which is one of my non-Canadian fields of research and publication.⁹ I also maintained an interest in the development of traditional Judaism in North America that began with my work on Cyrus Adler.¹⁰ Rabbi Rosenberg, apparently, was a man who combined both areas of my scholarly interest in his career. Beyond that, he was also a Montrealer, for whom material might well be available in my own back yard.

I had no opportunity to pursue the matter at that time, but Rabbi Rosenberg remained on my mind. A few years later, I began an adventure of discovery, lasting more than three decades from my first publications relating to Rabbi Rosenberg that appeared in 1990¹¹ to my comprehensive book on him, published in 2021. During this thirty-year period, I published some two dozen articles and two books either directly or indirectly related to Rabbi Rosenberg.¹²

The branching out of my scholarship to include areas related to aspects of the Canadian Jewish experience beyond my initial focus on Rabbi Rosenberg came a bit later,

in the 1990s. This development was spurred by my involvement in what was then called the Canadian Jewish Historical Society. I joined the Society at the invitation of Abraham Arnold, a journalist, writer, and activist in Canadian Jewish life. On a trip to Montréal, he reached out to me, among others, to support the Canadian Jewish Historical Society and its newly launched journal, *Canadian Jewish Studies*. I realized the value of the journal, and of the Society that sponsored it and quickly signed on. In 1994, I became the book review Editor of *Canadian Jewish Studies*, and in the same year, I became President of the Society. During my presidency (1994–2000), the Society changed its name to the Association for Canadian Jewish Studies, thus signalling the end of the dominance of non-academic research in the field and the beginning of the dominance of academics. In 2013, the Association for Canadian Jewish Studies honoured me with its Louis Rosenberg Canadian Jewish Studies Distinguished Service Award.

Another institutional framework with which I was involved was the Institute for Canadian Jewish Studies at Concordia University. The Institute began in the 1990s, getting its start from an initiative of the Canadian government's Multiculturalism program to give seed funding for university chairs in Canadian Ethnic Studies. It had been decided that in the case of the Chair in Canadian Jewish Studies, the grant would be divided between Concordia and York universities. At this point, I was Chair of Concordia University's Department of Religion, and so became one of the leaders in getting the Concordia chair and its associated Institute for Canadian Jewish Studies established. This task also necessitated my close collaboration with Professor Michael Brown, the point man from York University, which ultimately resulted in a collaborative volume with him and Daniel Elazar on the constitutional documents of Canadian Jewry.¹³ Later, I succeeded the initial holder of the Concordia Chair, Professor Norman Ravvin, and directed the Institute from 2012–2020.

Thus, by the mid-1990s, I had begun publishing about areas of Canadian Jewish life beyond those pertaining to Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg. I began by investigating the proximate area of Jews and Judaism in Montréal and Québec, particularly with respect to rabbis and communal workers, and came gradually to examine Canada-wide issues, including a survey of field of Canadian Jewish studies as a whole.¹⁴

By 2013, I felt confident enough with respect to issues related to Canadian Jewry as a whole to edit a volume of essays that attempted to examine the totality of Canadian Jewish studies,¹⁵ and, in 2015, to publish a book on antisemitism in Canada.¹⁶ The latter book had been commissioned by Wilfrid Laurier University Press, which had published in 1992 a highly successful book of essays on antisemitism in Canada edited by Alan Davies.¹⁷ The Press initially gave me the choice of editing a similar collection of essays or to write my own monograph, and I chose the latter course. My choice to write *A History of Antisemitism in Canada* on my own was the product of my un-

derstanding that whereas there were a number of scholarly publications brilliantly illuminating portions of the story of antisemitism in Canada, no continuous narrative history of antisemitism in Canada then existed. It is a testament to my development as a scholar of Canadian Jewish studies over three decades that I felt able to tackle this significant and important subject.

It is interesting to speculate that if I had received a teaching position at an American university in 1979, instead of at Concordia, and had never come to live in Canada, I would most likely not have approached the field of Canadian Jewish studies as even a minor scholarly interest. However, I did come to Canada, prepared both linguistically and intellectually to appreciate the value of the study of Jews and Judaism in Canada. An elegant Latin phrase may apply in this case: *habent sua fata libelli* [books have their destiny]. In Yiddish, there is a word that certainly applies: *bashert* [destined].

1

On my Hebrew education, see my "Girsa de-Yankuta, or Hebrew in the Afternoon: a Memoir of the Prozdor in Worcester" forthcoming in Arthur Green, Michael Fishbane and Jonathan Sarna, eds., *Hiddushim: Celebrating Hebrew College's Centennial*.

2

On my relationship with Professor Hertzberg, see my "Arthur Hertzberg: teacher, mentor, leader" *Canadian Jewish News* September 13, 2012, B29-30.

3

Ira Robinson, ed., *Cyrus Adler: Selected Letters* (Philadelphia and New York, Jewish Publication Society and Jewish Theological Seminary, 1985), two volumes.

4

See Jeffrey Gurock, *Conversations with Colleagues: On Becoming an American Jewish Historian* (Boston, Academic Studies Press, 2018).

5

Ira Robinson, Pierre Anctil, and Mervin Butovsky, eds., *An Everyday Miracle: Yiddish Culture in Montreal* (editor), (Montreal, Véhicule Press, 1990). Ira Robinson and Mervin Butovsky, eds., *Renewing Our Days: Montreal Jews in the Twentieth Century* (Montreal, Véhicule Press, 1995).

6

Pierre Anctil and I were co-editors, along with Gérard Bouchard, of *Juifs et Canadiens Français dans la société Québécoise* (Sillery, Septentrion, 2000). Cf. also Pierre Anctil and Ira Robinson, *Les Communautés juives de Montréal: histoire et enjeux contemporains* (Sillery, QC, Septentrion, 2010); we were also guest editors of "L'Antisémitisme au Québec" a special issue of *Globe : Revue Internationale d'Études Québécoises* volume 18 numéro 1 (2015); we were co-editors as well of *Les Juifs hassidiques de Montréal* (Montréal, Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2019).

7

Ira Robinson, "Ninety-Nine Meetings: The Jewish Public Library of Montreal in its First Century" *Canadian Jewish Studies* 22 (2014), 16-31; Ira Robinson, Rivka Augenfeld, and Karen Biskin, eds., *The Future of the Past: the Jewish Public Library of Montreal, 1914-2014* (Montreal, Concordia University Institute for Canadian Jewish Studies, 2015).

8

Brad Sabin Hill, ed., *Incunabula, Hebraica & Judaica* (Ottawa, National Library of Canada, 1981), 31. My review of this catalogue appeared in *Studies in Religion* 11 (1982), 464-5.

9

See in particular my *Moses Cordovero's Introduction to Kabbala: An Annotated Translation of His Or Ne'Erav* (Ktav/Yeshiva University Press, 1994).

10

My scholarship in American Jewish studies, which includes a number of articles on the career of Cyrus Adler, is collected in my book, *Translating a Tradition: Studies in American Jewish History* (Boston, Academic Studies Press, 2008).

11

"A Letter from the Sabbath Queen: Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg Addresses Montreal Jewry" *An Everyday Miracle : Yiddish Culture in Montreal* (Montreal, Véhicule Press, 1990). 101-114; "The Kosher Meat War and the Jewish Community Council of Montreal, 1922-1925" *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 22 (2) (1990), 41-53.

12

Ira Robinson, *Rabbis and Their Community: Studies in the Immigrant Orthodox Rabbinate in Montreal, 1896-1930*. (Calgary, University of Calgary Press, 2007); *idem.*, *A Kabbalist in Montreal The Life and Times of Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg* (New York, Touro University Press, 2021).

13

Daniel Elazar, Michael Brown and Ira Robinson, eds., *Not Written in Stone: Canadian Jews, Constitutions and Constitutionalism in Canada* (Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 2003).

14

Ira Robinson, "The Field of Canadian Jewish Studies and Its Importance for the Jewish Community of Canada" *Jewish Political Studies Review* 21:3-4 (Fall, 2009), 75-86.

15

Ira Robinson, ed., *Canada's Jews in Time, Space, and Spirit* (Boston, Academic Studies Press, 2013).

16

Ira Robinson, *A History of Antisemitism in Canada* (Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015).

17

Alan Davies, *Antisemitism in Canada: History and Interpretation* (Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992).