

Reflections / Réflexions

Introduction from the associate editor, Amir Lavie

The editorial team is pleased to feature a text by the late Gerald Tulchinsky in this volume's *Reflections* section. This instalment, titled "In Praise of History and Historians" consists of the draft speech that Tulchinsky was scheduled to deliver for the 2018 Rosen Lecture in Jewish Studies at Queen's University. Readers will notice the draft is not complete: some topics are only mentioned in general bullet points and there are some repetitions that perhaps would have been omitted in additional rounds of edits. Unlike the previous *Reflections* we've published in this section, Tulchinsky's text was not written specifically for it. Nevertheless, immediately upon receiving this text from Professor Tulchinsky's family we felt it would be a perfect fit. The topic of the lecture, the text's contemplative spirit, and most of all, the author's emphasis on historical research as a cross-generational conversation, evolving according to new contexts and research interests, made it an ideal instalment of this section. Especially inspiring is the final part of the text in which Tulchinsky articulated his conviction that the historian's task and professional commitment is a moral obligation that mirrors the timeless Talmudic teaching: "You are not obligated to finish the work, but you are not free to desist from it" (*Pirkei Avot*, 2:21). The ethical and communal imperatives that clearly shaped Tulchinsky's scholarly practice, we believe, helps explain why his scholarship became, and remains, a corner stone in the field of Canadian Jewish studies. We are thankful to Professor Tulchinsky's family for allowing us to share this text with our readers.

Introduction from the family

Our beloved father, Gerald, of blessed memory, never stopped working. On the day he died, the dining room table in our parents' home was papered with his writings and research for a book he was planning on the history of the garment industry in Canada. Slowing down as he was from coping with chronic illness, he persevered in his thoughtful and serious way with the task at hand—History.

Our father was planning to deliver the following lecture, *In Praise of History and Historians*, as part of the Rosen Lecture in Jewish Studies at Queen's University in February 2018, just two months after his passing. In it, Gerald outlines the formidable job of historians to always be mindful of context when examining historical events, and to be open to new research and discoveries. We know that it would have been delivered with his infectious enthusiasm, love for his chosen field, and peppered with his little jokes.

The lecture is published here as it was written, to be delivered as an address, and we, his children, are grateful to David Koffman and Amir Lavie at *Canadian Jewish Studies/Études juives canadiennes* for maintaining its original integrity and intent.

Laura and Ellen Tulchinsky. And Steve Tulchinsky, z"l.

In Praise of History and Historians

Gerald Tulchinsky

The tasks of the historian are formidable and I have always felt honoured to be a member of this demanding profession which seems to me to call for special qualities of judgement, imagination, and application and, in the classroom, and in the university, an ability to convey to students curiosity and excitement that accompanies the investigation and understanding of the past.

I have strived to be an historian since as a mere youth I was fascinated by the photos of the Six Nations Indigenous people I lived near to in my home town of Brantford. In this city's small museum next to the children's library I frequented so often, there were artifacts and photos of these Iroquois people; the Six Nations of the Grand River: the OnSenecas, Cayugas, Oneidas, Onondagas, Mohawks and Tuscaroras proudly displaying their headdresses, tomahawks, and lacrosse sticks. I wish now that I had made greater efforts to get to know them and their descendants, some of whom attended my own school and waited unsmiling after class for the buses that would take them back to the Reservation and homes only a few miles away. They didn't smile. On hikes around the local countryside, my brother and I visited the Mohawk chapel with its simple but beautiful Queen Anne communion silver proudly displayed. In those years, my mother regularly attended the Six Nations annual pageants on the Reservation at Oshwekan and regularly visited the home of poetess Pauline Johnson, a proud Mohawk. My father's lawyer was also a Mohawk.

Thus, I am honoured and proud to be here as an historian and as a veteran teacher at this university, and previously at Loyola College in Montreal and at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. And as a former student at the University of Toronto and McGill University where I encountered superb teachers and thesis supervisors like CB Macpherson, Maurice Careless, and John Cooper.

And I am thankful to the lecture committee of Jewish Studies to have been selected as this year's honouree in a series which stretches back illustriously over many years. What I learned in studies under many teachers, including distinguished colleagues here at Queen's, and from many wonderful students, like Dan Woolf and Duncan McDowall who in conversation and in print enlarged and deepened my understanding of history over many years, is that history is a moving target. History is a moving target. I have learned that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible to get it right. In historical studies, there is no such thing as a perfectly exact, precise, correct version of the past or of any segment of it. The object of our searches keeps retreating and metamorphosing even while we investigate. We are looking into a kaleidoscope and with a tiny twist the picture changes, sometimes completely.

Let us look at a specific historical happening which most of us believe we are at least partially familiar with, the HOLOCAUST. We know what happened, don't we?

Well, do we? As I tried to explain to the students I taught in classes on the Holocaust here at Queen's over many years, we have a mounting accumulation of increasingly impressive research that appears frequently which provides in sum a much more complex and nuanced picture of the tragedy than heretofore. We have learned from historians who, with astonishing and relentless diligence, have uncovered remarkably challenging information and insights from documents newly available in archives only in recent years, like those in the former Soviet Union, and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. And many historians have systematically, though cautiously, exploited the vast reservoir of testimony from eye witnesses.

For example, we have learned from historian Jan Grabowski of the enormously complex problems facing both the hidden Jews and those who sequestered them in Poland, and of the transformations in the relationships between them and the relentlessness of the pursuit by Germans and Poles, much of this from newly available documents and testimonies recorded close to the events as they unfolded. The context of Poland during the Second World War emerges from the works of these young historians, many of them at Polish universities, not just as a Jewish story, as disastrous as it was, but also a Polish narrative, that of a conquered nation in terrible travail. While looking for hidden Jews, the historian uncovers a broad picture of complexity, amidst terror and murder in conquered Poland.

In other words, context is the essential element in historical explanation. It is everything! Or should be to the historian. "It is the ethical imperative. It is the key methodological tool," to quote the eminent historian, R. G. Evans. History is not just my story; it is his story too and hers, and theirs. And unless we as historians get that clear, we've missed out and so, tragically, do the readers of our written work, equally, so do our students.

Without understanding our subject's context we are working on the head of a pin. This point comes through to historians of Canada's Jewish Holocaust experience who have now to reconsider and insightfully re-evaluate the meaning of evidence newly assessed on the questions surrounding the admission of Jewish refugees to Canada during the 1930's and 1940's. Do we get a full understanding of the context of all the issues involved from the famous book published in 1983, *None Is Too Many*, by Irving Abella and Harold Troper? Let's be careful here. As recent research has shown, Canada in those years was the scene of virulent racial prejudice that besides Jews excluded blacks, and numerous other so-called "undesirables," like Italians, Asians, Slavs, and others, from full equality in Canadian civil society and severely limited immigration to white persons and groups specifically committed to agricul-

tural pursuits. Indigenous peoples were treated with the utmost contempt; I saw it.

What I'm saying is that indeed there was plenty of antisemitism around, yes, and there still is, but there existed racism also. I grew up in Brantford, a multiracial industrial city in south-western Ontario where I heard the foulest of epithets directed at all of these immigrant groups, including Englishmen, and the Indigenous peoples. What I think historians need to understand is that a nation in mourning, as Canada was in the 1920's and 1930's, over its crippling military losses during the First World War (some 67,000 killed and 120,000 severely wounded) beset by a devastating economic depression (the price of wheat, one of Canada's major exports, dropped to 32 cents a bushel by 1932) riven by the great French/English divide, in the midst of a new war, and led by an extremely cautious prime minister, probably could not have done much better in rescuing Jewish refugees.

And now, here's a real corker regarding Canada and the Holocaust. According to recent highly impressive research, Abella and Troper got their numbers wrong. They were using figures for Jewish immigration that were incorrect. This new research shows that Jewish immigration was actually significantly higher than they reported. Jewish immigration to Canada between 1933 and 1945 was more than double the figure given in *None is Too Many*. How's that for historical revisionism? AND Jews constitute nearly the largest ethnic component of the total, AND was a higher percentage of total immigration into the country than any other group. Plus,—and this will rock your boat I'm sure—the villain, Frederic Charles Blair, the famous director of immigration, made a few exceptions. Other research in a brilliant PhD thesis at the University of Waterloo proves that the Canadian Jewish community was not unresponsive to the refugee crisis.

As well, the distinguished historian, Pierre Anctil, has recently taken a carving knife to the assertions that French Canada was riven by such virulent antisemitism that it prevented the King government, which was in power between 1935 and 1948, from admitting more Jews. Antisemitism was present in Quebec, yes, but not everywhere in French Canada. He points to subtleties, nuances, and class differences.

And if we are considering contexts, as we must, the Canadian government said or did virtually nothing about the horrendous famine disaster that destroyed the lives of millions of people in the Soviet Union in the early 1920s and in Ukraine during the early 1930s. Nor was it willing to condemn Italy for the depredations its army committed in Ethiopia in 1935, while Canada's representative on the League of Nations, when urged to respond to the Ethiopian crisis declared: "We live in a fireproof house far from "inflammable materials."

And we must understand that the full catastrophic dimensions of the Holocaust were not fully understood as the planned mass murder of Jews until the end of the war. Turning to countries like France, the whole background to that country's fascist/collaborationist regime at Vichy and its treatment of Jews needs to be studied anew, as was done in part by Queen's own John Sherwood some years ago, and in the context of transformations in French politics and culture since the Revolution, and for more of these among other works. Tim Smith provides much enlightenment on these matters. The research goes on. As one historian said to a beautiful woman he was hoping to impress who asked what was the result of the French Revolution, "it is too early to tell, my dear."

But that's my point. We don't know the answers to that particular question after more than two hundred years. Seriously! As to precisely why it happened when it did in certain areas of France and less emphatically in others. Cities, populations, bourgeoisies, and regions embraced the ideals differently. Historians have been trying to explain the differences, the subtleties, the problems, the nuances for years—it's a whole industry—and the search is bound to go on and on. But, does the question and sub-questions about the Revolution tie in with the emergence of virulent antisemitism and mid-nineteenth century France and the Dreyfus Affair in the 1890s? Nineteenth century antisemitism in France, some historians think, was worse than contemporary Germany. So why was Germany the progenitor of the mass murder we call the Holocaust there and not in France? Historians are now contextualizing the Holocaust within the mass murders, like the Armenian genocide of 1915, which claimed at least one and a half million lives, a generation before the German assault on Jews in the 1940s, as well as other mass murders in what one historian calls the "rimlands" of eastern and southern Europe.

Holocaust historians recognize that not only France, and its history of collaboration, but also Holland had its own sad Holocaust history. From assiduous Dutch historians we learn only recently that at the concentration camp of Westerbork the ruling Germans—Austrians really dominated—set up elaborate and generally effective measures of deception before Dutch Jews who were interned there were deported to Auschwitz. We knew this about Thereisinstadt in Czechoslovakia concerning which there is a most revealing new book, a significant revision of an older work, but exploiting newly available documentation. Now we know more about the German implementation of the most clever of deceptions. And those brave Dutchmen who hid Jews, many little girls, were far more worried about Dutch collaborators than they were about German authorities. The context here upon examination reveals widespread Dutch compliance. Why?

Much of the historical discussion has been about the supposed uniqueness of the Holocaust resting on the question of "intentionality." Yes, there were mass murders

in the past, but is the Holocaust unique because the Germans intended to wipe out all Jews, entirely, completely and therefore unique. Well, historians are trying to find out and the Dutch case I've cited suggest that the answer is YES. And all other evidence is equally influential.

The premier of Hungary not long ago said that his country should have done more to protect Jews during the Second World War rather than persecute them, as they did so mercilessly and in so deadly a fashion, driving many to drown in the Danube and some half million to be gassed at Auschwitz. The astonishing confession obviously ties in, historian Richard Evans reminds us, with issues of national identity and historical context. What was Hungary then, if not a fascist state in full collaboration with Germany and its policy of exterminating Jews who professed to be true and loyal Hungarians, some of them even converting to Christianity. And what was France with its Vichy-based government? Will historians be debating that too? It will be interesting to see if that gets included in the assessment of the results of the French Revolution and whether or not that historian can impress the woman.

History is becoming, it always has been a moving target, and now a battleground. But seriously, is the Holocaust of European Jews any different from the mass murder of Gypsies? And the answer from Evans, ever the wary historian, is a resounding and unequivocal YES. "It was in many ways different." But let's have a closer look at the evidence. Postmodernism with its new perspectives doesn't work for Evans.

Much of the historical discussion has been about the supposed uniqueness of the Holocaust resting on the question of "intentionality." Yes, we know there were mass murders in the past, but the Holocaust was unique because the Germans well before 1941 intended to wipe out all Jews, entirely, completely, and was therefore unique. Well, the historians are trying to find out and the Dutch case I've cited suggests that the answer is YES. And all other evidence is equally influential. Did you know that in 1942 a German agency put out for internal consumption a book—I have seen it—listing all Jewish communities in the United States and Canada with up-to-date figures on each city's Jewish population, including Toronto's? Why? Why would the German authorities do this if they were not planning ahead? And new research reveals that the Madagascar plan to move all Jews to that island where they would die off was more serious than previously thought. The intentionality theory wins this time! But does it really? Let us push further.

Holocaust research and debate on intentionality and functionality questions continues apace. A new book on what happened at Theresienstadt, the German concentration camp near Prague, shows up the intentionality quite well. Jews were duped until the last two hours into believing they might be spared by a series of clever tricks employed to secure their compliance to orders in the camp. A new book on

the Holocaust contends that the “final solution,” the words employed to describe the destruction of the Jews, was not decided upon any earlier than the spring of 1941. Meanwhile, other historians still hold to the intentionality approach, that is, that the Holocaust was implicit from the Nazi seizure of power in 1933. How so? Some historians advise us just to look at Martin Luther’s writings on Jews and through Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, and some of his speeches.

Turning now to my own recent research and writing on Canadian Jewish history, I have focused on the economic pursuits and specifically the clothing industry, what many laughingly call the “shmatta trade.” That word, which means dirty old rag, is usually spoken with a knowing smirk, or associated dark humour. But I must tell you that the reference to dirty rags hurts me very much because my mother, at the age of eight with her little fingers helped her mother sew up the ends of socks that were brought out in bundles by a contractor to their hardscrabble farm near Goderich. To help the faltering family economy, she worked on socks, not filthy old rags, not shmattas.

The clothing trades in all their complexity constituted the great Jewish *métier* up to a generation or so ago. It has passed. But, in my opinion the clothing trades shaped Jewish economy, social change and cultural life in profound ways. In it thousands of Canada’s Jews were employed, men, women, and children almost at starvation wages and the women subjected to the most vile sexual harassment. So please, don’t talk to me about shmattas!

By the way, do you know the difference between a Jewish clothing manufacturer or worker and a psychiatrist? One generation!

But seriously, what historians think they have found is that in the process of migration from Eastern Europe to North America huge numbers of Jews became proletarianized in the burgeoning clothing industry as operators, pressers, etc. But other historians have different perspectives. And what these historians have pointed out is that this so-called proletarianization process began well before migration set in, in Poland particularly.

Studies of pre-war Warsaw and Lodz bear this out. And what does this mean for the evolution of radical ideas among the immigrants, some of whom were hugely influential in the North American labour movements. Well, there were also splits and almost open warfare between the factions, the effects of which lasted for years, we are now finding out from wonderful new books. The target moves from sewing machines and pressing irons to ideas and philosophy. The target moves. The context has changed.

The clothing industry amongst numerous other challenges, like testy labour relations and marketing, was beset by other serious perplexities. We have known for years about many of these difficulties and I won't repeat them here, though I will discuss them in a book I am now writing and hope to finish soon. But what I did learn during recent research is that insurance companies refused to issue coverage to clothing factories that did NOT lock their exit door and windows. Why? Locks keep thieves OUT. But locks also kept IN anyone needing to use the exits in case, say of fire. And such was the case on January 20, 1950. Shortly after one o'clock in the afternoon at a firm called Phillips Dress located at 447 Richmond Street in Toronto. The cost here was nine lives, workers who died at the scene or a day later in hospital of burns and smoke inhalation. Nine people, some of them Holocaust survivors who tried to escape but were locked in. We are shifting from labour to corporate Canada, a whole new line of inquiry.

And what I am also learning through this new research is that much about the intensity of commitment that workers and their union leaders had towards improving on their dire conditions. I knew about this as we all do, of course, but I learned just recently of a specific example of the dedication to the workers' cause. Strikes were bitter and sometimes violent. A lot was at stake. In June 1953 Lowies Rosen and two other members of the Toronto local of the ILGWU, the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, were sentenced to jail terms, Rosen for one year for fighting back physically against goon squads supporting scab labour during a bitter dispute at a Toronto clothing factory. Goon squads used lead pipes wrapped in newspapers and Rosen's boys did the same, maybe from a Kingston supplier. But the goons went home to New York, possibly missing a few teeth, and Rosen went to jail for a year with all that implied.

There are some big themes here, the main ones, of course, concerning the nature of entrepreneurship in the clothing industry and the treatment of workers, and the willingness of the Lowies Rosen to put his life on the line to protect workers' rights. The utter inhumanity of the insurance companies at the time, I find unspeakably ugly. We need another book and I am writing it. What do we need to know? For lessons?

Say of the Holocaust. What does the Holocaust mean? Does it have a meaning? Does it teach us something? What? Michael Marrus in a brilliant new book has examined this perplexing question.

- If you do this, then that
 - o if only this then that

What are the lessons of the Russian Revolution?

- if not Lenin or Trotsky, then no Revolution?
- but what about other revolutionaries like Stalin?

- what did the Revolution bring?

In Vassili Schedrin's work we find some of the answers, but perhaps not all.

We need to know because we're curious about these and so many other matters and because to many in the human community it's important to know how we got to where we are now. Why? Because we are thinking human beings. We have interests. We have minds that roam. We ask questions. Cogito ergo sum.

Richard Evans stated in a *Times Literary Supplement* review that "history has always been contested terrain . . . [We have an] unquenchable thirst for conflict and debate that most historians possess." And history is a moving target and it is a battleground. The debate on Winston Churchill still continues. For example, brilliant new books now challenge older assertions about Churchill's culpability in the First World War's Dardanelles affair. And this investigation morphs into tough questions about the Second World War because amongst other questions, there is one pressing one about Churchill's and Roosevelt's response to the news about the mass murder of Jews.

So, the next time you want to know something about the past, first talk to your nearest historian. Whatever you do, DON'T go to a sociologist. They know nothing but pontificate and dupe others. DON'T go near an economist. They are the geniuses who gave us "trickle down economics." STAY AWAY from the School of Business. Even their own students hold them in contempt. Avoid all geographers. They don't know north from south. AVOID AT ALL COSTS lawyers. They are incredibly pompous.

I hope you realize that I am jesting here. I am simply trying to summon my historian colleagues to their duty and remind you, the consumers of historical knowledge, of where you can best seek it, all the while remembering that we are in pursuit of targets that move while we are trying to follow the ethical imperative of understanding that context is everything.

So, RUN! Don't walk, to your nearest historian. She or he will give you guidance. What more do you need? Seriously, talk to a historian like Donald Akenson, Paul Christianson, Ian McKay, Rebecca Manley, or Jim Stayer. They probably won't be able to give you ALL the answers to even the most serious questions about the Second World War in Russia, the identity of Ireland, the meaning of the seventeenth century English religious transformations, Canadian cultural change, or the German Protestant Reformation. But with their guidance you'll be venturing on a very deep, mind-expanding journey. Sit with them and learn. Let them be your Rabbis. And you'll have such fun along the way while you learn about the contexts of your inquiry.

And to the historians, absent and present, I have only modestly and humbly to advise critical inquiry, caution, deep thought, patience, diligence, and hard work. WORK! WORK! Stop hiding behind your tenure and work.

The Talmud put the mandate this way: “You are not obliged to finish the work, but you are not free to desist from it.” And a little further the Talmud states: “The work is hard, the labourers are sluggish and the hour is late. But the reward is great—and the master of the house is waiting.”

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Richard Evans, “Unending history: The case against Shlomo Sand’s view that a discipline is in terminal decline,” *Times Literary Review*, June 23 2017, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/against-shlomo-sand/>