

Natalia Khanenko-Friesen

***No Better Home? A Ukrainian Canadian Response***

As a cultural anthropologist and scholar of diaspora studies with long-term professional interest in Ukrainian Canadian culture, I was delighted to be invited to comment on the value of *No Better Home?* The book thoughtfully and authoritatively untangles factual and interpretive layers of complexity, tensions, junctures, disjunctures, and multivocality of the Jewish Canadian experience. In doing so, the book allows one to develop a much better understanding of Canada as a home for Jewish communities and an appreciation of Jewish Canadian experiences. I am sure other readers will appreciate this impressive dissection of history that retraces the evolution of the Jewish presence in Canada from the early 1700s to recent times.

The book's key messages are also important intellectual contributions to a number of scholarly fields including global Jewish history, Canadian history, immigration and transnational studies, diaspora studies, language studies, and more. Its essays shed much light on life and choices Jewish Canadians made and continue making to maintain themselves as viable communities. Importantly, these essays overall illuminate the essence of Canada and Canadian culture, making this publication a valuable read for anyone interested in how Canada is lived and experienced from within.

Readers expecting to hear that Jewish Canadians have long been a united community will be surprised to learn how multivocal, linguistically, culturally, and religiously diverse various subgroups of Jewish Canadians have been. First, ancient and modern dispersals, regulated- and state-sanctioned discrimination across various hosting lands, and the removal from the ancient homelands being so far in the past have dictated for the Jewish communities around the world different strategies of self-maintenance. This long and meandering global history led to the formation of distinct versions of Jewishness. When Jewish immigrants encountered Canada, with its own evolution and formation of the Canadian society as a nation, a unique path towards a new home began to shape.

Second, unlike most ethnic communities that might have enjoyed a clear and strong connection to an easily identifiable ethnic homeland, Jewish diasporic communities did not have a designated homeland of their own until the mid-twentieth century. As such, for millennia Jewish identity had to sustain itself on the basis of so many important pillars other than a shared ethnic language, shared ethnic homeland, and shared religious tradition. Third, this complex evolution of Jewishness demands novel approaches to explaining the foundations of Canadian Jewish identity, and many insightful perspectives are advanced in this publication in this respect. Thus, a Montrealer, Lois Dubin, inspired by the idea of a "tripartite identity" of early twentieth-century Habsburg Jewish people—they are politically Habsburg; culturally and linguistically German; and ethnically Jewish—considers herself politically Canadian (and federalist), linguistically English, and ethnically Jewish. Potentially not all Jewish Canadians follow this breakdown describing their Jewish and Canadian positionalities. But the notion of tripartite identity can serve many as a useful tool to explain

the layers of one identity. Fourth, to fully understand and appreciate Canadian Jewishness one also needs to examine the Canadian part of the hyphen. David Weinfeld takes this on, singling out one important aspect of Canadian culture that in his opinion explains the robust Jewish life in Canada. Comparing Canada to the United States, Weinfeld calls Canadian culture thin which, paradoxically, allowed the Jewish culture to grow “thick” and become vibrant, diverse, and self-sustained across many generations in Canada.

Apart from appreciating the intellectual rigour of the volume, reading this fascinating collection also offered me a stimulating experience of stepping into an unfamiliar cultural diasporic space of Jewishness in Canada with its contested historical memoryscape and continuous identity renegotiations. Intriguingly, though, delving into the book’s subject matter was also akin to intellectual homecoming, so familiar the book’s intentions are to a Ukrainian Canadian scholar who has been observing the evolution of Ukrainian identity in Canada for some time.

Professional and personal lifepaths of my own equipped me with the lenses through which I engaged with the book. A young Kyivite, I arrived in Canada in the early 1990s to pursue my academic studies, and eventually settled on, and fell in love with, the Canadian prairies, though my academic life in North America had also unfolded in meaningful ways at some point in Toronto and Cambridge, Massachusetts. Like many authors of the book, I found myself on numerous occasions explaining my own Ukrainianness to myself and others, both inside and outside of the Ukrainian community. I have been examining and commenting on the complexities of Canada’s Ukrainian experience, comparing it to other Ukrainian diasporic settings, the homeland, Canada’s mainstream and other ethnic communities and their practices and representations.

My childhood and youth in Soviet Ukraine did not intersect much with Jewish culture, though I cherished my friendships with my Jewish friends and was immersed in the popular culture of the day enough to understand the unique place Jewishness occupied in the local lore. Vernacular references to Jewishness on one end loudly signalled otherness and yet, simultaneously, pointed to something of one’s own, something deeply familiar, intimate, and personal. In times of my youth, in my milieu back in Ukraine, Jewish culture and traditions were not well known or understood, but nonetheless, Jewish spaces, sounds, and tastes felt like an integral part of Ukrainian cultural domain. Various Jewish communities and Ukrainians lived side by side on the territory of contemporary Ukraine over the course of a thousand years, both as minorities and subjects of medieval states, then large empires of Habsburg Austro-Hungary and Tsarist Russia and later a totalitarian state of the Soviet Union. Jewish families were next-door neighbours to Ukrainians in their Orthodox or Greek-Catholic or later Soviet or post-Soviet communities. Yet, given their different statuses and positions in homeland societies, as well as differing memories

of past conflicts that have not been fully reconciled, effectively, in Canada the two groups have never truly re-engaged with each other on the communal level. Many members of these two communities continued holding on to their differing understandings of their complex shared history in Europe, despite scholars in both fields, Ukrainian studies and Jewish studies, periodically engaging in the dialogue about the virtues and misfortunes of Jewish-Ukrainian encounters over the course of history.

While Jewish arrivals to Canada date back to the 1700s, Ukrainians began actively arriving in Canada after 1891. In Canada, neither group gravitated to the other, and did not reconnect in ways, say, the Mennonites and Ukrainians did, or Poles and Ukrainians did. Their collective energies and foci were redirected towards their own groups' immediate goals and tasks of community building and language and culture maintenance, again in various ways and with various purposes. Equally the two groups also faced and dealt with the pressures of political, ideological, and religious factionalism within their own ranks. In both cases, though, these goals were pursued in the context of continued mainstream Canada's prejudice, racism, and discrimination that both groups have experienced throughout their Canadian history. Several decades after their settlement in Canada, by the time the policy of multiculturalism was adopted in 1971, Ukrainians had successfully transitioned from being seen as non-white stalwart garlic-smelling cultural Eastern European others into acceptable citizens of Canada and among its celebrated "nation builders." On the other hand, and at the same time, institutional racism (i.e. blocking Jewish immigration to Canada), antisemitism, and vernacular manifestations of cultural intolerance towards the Jewish people linger in Canada, the latter having been so poignantly illustrated by Jack Kugelmass in his contribution to this volume.

Reading the book, I could not avoid comparing Jewish and Ukrainian understandings of Canada as home. The very question whether Canada is a good, or better, home for the immigrant people, I believe, was hardly on the radar of the Ukrainian Canadians who univocally would have given a positive answer to this question if it would have been asked of them. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that Ukrainian dispersal has roots in more recent, modern times and in broad strokes, was more or less unidirectional, from home villages to a place of new settlement, with Ukrainians taking root in countries and regions they had come to. The Jewish people on the other hand have been displaced from their original and interim homelands multiple times throughout millennia. Therefore, asking the question that begs comparison—of not just a good home but a better home—makes more historic sense in Jewish diasporic settings.

That Ukrainians have not seriously considered the question whether "Canada is better home" probably also has something to do with the fact that the first and until now most populous Ukrainian immigration wave to Canada (1891-1914) of farm-land-focused immigrants immediately received access to much desired Canadian

soil. Most of the 170,000 Ukrainians predominantly from the Habsburg Empire arrived in Western Canada to take homesteads, and thus they partook in active colonization of Canada's western frontier. The emerging Ukrainian community embraced the national discourse of the day of empty prairies and pristine lands that needed to be broken, to eventually build on such discursive pillars a powerful narrative of their own ethnic origin as pioneer settlers, developers of western Canadian agriculture, and thus builders of the Canadian nation. Canada offered so many opportunities to Ukrainian families that, despite initial prejudice and persecution, to many local family history writers, Canada was an even better homeland than earlier versions run by imperial or totalitarian rulers. This pride sustained the Ukrainian Canadians throughout many decades and very much informed their leaders' actions in the 1960s, when Paul Yuzyk called Canadian politicians to support the adoption of the official policy of multiculturalism. History, though, offers some lessons and a perspective on what Ukrainians in Canada may see as Ukrainian invention. Jeffrey Veidlinger's article contextualizes this Ukrainian drive towards a more just Canada in Jewish-Ukrainian political cooperation in the past, in the turbulent and shifting times of the early twentieth century and in the Jewish social advocacy at the time. Veidlinger reminds us that it was Jewish political participation and activism that introduced the idea of "national autonomy" in the Ukrainian nation building project of early twentieth-century Ukraine. Back then, "Jews were conscious of securing rights as a minority group within the largely binational (Russian and Ukrainian) state," thus providing the newly created Ukrainian government of 1917 with the novel multicultural and civil template for the future Ukrainian state.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the heightened focus on Canada as a home is also dictated by key developments in historic homelands of both communities, at least in the twentieth century. Until 1948, in the case of the Jewish community, and until 1991, in the case of the Ukrainian community, both ethnic groups had been building their communal lives in Canada without their own homelands as political agents and subjects on the global stage. In the case of Ukrainians in Canada, most of whom in the twentieth century either rejected or doubted the legitimacy of Soviet rule in what was then Soviet Ukraine, Canada was true home, with Ukraine remaining solidly in the landscape of longing and imagination. This long-term absence from a political map, and long-term inaccessibility to one's homeland, certainly channelled personal and communal agencies as well as political and intellectual energy towards realignment with ethnic peers elsewhere in the world. Both Jewish Canadians and Ukrainian Canadians sought out and looked up to their ethnic and culture peers in the United States, though as I learned from this volume, there have been differences in vectors of fascination and orientation and in how the two Canadian minorities connected with their US-based peers.

Measuring the successes in making a host land a home has been oftentimes done by Canadian Jews in comparison to how their Jewish peers and cousins fared in the US. Lois Dubin states that “for the Montreal Jew, thinking about Canada as a home meant simultaneous awareness of the local Jewish community, the Protestant English-speaking sector of Montreal, the Catholic majority of Montreal and Quebec, as well as the entire country of Canada—and all of them embedded in the larger North American continent, which means of course the United States.”<sup>2</sup> A similar cross-border curiosity and cross-referencing is present in the psyche of the Ukrainian Canadians and Ukrainian Americans. Though writing from the prairies—the space imagined by the Ukrainian Canadians as a birthplace of Canada’s own Ukrainian history and culture—and commuting between the US Eastern Seaboard and Canada’s west made me fully aware of American Ukrainians’ appreciation of Ukrainian-Canadian successes in self-mobilization, community building, and transnational diasporic engagements. In pre-war times, and now, with Russian troops ravaging Ukraine, diasporic mobilization of both is profound and comparable.

Weinfeld, in his postscript, “Thin Canadian Culture, Thick Jewish Life,” contemplates how Canada’s Jewish communities benefited from the thinness of Canadian culture. Weinfeld embraces this juxtaposition of thick/thin in reference to a 2015 exchange between Justin Trudeau and a journalist interviewing him but rephrases it in a more conceptual way. Canadian culture, being thin enough, allowed Jewish people to think about themselves as Jewish first, and Canadians second. “Where Jewish culture feels thick, durable, and substantive, Canadian culture feels shallow, flimsy, and unformed. Yet, that is Canadian culture’s greatest strength. By having a thin culture, Canada allows other cultures to feel at home.”<sup>3</sup>

This powerful assertion wraps up the discussions in this volume. Reflecting on the key question that the volume addresses, whether Canada is a “better home” for the Jewish people, the contributors’ collective message implies that Jewish people were able to achieve a sense of belonging in this country. But together, contributions to the volume left me with the feeling that the phrase “sense of belonging” should not be automatically signal belonging to Canada. In so many circumstances discussed by the authors, the sense of belonging was oftentimes most projected onto the group itself. For Jews in many instances, the plains of Canadian culture have been too thin to serve as a foundation for their Canadianness.

As a Ukrainian Canadian scholar, also representing institutional and professional networks of this field, the book offered me many intriguing details about Jewish life in Canada, making me want to go further on my journey through the thick diasporic space of Canadian Jewishness. I have been intrigued by the parallels and differences in how Jewish and Ukrainian Canadians pursued their belonging to Canada in their respective ethnic solitudes. It is not difficult to imagine that if Jewish-Ukrainian dialogue in Canada has an opportunity to grow, then perhaps not only parallels but

meaningful intersections and points of contact between the two groups can be discovered and appreciated not just within but across the rich terrains of both Canada settler cultures.

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### 1

Jeffrey Veidlinger, “To Guarantee Their Own Self-Government in All Matters of Their National Life”: Ukrainians, Jews, and the Origins of Canadian Multiculturalism,” in *No Better Home? Jews, Canada, and the Sense of Belonging*, ed. David S. Koffman (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 42.

### 2

Louis C. Dubin, “Montreal and Canada through a Wider Lens: Confessions of a Canadian-American European Jewish Historian,” *No Better Home? Jews, Canada, and the Sense of Belonging*, 218.

### 3

David Weinfeld, “Postscript. Thin Canadian Culture, Thick Jewish Life,” *No Better Home? Jews, Canada, and the Sense of Belonging*, 297.