

## **Essays by Scholars of Jewish Communities Outside Canada**

Stanisław Krajewski

## **Canada as Terra Incognita**

For me, Canada is terra incognita. I did pay brief visits to Montreal and Toronto, but before reading the present book my basic picture was that Canada was an addendum to the United States, huge in area, small in population. Ditto its Jewish community. And while I knew that some good friends living in New York were born in Canada—Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, for example, with whom I had the privilege to work on the core exhibition in POLIN, the Museum of Polish Jewish History in Warsaw, or David Roskies, scholar of Yiddish and, even more important, a member of the original Havurat Shalom—their Canadian origins did not seem significant. Has the book changed my perception? Well, yes and no.

To begin with “yes.” I realize now that the Canadian Jewish community is sizeable. In the near future it may become larger than that in France—especially because of the francophone Sephardic Jews. And it is diverse, characterized the evolution of its attitudes from biculturalism to multiculturalism, which was not a smooth process as related in several of the book’s chapters. Yet the most significant and characteristic aspect of Canadian Jewry is seen in the role of Yiddish. (That is why, perhaps, the Canadian roots of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Roskies, and Jack Kugelmass, who authored one of the chapters in this book, are not to be ignored.) In Montreal and Toronto, for decades it was the mother tongue of most Jews. This is no longer the case, but the story remains impressive, especially when I compare it to the fate of Yiddish in post-war Poland. Still retained among some survivors, it was not transferred to next generations. Even the son of a noted Yiddish teacher and translator has not learned the language. We were all raised culturally Polish. Nowadays we sometimes invoke Yiddish but never speak it, to use the apt phrase from Margolis’s chapter. Many decades ago, Warsaw’s state Yiddish theater introduced earphones with translation. The natural public was disappearing. After 1989, when we gained freedom and all cultural paths became open, there has been a notable academic revival of Yiddish. It is not, however, part of Jewish life; the devoted experts are often non-Jewish.

Does the Canadian fate of Yiddish show that in Canada it was better for Jews than in Poland and everywhere else (with the possible exception of Australia)? Perhaps, but anyway non-Hasidic Yiddish seems to have disappeared as a mother tongue. Is then the label “better” still applicable? And, after all, is Yiddish central to being Jewish? To be frank, for all its sentimental value, it isn’t for many Jews, even with European roots, including myself (even though my mother spoke as much Yiddish as Polish in her pre-war childhood).

I belong to the baby boom generation of “Polish Polish Jews,” to use the phrase from the title of one of my books. That is to say, the Jews who were born in post-war Poland and have lived there up to the present century. We started from a state of complete assimilation, sometimes even without awareness of roots. When in 1963, still in elementary school, I wrote an essay about the Warsaw ghetto uprising, on its twentieth anniversary, I did not feel it was about me or my crowd. It was also signifi-

cant that many among our parents were approving of and involved in the communist project. This meant a very different kind of participation in the power elite than in the case of Nathan Phillips, related in Troper's chapter. And their careers ended dramatically with the 1968 communist-orchestrated antisemitic campaign. As a result, most of the assimilated Jews who had never thought about emigration left Poland. Those of us who remained had to choose: some denied their Jewish connections; others, including myself, affirmed them. We have undergone a long process I call "de-assimilation," that is gaining a Jewish identity, connection with other Jews and our history, including the Shoah, some competence, involvement, religious or more often not, and all that without diminishing our participation in Polish public life. De-assimilated Jews have mostly partial or remote roots. Some of them have formally converted to Judaism to take part in religious life, alongside converts who have no knowledge of Jewish ancestry. Now they form the bulk of our community. All this is interesting, but in the context of the present remarks it is significant because it exhibits the opposite pole to the Canadian one, or the heavily, obviously, organically Jewish community, with relatively low intermarriage rate and smooth participation, individual and group, in national life. To further pinpoint the difference, let us invoke commemorations of the Shoah. I presume that in Canada they are done by survivors and their descendants, and others are invited as guests. I guess that all that tragic history feels abstract in Canada because it happened somewhere "there," far away from your lives. In Poland, those places are around us. In Falenica, just outside of Warsaw, where there was the ghetto from which my grandmother and aunt were taken to the Treblinka death camp, I participate sometimes in commemorations: I can represent the victims, I can address the gathering, and chant *El male rachamim* (in Israeli Hebrew, sorry). The events are organized principally by Christian and other non-Jewish people from the town; I am a guest.

Having read the book, I am able to see some features of Canadian Jews. On the other hand, my original perception has remained in place: I can still perceive no uniqueness, Canadianism that would be specific and strong enough to form a picture of Canadian Jews as more than another branch of the American Jewry. After all, while I highly appreciate the fact of the relatively elevated Jewish literacy in Canada, I see as even more relevant the fact that all Canadian rabbis come from seminaries in the United States. Thus, sincerely, I cannot see in what sense, as claimed in Weinfeld's postscript, Jews have forged a distinctive Canadian Jewish culture.

Perhaps the work on the museum of Canadian Jewish history, as advocated in Menkis's chapter, could help substantiate the claim better. This is certainly a worthy project. All the special aspects, like the relations with the Indigenous peoples or the range of attitudes to biculturalism, could be presented. The presence of Francophone Canada in the background is very interesting, for instance the story of the choosing of the term "Sephardic" as the designation of French-speaking Jews. When a recently arrived Moroccan Jew, not very religious, as narrated in the autobiographical chap-

ter by Yolande Cohen, decides to attend the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue—the oldest in the country—to make connection to an older wave of Jewish immigration, the story becomes one of a search for belonging. Yet it only underscores the fundamental feature of the contemplated museum: it will be most of all an account of immigration, a relatively recent one at that.

I cannot help but compare this imagined focus of the Canadian museum to POLIN. Again, the contrast is conspicuous. Jews arrived in Poland many centuries ago, and the perception is that we have been in Poland for generations immemorial. Yiddish developed in Poland and its vicinity. The river Vistula, flowing through both Cracow and Warsaw, spoke Yiddish, wrote Sholem Asch and S. L. Shneiderman. We belong here, we are connected in a most fundamental way, despite antisemitic rejection and the ripping dynamic of modern nationalisms, both Polish ethnic, linked to Catholicism, and Zionist. The story of acculturation and assimilation is also part of our legacy. In the nineteenth century, Poland was partitioned between three empires, which resulted in a sort of linguistic biculturalism: German and Russian were the dominant languages. It is remarkable, as mentioned in Weiser's chapter, that Polish acculturation was chosen by some Jews despite the rulers. And all that has led to present-day de-assimilation, the search for roots and conversions, initiated by people of my generation.

There exists one more topic that has emerged as a link between us in Poland and you in Canada only recently; I mean the presence of large numbers of Ukrainians. They had been quite numerous in Poland even before the Russian invasion of February 2022, functioning similarly to Mexicans in the US. Since the aggression, millions have fled and only some have come back. In Poland, there are now probably well over two million Ukrainians, the number and the ratio comparable to that in Canada. There are important differences: in Canada, Ukrainians were part of the multifaceted influx of immigrants. In contrast to that, Poles have shown laudable openness to these refugees, but very little to other ones, especially peoples of colour. Apparently, a major reason for assistance results from an identification with the victims and the feeling that Poles can be the target of another Russian campaign. The great pro-Ukrainian mobilization is remarkable because it happened despite dark pages of history: Ukrainian massacres of Poles, especially in 1943, remain an important point of reference in the national psyche. Yet, for the time being, only a minority keeps referring to those horrors. It is worth mentioning that the most virulent anti-Ukrainian expression is voiced by those Poles who are also engaged in antisemitic hate speech.

Polish Jews, as individuals and as a community, fully participate in the efforts to help refugees. And again, this is despite the recollection of the extreme brutality of pogroms performed by Ukrainians. Presence of Ukrainians is clearly felt in our synagogues. Their arrival may signify a new chapter in the general history of Poland. And an even deeper process seems to occur. The feeling exists in Poland, Europe, and

North America that Ukraine defends not only itself but also Western democratic and liberal values. The presence of these values in pre-2022 or pre-2014 (when the Russian aggression began) Ukraine was limited but they were much better rooted than in the closely related Russian nation. The reasons for the difference have to do with history. Veidlinger's chapter refers to the legacy of the short-lived Ukrainian National Republic, more than 100 years ago. They proclaimed cultural autonomy for all—Great Russians, Jews, Poles, and others. The picture was more complicated, but I do appreciate the fact, reported in the chapter, that Senator Yuzyk recalled that very legacy while fighting for Canadian multiculturalism. Hopefully, Ukraine will prevail and with the help of the West, primarily NATO, it will rebuild an inclusive and democratic society. And maybe this new reality of including large Ukrainian minorities will bring a special connection between Poland and Canada?

To conclude, is Canada the best place for Jews, or at least for the Jewish diaspora? Perhaps. If a Russian invasion or another disaster forced me to flee, and Israel would not be a viable option, I would certainly think very seriously about Canada as a great place of refuge. On the other hand, "the best" means the best for me as I am now. Among all my connections to people and social institutions the Polish ones, including prominently their Jewish component, are by far the strongest. And you know as well as I do that in Canada, while pondering Jewish history and beliefs, you need to look back to Poland. In Poland, I have no particular need to refer to Canada.

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