

**Norman Ravvin, *Who Gets In: An Immigration Story*
(Regina: University of Regina Press, 2023),
266 pp., ISBN: 978-0889779228.**

The First World War marks a watershed moment in modern Jewish history. Almost overnight the war interrupted the strong Jewish migration from Eastern Europe to the United States and a few other destinations including Canada. During the war and its violent aftermath hundreds of thousands of Jews were displaced from their homes across Eastern Europe. Just when regular steamship service from Europe across the Atlantic had resumed in 1921, the United States Congress passed a restrictive immigration act that specifically excluded persons born in Eastern and Southern Europe as well as those born in countries and colonial territories in Asia and Africa. Influential American lawmakers openly described Jews from Eastern Europe as particularly threatening, associating them with Bolshevism and a range of antisemitic stereotypes. In the early 1920s Jewish aid organizations on both sides of the Atlantic were desperately looking for alternative destinations for Jewish refugees stranded across Europe. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) sent delegations to Mexico and Cuba. Brazil emerged as an important destination in the 1920s, as did Mandate Palestine. Canada is strikingly absent in reports by HIAS and other Jewish organizations during the 1920s.

During the second half of the nineteenth century Canada served primarily as a transit country for Jews and other Europeans heading to the United States. This changed in the mid-1890s, when the government and businesses such as the Canadian Pacific Railway promoted immigration and the development of the country's interior. Almost eighty thousand Jews immigrated between 1900 and 1914, boosting the Jewish population from a few thousand to over one hundred thousand by 1920. Unlike Christian Eastern Europeans who moved in large numbers to the Prairie provinces, Jewish immigrants clustered in Montreal and Toronto. There can be little doubt that the passage of the restrictive US immigration bills in 1921 and 1924 alarmed elected officials and civil servants in Canada. Members of the English-speaking Protestant establishment held ambiguous views about urbanization and industrialization, were concerned over the spread of socialism, and beholden to antisemitic and racist stereotypes.

In their seminal 1983 study *None is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe 1933-1948*, Irving Abella and Harold Troper have shown that a mere five thousand Jews from Europe managed to enter Canada between 1933 and 1945. Curiously, Abella and Troper pay little attention to the period before 1933. Norman Ravvin's *Who Gets In* addresses an important gap because the (understandable) focus of the scholarship on the Nazi regime and the Holocaust has obscured the deeper roots of Canada's rigid immigration policy in the post-1918 period. The exclusion of Jews was related to that of Chinese and South Asian immigrants from Canada in the early twentieth century.

The experiences of Asian immigrants in Canada before 1950 have received growing scholarly attention in recent years.

Jewish migration to Canada was already low years before the 1930s, when the Nazi regime and governments in Poland and Romania began to terrorize their Jewish populations. Ravvin, a well-known Canadian fiction writer and literature scholar who teaches at Concordia University, sheds some light on the important question of why Canadian officials considered Jewish migrants as unwelcome. In fact, the book begins with the 1914 Komagata Maru incident, when a ship carrying 376 South Asian migrants was detained in Vancouver's port and forced to return to India. Another merit of Ravvin's study is the focus on Jews outside of Toronto and Montreal, specifically on the little-known history of Jewish agricultural colonies that were established after 1891 under the auspices of the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA) in the Prairie provinces.

The main protagonist of the book is Ravvin's maternal grandfather, Yehuda Yosef Eisenstein. In 1930, the twenty-nine-year-old moved from his hometown in rural Poland to Saskatchewan, joining a brother who sponsored him. On the immigration form Eisenstein stated that he was single and a teacher. This lie was required to placate suspicious Canadian immigration inspectors. As the director of the Canadian census Robert H. Coates put it in 1929, "Orientals, Hebrews and certain of the Slavic people ... are practically inassimilable by marriage" and would not be expected to become part of "Canada's 'melting pot'" (32-33). Eisenstein was the married father of two daughters. After completing his service in the Polish army, he had earned income as a grain merchant—in one of the poorest countries in Europe. In Saskatchewan he found work as a shochet in the town Dysart before serving a small Jewish congregation in the little JCA colony Hirsch (named after the organization's founder Baron Maurice de Hirsch) as a non-ordained rabbi. Soon after his arrival Eisenstein hired a lawyer in the nearby mining town Estevan to get his wife and daughters to join him—a seemingly futile effort because of the false statement he had made upon his arrival.

Ravvin invites readers to look over his shoulders as he locates material relating to his grandfather's case. Dozens of letters went back and forth between Saskatchewan, Jewish representatives in Montreal and elsewhere, and government offices in Ottawa and Regina. His grandfather was not easily intimidated by early rejection letters. The effort required tenacity and ingenuity and depended on assistance from figures he would never meet in person. Among the supporting cast of this book are several colourful characters. They range from Eisenstein's surprisingly well-connected provincial lawyer to Prime Minister R.B. Bennett, who may or may not have had a crush on the wife of a Jewish confectioner in Calgary. Largely absent from his grandfather's file (for reasons that are impossible to ascertain) is Frederick C. Blair,

the notorious immigration bureaucrat and antisemite who figures prominently in *None is Too Many* and studies about Asian immigrants. A fascinating behind-the-scenes helper was Lillian Freiman. The respected wife of an Ottawa department store owner used her contacts with members of Canada's political establishment to save hundreds of Jews from deportation. It is not well known that she also put in a good word on behalf of Jewish immigrants who, like Eisenstein, tried to bring over family members in the 1920s and 1930s.

Ravvin shifts between historical analysis, anthropological field study, and personal reflections. The book contains reproductions of over two dozen letters, photographs, and maps. Relying on family lore and official documents he tries to figure out what possibly happened or was implied by a remark, decades after the main protagonists passed away. The narrative does not consistently follow a timeline. Ravvin frequently digresses to matters that seem not related to the story. This can be distracting but also captivating. Ravvin emphasizes that his grandfather was a migrant looking for a better life, not a refugee. This illustrates a commitment to careful research and distinguishes him from other authors in the field of Jewish and general migration studies who remain beholden to sweeping narratives of Jewish migration as a continuous chain of expulsions and flight from persecution.

Ravvin deserves credit for shifting attention to Jews outside of the bigger cities. The Canada readers encounter in this book was not a welcoming place. Yet little-known figures like Lillian Freiman and a few others paved the way for a different, more inclusive Canada as it would emerge after the dark years of the Second World War and the Holocaust.

Intrigued by the book I checked what became of the agricultural colony in Hirsch. The little train station and the synagogue have vanished. A few farmhouses seem still to be in use. On the outskirts of the former settlement, on the main road and rail line to Estevan, remains the well-kept Jewish cemetery, protected by a little fence and surrounded by a wide expanse of fields.

Tobias Brinkmann

Penn State University