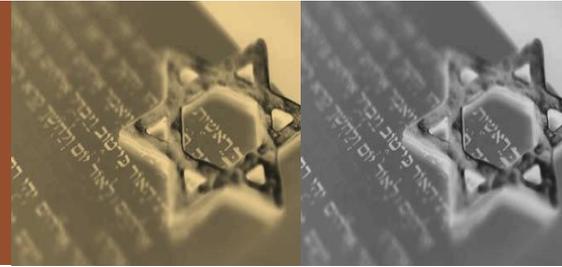


# CHAPTER NINE:

## COMMUNITY NUMBER TWO

### THE JEWS OF CANADA



Canada is often seen – wrongly – as a poor man's U.S.A. There is a strong tendency to dismiss it, seeing the interesting things in North American Jewry happening south of the border in the United States. This does a tremendous injustice to the community of Canadian Jews. The American Jewish community is of course indeed far larger. It is about fifteen times larger than the community of Canada. But this disguises the fact that the Canadian community is one of the largest in the world, third among Diaspora communities behind the U.S.A. and France. In addition, the Canadian community, as we shall see, is in many ways far more cohesive and conscious of its Jewish identity than the American community as a whole. Far larger percentages of the Canadian community are educated in Jewish schools, far larger percentages visit Israel and all in all, the community is a remarkably successful and vibrant Jewish community. Welcome to Canada!

#### **1. Who are the Jews in the national community? Where did they come from? How many are there? What is their geographical distribution inside the country?**

Canada houses a substantial Jewish community, the fourth largest in the world. It presently has a little over some 370,000 Jews out of a total Canadian population of some 29,000,000. The majority of the community consists of Ashkenazi Jews who came from Europe although there is a substantial sub-group of North African French speaking Jews in Montreal.

The origins of the community are relatively recent. The first Jews date from the second half of the eighteenth century, after the British took Canada from the French and allowed Jews to settle there. The original Jews settled in Montreal which has remained one of the major centres till today. Till the mid nineteenth century almost all Jews lived in Montreal but an influx of Jews from Central and Western Europe, shortly followed by a wave of Lithuanian Jews saw the spreading out of the community to additional towns and cities. The Eastern European emigration at the end of the nineteenth century saw many Jews coming also to Canada. If there were 6,000 Jews around 1890, there were just over 125,000 in 1921, with almost all the newcomers coming from Russia and to a lesser extent, Rumania.

From this time immigration was seriously restricted and the next wave of immigrants only arrived in the aftermath of the Holocaust, in the form of tens of thousands of refugees. In 1956, following the failed Hungarian revolution against the Soviet Union, many thousands of Hungarians were admitted to Canada including some four and a half thousand Jews and shortly after this there is a considerable immigration of Jews from Morocco and other North African countries. More recent immigration waves



have included Jews from the former Soviet Union and Israeli Jews both of whom settled in large numbers in recent years. There are now estimated to be around 30,000 ex-Israeli Jews settled in Canada. Geographically, there are two major centres, in Montreal and Toronto. Up to twenty years ago, they were similar in size, but the concern among many Jews about the Quebec nationalist movement with its threats of secession from Canada, caused the development of Toronto as the largest Jewish centre. At present there are around 175,000 Jews in Toronto compared with 100,000 in Montreal. These two centres are by far the largest in Canada. Only three other centres, Vancouver, Winnipeg and the Canadian capital Ottawa have more than 10,000 Jews each, and of these Vancouver is much the largest with 30,000.

## **2. How can they be defined economically? What are their professions and occupations?**

With a few idiosyncratic details specific to the Canadian story, the Jewish community has by and large followed the occupational and professional pattern that is typical of the story that we have witnessed already with respect to the U.S.A. and which we will continue to see in other countries. Some of the first Canadian Jewish settlers became involved with the military and served in the British forces at the beginning of their rule. This reflects the close relationship between the Jews and the British at the beginning of the period. Among the refugees that came in the post-Holocaust period, several thousand tailors and furriers came in under a special arrangement with the government: these were professions that answered Canada's perceived needs at that time. In addition, we see a number of Jewish farming villages that were set up around the end of the nineteenth century and in the early years of the new century. These were a not insignificant element of Canada's Jews in their early years but most collapsed at the time of the Great Depression.

If we look at the community today we find many in professions, government and civil service, light industry and trade. In addition, cultural fields, communications and academia all show a considerable Jewish presence.

## **3. What is the religious orientation of the Jewish community?**

The significant factor in the Canadian community is that it can be compared to a more traditional version of North American Jewry. The breakdown of Jews into the three main streams of Orthodoxy, Conservatism and Reform stands at approximately 40%, 40% and 20%, but the average Conservative congregation, for example, is likely to be more traditional and observant than its equivalent sister congregation south of the border. There are Haredi congregations, especially of Belz, Lubavich and Satmar Organizat, in and around Montreal and Toronto. One suggestion for the higher average degree of tradition in Canada is connected with the pronounced multiculturalism of Canadian society. Caught between different groups of the population, Jews tend to be more aware of their own heritage and of the legitimacy of preserving it. Montreal's leading Conservative congregation recently seceded from the North American movement and announced itself as independent, resisting the trend towards egalitarianism in the Conservative movement as a whole.



#### 4. What Jewish educational and cultural life is there in the community?

Jewish education is well organised in Canada. In the two major centres of Toronto and Montreal, there are about a dozen day schools as well as a number of Yeshivot. In Toronto around 40% of Jewish children go to Jewish elementary schools and 12% go to Jewish high schools. In Montreal the figures are higher, 60% and 30% respectively. The national average stands at 55% for Jewish children going to at least elementary day school. In addition there are a few other schools in the smaller communities. In addition, there are youth movements and organizations, and a good network of camps in the field of informal education. In the universities, the field of Jewish studies is less developed than in the U.S. Nevertheless, there are courses in many universities and McGill, Toronto and York universities all have strong Jewish studies departments. Unlike the situation in the United States, there is no Jewish university as such. The major centres for professional Jewish education, rabbinic or educational, are in the United States and Canadian Jews tend to study there.

There is a strong and vibrant Jewish culture especially in the two large towns. This is reflected in the more than twenty different Jewish newspapers and periodicals that are published within Canada. Canadian Jews tend to be proud of their Jewish culture and to seek opportunities to celebrate it. Once again this is a reflection of the proud multi-culturalism that has deep roots in Canada.

#### 5. What is the situation of assimilation and intermarriage in the community?

We have already suggested that there is less assimilation in the community than in the United States. There is no question that many of the same influences that we find throughout the western world are acting on the younger generations. Assimilation is higher than in past generations and it is rising as is the rate of intermarriage. However both of these phenomena are lower than in the Jewish community of the United States. The out-marriage rate in Canada in the last few years stands at 35% as opposed to 54% for the United States.

#### 6. Are there any major historical circumstances that affected the inflow or outflow of Jews to and from the community?

As in the United States, almost the entire growth and development of the community is connected with external historical events. But if the American Jewish community traces itself back to the Spanish experience of expulsion and inquisition, the Canadian origins connect in with the British conquest of French Canada in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. Following this, the growth of the community follows the broad contours of the Eastern European Jewish experience with the addition of the French colonialization of North Africa which led to immigration in the late 1950's.

The other main factor is Israel. Some 7,500 Jews from Canada have gone on Aliyah since 1948. The number of Israeli Jews who have settled in Canada is around 30,000. Once again, this is not unlike the situation in the United States but it should be noted



that in percentage terms, the group of ex-Israelis is far larger, amounting to some 8% of the total community.

### **7. Are there welfare problems within the Jewish community? Are there welfare organizations within the community?**

One of the characteristics of successful communities is to brush welfare problems under the carpet and to tend to deny their existence. Since all communities will tend to have such problems, the denial of their existence tends to say more about community attitudes than realities. In the last few years, Canada's Jewish community has begun to examine more seriously problems of poverty within the community. According to recent figures, an authoritative estimate is that some 17% of the community are poor. This is about the same percentage as is found in the general population. As far as specific groups are concerned, the three major vulnerable groups are recent immigrants, the elderly and single mothers. The rate among senior citizens is over 20%.

There are a number of official community agencies such as the Jewish Family and Child Services which help the disadvantaged and there are several voluntary groups who supplement the work of the official agencies. However, officials have made statements to the effect that the community as a whole has not tackled the problem with sufficient resolve and it seems likely that the issue will begin to receive a higher priority.

### **8. What is the feeling of physical security of the Jewish community? Has there been and is there today a problem of anti-Semitism?**

The Canadian Jewish community has seen relatively little anti-Semitism. The major period of anti-Semitic agitation was the decade of the 1930's, when anti-Jewish rhetoric went on the agenda of a number of groups and organizations. More recent periods has seen a small but active far-right with its xenophobia and anti-Semitism but these have found little echo in the official political culture. There are anti-Semitic political sentiments that surface every so often on the right wing of the conservative political parties but the official conservative leadership tend to firmly distance themselves from such ideas. The nationalism of the Quebec separatists was seen as worrying to some a few years back but this anxiety appears to have evaporated. The last year or so have however seen a return of anti-Jewish feeling in parts of the population and these have expressed themselves in sporadic attacks on Jews and Jewish property, including synagogues and cemeteries. To a large extent it is clear that some of these attacks should be traced to the hostility engendered by the intifada, as we have seen in relation to other countries. Nonetheless, it is clear that the story is more complex than that. The number of anti-Jewish incidents was already rising in 1999, the year before the intifada. However, all in all it seems clear that the majority of Jews do not feel overly anxious on this score.



## 9. What are the major problems on the agenda of the Jewish community?

The problem of assimilation is one that will inevitably crop up in any discussion of community trends in any western community. From that point of view, the Canadian community is no different. Assimilation and intermarriage *are* problems within the community and cannot be dismissed out of hand. The fact that they exist at a far lower level than in communities such as that of the U.S. does not mean that they are not cause for concern. The starting point of the Canadian Jewish community is different and the demands that it makes on itself and its members will tend to be higher.

However, it should be said that the Canadian community seems to be in a relatively good place. On the whole the Jews are doing well and their institutions seem to be functioning well in a well-developed economy. One problem that should be noted is a result of this general success. With high quality Jewish educational and cultural institutions up and functioning, the hope of the community must be that more and more young people involve themselves in the system. But it is a very expensive system. Jewish schools are prohibitively expensive for some and in general “being Jewish” in the contemporary Canadian world is a very expensive business. Unlike the case for its more diffuse southern neighbour, it is a reasonable aspiration of Canadian Jews that most of the children in the community should enjoy the existing institutions. The resources necessary to make that happen are immense and probably beyond the means of the community as it now stands, despite its financial wealth. In other words, it might be that the very success of Canadian Jewry in creating good institutions which can provide the underpinnings for a rich Jewish life, is the basis of the community’s largest problem. Out of this rich reality must come increased expectations. The realization of these expectations is not that simple.

## 10. What are the demographic trends within the community? Can anything be said about the future of the community?

The Canadian Jewish community is a fast growing Diaspora community. In the last forty years, the population has gone up from 260,000 to 360,000, a rise of almost 40%. Most of this increase is due to immigration, but it shows Canada as a desirable place for Jews to go. Much of the attraction is not specifically because of the Jewish question: Canada itself is seen as an attractive place to live. But the facts are that the community is getting larger and in many parameters it is showing increased strength. In demographic terms, it seems likely that more Jews will come into the community *from* Israel than will leave the community *for* Israel.

It is extremely difficult to talk about future trends in a community that is largely dependent on immigration to grow. There are too many unknown factors. But what seems certain is that Canada will remain an attractive country for Jews looking for an alternative place to live. Despite the usual intra-communal disputes and tensions and the fact that different immigrant groups often look askance at one another, the Canadian Jewish story seems to prove that the Jewish community can integrate its



diverse groups and create a whole that is truly bigger than the sum of its constituent parts. It seems reasonable to assume that this will continue.

### **11. What is the general contribution of the community to Canada as a whole?**

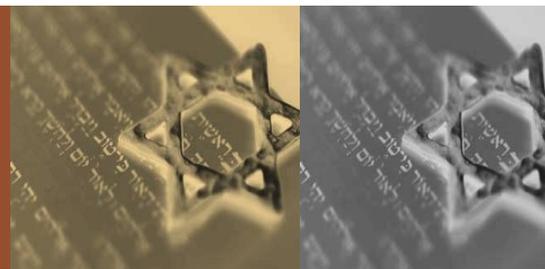
The Jews are a significant and valuable group in the rich mosaic of Canadian society. It is important to note that over the last generation, the Canadian government has officially begun to define itself as a multi-cultural society, leaving the melting-pot model that tended to define it previously. In 1971 an official government report supported the adoption of multi-culturalism as a recognized and desirable characteristic of Canadian society and in 1988 the Canadian Multi-Cultural Act was adopted. Canada celebrates its ethnic diversity and the contribution of each of its groups towards the society as a whole. Canadian Jews have been involved in many important enterprises including important national work in the field of cultural relations and tolerance. Generally, as a relatively educated and enterprising group, the Jews have made significant contributions to the society as a whole in many fields. Major writers (Mordechai Richler) and popular poets and musicians (Leonard Cohen) are part of Canadian cultural life. In almost every profession, Jews have made a significant contribution.

### **12. What is the relationship with Israel in the community as a whole?**

A 1991 survey in Canada found the following interesting point regarding the connection of Canadian Jews with Israel. At that time, 61% of all Toronto Jews and 70% of all Montreal Jews had visited Israel, compared with a mere 31% of all United States Jews. A more recent estimate put the relative numbers at 66% for Canada and 35% for the States. This is a very telling statistic and accords with everything that has been said above regarding the general characteristics of Canadian Jewry and the contrast with American Jewry. Canadian Jewry is in general extremely conscious of its Jewish identity and as part of that identity it celebrates its connection with Israel. Most of its Jewish schools emphasize the subject of Israel in their curriculum in a way true of only some schools in the U.S.A. As mentioned, some 7,500 Canadian Jews have moved to Israel since the foundation of the state of Israel, and despite the fact that once again, there are more Israelis who have moved to Canada (some 30,000), the feeling of connection to Israel is strong and Canadian Zionism is a particularly noteworthy part of the community story.



## Introducing Canadian Jewish voices.



**Andres came to Canada as one among thousands of refugees (many of whom were Jewish) who were allowed into Canada after the failed 1956 anti-Soviet revolt in Hungary. He writes two years after his arrival.**

*"I am so glad to be here. Glad and grateful. God knows what would have happened to us if we'd stayed in Budapest. Many of those who stayed were hunted down by the Soviets and sent to camps – or even worse. I don't want to think about it. I'd been a loyal member of the Communist party in Hungary ever since the war. We were grateful to the Russians for coming in to Hungary before all the Jews could be killed and Hungary as we knew it destroyed by the Germans. But it all went sour. It's hard to know which system was worse. All I know is that I've come to distrust – distrust? Despise! – all absolutist systems – all "isms". I'm looking for a land where people can live their own lives free of the feeling that someone else is watching over their every move, and I think that I've found it in Canada. I found Canada, or rather Canada found us. The government offered to take thousands of us and now we are here and I still can't quite believe my luck. I knew only a little about Canada. It wasn't quite the hated enemy of the Soviets that the U.S.A. was, so we didn't hear much about it. The truth is that if the Russians had known what the real story was they'd have brainwashed us all about the evils of Canada too. It's a great land, a democracy and it allows people to be free in a way that the Soviet regime needs to fear. There can be few countries better or freer than Canada.*

*I come here as a Jew. The honest truth is that I know far too little about what that means, even now. Under the Soviets, Jewish life was almost suffocated and in the years before the war, when the Hungarian fascists were in power, when I was a kid, it was not wise to emphasise one's Jewishness and therefore we kept quiet and tried not to draw attention to our being Jews. As a result, I never went to any Jewish educational institution and I now feel ignorant and more than a bit ashamed. Understand me. I'm not a theological Jew. I have no belief in any God, but I like the idea of being a Jew according to culture. The problem is that I know so little and most of the Jews here seem to know a lot. They are almost all very proud of being Jewish and it so different from the life that I have lived, hiding the fact that I am a Jew. I hope my children grow up to be proud Jews and in a country which has invited me in. I will do whatever I can to make sure that that comes true."*

**Andrea is Andre's granddaughter. She lives in Toronto and is fifteen years old.**

*"I'm a third generation Canadian Jew and proud of it. The whole Jewish thing is kind of funny. My grandfather, who's approaching his mid-seventies, was a Communist! He was totally against all kinds of religion, and knew nothing about Judaism when he*



*came over from Hungary in the 50's. He wasn't anti-Jewish even though he told me many times that when he was in Europe, he felt that it was far better not to be Jewish and that being Jewish only brought trouble for people like him and his family. But look at me. I go to a Jewish day school, one of the best schools in Canada, and I love it. I go to synagogue on a regular basis and it really speaks to me. I know more about Jewish subjects than my parents and grandparents all together! I'm not boasting. It's just so funny to think of the way that things have turned out. Last year I went on the school's eighth grade trip to Israel and it was so interesting. It's a strange country, but fascinating, and so different from Canada. Everything there seems so intense. Here life is really quite relaxed compared to the way that people seem to live there and the problems that they have to face. One of the last activities saw a few ex-Canadians who have gone on Aliyah to Israel coming and talking to the group about their life in Israel. Some of the group called it Zionist propaganda but the truth is that it was very interesting. I understand why they wanted to go but one of the intriguing things was to realize that they had all gone despite the fact that they enjoyed life in Canada so much. None of them seemed to have anything but good words to say about their lives here. And yet they left. I have to say that I don't quite get it. I am so happy here, I can't believe that anything would ever take me away for ever. They said that they went on Aliyah because they felt so Jewish, and that Israel was the place to express that. But I feel so Jewish here and feel that this is a place where one can be totally Jewish! Grandpa is pleased that I react that way. He says that he's pleased that Israel exists but that he has no more time for Zionism than for any other "ism". He wants me to stay here and keeps talking about the fact that you need to appreciate true freedom when you find it. He's such a Canadian patriot, but he's also such a proud Jew these days. The truth is that he's found a place where there seems to be no contradiction between the two ideas!"*

