

Canadian Jewry: A Diaspora Community in Transition

David H. Goldberg

The Canadian Jewish community currently finds itself at a crossroads, both in relation to major aspects of its internal affairs as well as in its attitudes toward Israel and the Middle East peace process. Generally speaking, Canadian Jews remain strongly committed to Israel. But in practical terms this commitment is being affected by a number of competing pressures. The most significant of these pressures is the need to devote more community resources to increasingly serious internal challenges, coupled with a rapidly diminishing monetary base resulting from the global recession.

The 1991 federal census reported that 365,315 Canadians (13% of a total population of 26,994,000) identified themselves as "Jewish" in an ethnic or religious sense, thereby making Canada the fifth largest Jewish community in the world (after the United States, Israel, Russia, and France). The census also showed that there had been a significant shift in the geographic distribution of Canadian Jews, with Toronto now home to 162,605 Jews, or forty-five percent of the national total. In fact, Toronto's Jewish community experienced a seventy percent increase in the past two decades, constituting a "demographic revolution" unparalleled in North American Jewish life.

The Toronto community adapted fairly well to the infrastructural pressures resulting from this population explosion, with an increase in the number of synagogues and day schools as well as social and cultural institutions. At the same time, there have been some noticeable social and economic problems. For example, while Jews are very well represented in the "professions" (one in four doctors, and ten percent of all accountants, lawyers and judges in Toronto are Jewish), some 20,000 Jews — constituting about thirteen percent of the city's Jewish population — reportedly live below the poverty line.

Symptomatic of a broader demographic problem affecting Jewish life in Canada is the fact that doubling the size of the Toronto community largely

Dr. Goldberg is Director of Research and Education at the Foundation for Middle East Studies in Toronto. The article, slightly revised, was first published (Oct. 1, 1995) in *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoint* of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, and is reprinted with permission.

came as the result of the abandonment of smaller Jewish communities across the country. While there are sizeable pockets of Jewish immigrants from Israel, South Africa, and the former Soviet Union residing in the greater Toronto area, the city's Jewish population growth resulted mainly from internal migration. Toronto has increasingly become a magnet for young people from small Jewish communities in the Maritime provinces and western Canada, as well as from non-metropolitan areas of Ontario. They come to Toronto seeking better education and employment opportunities, as well as a more varied Jewish communal life and, increasingly, Jewish spouses. There is also an influx of older people being reunited with family members who had migrated to Toronto earlier.

QUEBEC'S UNIQUE JEWISH COMMUNITY

For the better part of two hundred years, Montreal was home to Canada's largest Jewish community and the undisputed center of the country's Jewish life and culture. However, beginning roughly in the mid-1970s the Montreal community experienced a significant decline in its size and influence, relative to Toronto. The 1971 federal census found that 110,000 Jews lived in Montreal; in the 1991 census, the number had slipped to 101,210 and is still declining. It is not only the absolute number of Jews leaving Montreal, mostly for Toronto and to a lesser extent Ottawa, that is disturbing; it is also their demographic character. Overwhelmingly, they are university students, young families, and professionals; in other words, the Jewish community's future. While Jews are still well represented in the professional fields in Montreal — one in ten doctors, one in twenty accountants — the community is aging rapidly, many institutions are declining, and over twenty percent of the Jewish elderly are living below the poverty line.

Recent surveys indicate that a sizeable proportion of English-speaking Jewish businessmen in Quebec have achieved a level of proficiency in French that permits them to do business with the provincial government — *if there was business to do*. The problem is that the continuing uncertainty about Quebec's political future has exacerbated a general slowdown in the province's economy. Over the past two decades, there has been a significant migration to Quebec of Jews from the French-speaking countries of North Africa. These people obviously have no trouble addressing the "Quebecois" in their own language. But even sizeable segments of this community's youth are reportedly considering relocating because of the continuing political and economic uncertainty.

Despite serious efforts by local community leadership to maintain good relations with both the federalist and separatist camps, there is growing

concern that Quebec Jewry will suffer no matter which way the independence drive ultimately goes. Had Quebecers voted in the October 30, 1995 referendum to separate from the rest of Canada, the Jewish community feared various forms of discrimination, including restrictive language laws and a drop in property values. By the same token, some community leaders worried that if the independence referendum failed, Quebec Jewry would be accused by the nationalist forces of having quietly favored, and financed, the "non" side. This fear was seemingly reinforced by the public charge made by Quebec's separatist premier, Jacques Parizeau, that the narrow defeat of the October 30 referendum was caused by the "ethnic vote and money," a thinly veiled reference to Montreal's Jewish, Greek, and Italian communities.

While Jews living in Montreal are obviously the most directly affected by the independence debate, Quebec's Jewish community still constitutes close to thirty percent of the national total. What happens to them has serious implications for all of Canadian Jewry. National Jewish leaders spend a significant amount of time and energy studying the "Quebec question" and developing contingencies for the province's Jewish population.

THE CHALLENGE TO "JEWISH CONTINUITY"

Canadians frequently lament that they are "one generation behind" what happens in the United States. This appears to be the case with regard to inter-marriage. While the current rate of Jewish inter-marriage in Canada (between fifteen and twenty percent) remains significantly lower than in the United States, the growing trend toward inter-marriage — in the major metropolitan centers but even more so in the smaller, isolated communities — is cause for concern among Canadian Jews.

In an informal survey conducted recently by the Council of Jewish Federations of Canada, community elites ranked "Jewish continuity" as the single most important challenge on Canadian Jewry's national agenda. A significant portion of community resources has already been committed to studies of the issue. However, Canadian Jews are as stymied as their American cousins in finding a quick and easy solution to the problem of inter-marriage.

Studies consistently reflect a high positive correlation between successful efforts towards Jewish continuity and a community's commitment to quality Jewish education. This being the case, Canadian Jewry should be relatively well insulated from the forces of assimilation and inter-marriage. For there exists throughout Canada a highly institutionalized network of Jewish day- and afternoon-schools representing all denominational viewpoints. Quebec and Ontario alone

have twenty-two and twenty-seven day schools, respectively.

To be sure, educational institutions are not immune from the socio-demographic and financial pressures affecting Canadian Jewry as a whole. Nevertheless, Canadian Jews have always viewed Jewish education as a communal responsibility rather than an individual privilege. There is every reason to believe that local communities and national organizations will take the steps necessary to guarantee quality Jewish education for Jewish children throughout Canada.

RISING RATES OF INTOLERANCE

In the 1990s, Jews achieved a level of social, economic, and political "acceptance" in Canada that overrides the painful memories of formal and informal discrimination suffered by Canadian Jews less than a generation ago. And yet, despite these objective circumstances, they continue to express deep concern about traditional and new forms of anti-Semitism, racism and intolerance.

There was an 11.7 percent increase between 1993 and 1994 in the number of reported incidents of anti-Semitism in Canada, ranging from petty vandalism and the painting of graffiti on Jewish institutions, to physical harassment. Prominent Jews received bullets in their mail, and police authorities acknowledged that the names of Jewish community activists were on a "hit list" produced by a fringe neo-Nazi group. Jewish leaders complain bitterly about the continued presence in Canada of the prominent Holocaust denier, Ernst Zundel, who freely uses the most sophisticated technology, including cable television and the Internet, to circumvent Canadian laws prohibiting the dissemination of hate literature. Analysts emphasized the potential cross-border linkages between Canadian-based white supremacist lunatic fringes and the individuals implicated in the bombing of the U.S. Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

Canadian Jews do take solace from the fact that the overwhelming majority of Canadians express revulsion over the racist attitudes and activities of fringe right-wing groups, and community leaders applaud moves by the federal government and some provincial governments to toughen laws against hate crimes. At the same time, Canadian Jews continue to watch carefully the traditional correlation between economic downturn and increasing rates of anti-Semitism, and caution that it is irresponsible for Canadians to assume that they are somehow immune from racist violence.

In 1987, the government of Canada introduced "war crimes legislation" and pledged to track down and bring to justice, under the Criminal Code of Canada, suspected former Nazis living in Canada. However, since then only

one case has gone to trial, and the acquittal of Imre Finta was upheld by the Supreme Court of Canada (although the Court did affirm the constitutionality of the war crimes legislation). In early 1995 the Canadian government announced a change of direction on the issue: The emphasis would now be on stripping suspected Nazi war criminals of their Canadian citizenship or landed-immigrant status (on the grounds that they had failed to disclose their activities during the Second World War upon entering Canada) and deporting them. For Canadian Jews this new course is certainly better than the inaction of the past several years. But, cognizant of the ticking of the "biological clocks" of the aging suspects and of the possible witnesses to their crimes, community leaders continue to press the Canadian government to establish a firm timetable for deporting the twelve suspected Nazi war criminals for whom cases are reportedly being built.

HARD-HIT BY THE RECESSION

Given the disproportionate involvement of Canadian Jews in fields vulnerable to severe economic fluctuations (including manufacturing, retail stores, real estate, and construction), the Canadian Jewish community was harmed by the global recession of the 1980s.

The most immediate impact of the financial setbacks suffered by a sizeable number of Jewish-owned corporations was the elimination of a significant slice of the top layer of charitable contributions to Jewish causes. There was also a more general spin-off effect, with the smaller contributor saying to himself, "If the big guys are in trouble, maybe I should hold back on my pledge for this year."

The challenge of addressing growing communal demands with less financial resources has forced the leadership of Canadian Jewry to re-evaluate priorities. The practical implication of this is that the balance of power in the community is shifting from national institutions to the agencies directly responsible for fund-raising (i.e., UJA campaigns administered by the local federations). Consistent with this, there is a greater emphasis on first securing local institutions, and only then providing funds earmarked for projects outside of the local community (i.e., national institutions and Israel). A case in point is the decision by the Jewish Federation of Greater Toronto to come to the assistance of the city's bankrupt Jewish Community Centre. Faced with the prospect of the JCC's closing, the Federation took over responsibility for the multi-million-dollar debt. But, observers asked, will the decision to protect this local "sacred cow" constrain the Toronto Federation's ability to contribute to national agencies, via the Council of Canada's Jewish Federations (CJF)?

ISRAEL, THE PEACE PROCESS, AND CANADIAN POLICY

Popular and scholarly analyses portray an image of a Canadian Jewish community that is unusually supportive of Israel, both in terms of general sympathies and financial contributions. A series of qualitative surveys published in the late 1980s or 1990 suggest that Canadian Jewish attitudes toward Israel were stronger than those of American Jews. Consider the following:

- Two-thirds of Canadian Jewish adults said they have been to Israel at least once, compared to thirty-five percent of American Jewish adults.
- Eighty-seven percent of Canadian Jews agreed with the statement that "caring about Israel is a very important part of my being a Jew," compared to seventy-three percent of American Jews.
- Eighty-five percent of Canadian Jews agreed with the proposition, "If Israel were destroyed, I would feel as if I had suffered one of the greatest personal tragedies in my life," compared to sixty-six percent of American Jews.
- Forty-two percent of Canadian Jews regarded themselves as "Zionists," compared to twenty-three percent of American Jewish respondents.
- Twenty-one percent of Canadian Jews said they "have seriously considered living in Israel," compared to thirteen percent of American Jews.

Beyond these attitudinal factors, Canadian Jews have always given tangible expression to their support for Israel. Per capita, they have been among the biggest purchasers among Diaspora Jews of annual issues of Israel Bonds, and they have contributed generously to special fund-raising projects, including emergency Bonds sales during the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars, "Project Renewal," "Operation Exodus," and the like. In 1993, for the first time ever, Israel Bond sales in Canada topped \$100 million, despite the recent collapse of prominent Jewish-owned businesses. Canadian Jews, moreover, continue to make generous financial contributions to private institutions in Israel, and they were among the first Diaspora Jews to invest heavily in Israeli commercial ventures.

There is little evidence of a repetition in Canada of the United States experience, where segments of the Jewish community abstained from annual Israel Bond campaigns as an expression of concern about the peace process or in reaction to statements attributed to top Israeli officials about Israel's no longer needing "charity" from the Diaspora. Nevertheless, some fund-raisers in Canada might find that an "Israel at peace" will be a harder "sell" in a community still suffering the effects of the recession. By the same token, this same image might make it easier for Canadian Jewish leaders to

gradually downgrade financial support for Israel in their list of priorities, as they move to apply diminishing communal dollars to growing internal needs.

There have been no quantitative surveys of Canadian Jewish attitudes about the peace process begun at Madrid in 1991. The attitudinal surveys referred to above found that, of those Canadian Jewish leaders who expressed an opinion on peace and security issues, slightly more were inclined toward the "dovish" end of the spectrum. However, equally interesting was the large proportion of the community elite who chose not to express an opinion about such issues (perhaps based on the proposition that it is inappropriate for Jews in the Diaspora to adopt strong positions on issues about which there is no overriding consensus in Israel).

To be sure, a number of prominent Canadian Jews are readily identified with the "doves" or "hawks" in Israel. However, all indicators suggest that the overwhelming majority of Canadian Jews remain viscerally supportive of Israel and of the decisions taken by the state's democratically elected authorities, *whichever government is in power*.

This visceral support for Israel is reflected in the positions adopted by the major Jewish organizations on key aspects of Canada's Middle East policy. For example, there is universal support for Canada's participation in the peace process (as "helpful fixer" and holder of the gavel for the multilateral working group on refugees), and for initiatives over the past two or three years to enhance the quality of bilateral economic relations. (These include the formation of the Canada-Israel Industrial Research and Development Fund, and the start of formal negotiations between Canadian and Israeli officials toward a bilateral free trade agreement.) Similarly, there is widespread consensus among Canadian Jews on specific differences of opinion between Canada and Israel. These issues include the status of Jerusalem and Canadian official visits with Palestinian authorities at "Orient House"; Canadian guidelines prohibiting arms sales to Israel or the procurement of weapons or dual-use commodities from Israel; and the strange case of Canada's receiving a growing number of "refugees" from Israel, despite overwhelming evidence that the accusations of persecution levelled against Israel by these claimants — mostly ex-citizens of the former Soviet Union — are baseless.

Ironically, the widespread belief among Canadian Jews that Israel is being unfairly treated in the "refugee" controversy has served to refocus the "Israel" component of the community's agenda, even as local and

* From 1989 to 1993 Canada's Immigration and Refugee Board approved a total of 297 applications for "refugee" status of individuals arriving from Israel. In 1994 alone, the IRB approved 380 cases, while rejecting 504. The acceptance rate for "refugee claimants" from Israel was ten percent in 1992, eight percent in 1993, and fifty percent in 1994.

national leaders move to direct more of the community's diminishing resources toward increasingly complex internal challenges. These include the following questions: Can the organized Jewish community adapt to the new conditions posed by its evolving internal dynamics, and by changes in the broader Canadian political, social, and economic environment? Will this adaptation be evolutionary, or must it entail a revolutionary change in the way in which Canadian Jews organize themselves and interact with each other and with the general community? And, can Canadian Jewry adjust to its new circumstances while preserving the qualities that have always made Canada unique among Diaspora Jewish communities? □



A Moving Russian Experience

Following the translation into Russian of his latest book, *The Challenge to Jewish Survival* by the Joint Distribution Committee, the editor of this journal was invited to participate in three 1996 winter conferences held in Russia — two in St. Petersburg and one in Moscow. It was his first encounter with Russian Jews on their home turf, and along with others who have witnessed a Jewish revival in the former Soviet Union (see, especially, the excellent articles in the February 1996 issue of *Moment* magazine), he too was deeply moved by the experience. Two principal characteristics marked his encounter: a) A sincere search for Jewish identity and a desire on the part of Russian Jews to return to Jewish history and peoplehood after seventy years of suppressive Communist rule; and b), a profound ignorance about the most elementary, taken-for-granted components of Jewish culture and experience.

At the first conference, 150 "Hebrew teachers" from different and even remote areas of the FSU met for several days, listened to speakers talk about Jewish education, and reported on their back-home educational activities. Many participants knew but little Hebrew — all talks were given or translated into Russian — and despite the fact that this was their sixth annual conference, none of the delegates had developed a systematic curriculum of Jewish studies nor a clear, comprehensive, educational purpose that they were ostensibly seeking to realize. Like the other two conferences, this one was essentially a much-needed social gathering reflecting fellowship, affinity, and belonging. Only a few participants expressed optimism regarding an assured future for Jews in the FSU, but for a variety of reasons, mostly personal, no one had immediate plans to migrate to Israel or elsewhere, and instead was prepared to engage in local Jewish revival.