

Jewish-Canadian Relations Before, During, and After the Holocaust

By Alana Lawson

In the late 19th and early 20th century there was a massive influx of Jewish immigrants to Canada, due largely to persecution in Eastern Europe. The newcomers settled mainly in urban areas and tended to band together. They congregated in certain neighbourhoods and continued to speak to each other in their native tongue, which for most Jewish immigrants was Yiddish. They also maintained many cultural traditions and rituals that pertained to their religion. This meant that Jews were a highly visible minority and were an easy target for xenophobia.

To understand the Canadian attitude towards the Jewish people within the country it is necessary to understand the socio-economic reality of Canada at that time. The decade that preceded the Second World War was one of extreme economic hardship for all Canadians; concern increased in French Canada that Francophone culture was in imminent danger of being swallowed up by the English majority. This was the time of the great depression, and 20% of the Canadian labour force was unemployed. Canadians had lost their sense of security and their faith in the democratic process and were struggling to define themselves as a nation. In the years since 1867, the year of Confederation, Canada viewed itself as a nation with the dual heritage of British and French origin and had established an uneasy balance between the two; the sudden extreme instability wrought by the depression resulted in greater polarization between the two distinct language groups and encouraged each group to believe that they were in direct competition in terms of values. This urge for self preservation was especially strong in Quebec, but was present all over Canada. It encouraged xenophobia and protective, and thus isolationist tendencies.

The Jewish people living in Canada were viewed as a particular threat to English Canadians because of their incredible adaptability. By the second generation of Jews living in Canada, the majority of them could speak English and were making great strides towards entering English society. Although they still lived in the same urban areas and neighbourhoods, they were attending English schools and becoming educated, particularly in the liberal arts, which encouraged them to become professors, doctors and lawyers. Previously, Jews had been relegated to working in factories, making textiles or industrial goods. This posed no threat to anybody; however, when they became upwardly mobile at a time when other Canadians were so concerned about their own livelihoods, the Jews became a threat. They were taking up spaces in universities and job placements that otherwise would be reserved for Canadians of British heritage. This led to unofficial

policies of exclusion at universities and unequal qualifications required for Jewish students and a general air of anti-Semitism. This had less to do with the Jews themselves being considered bad people and more to do with the attitude of English Canadians that they were entitled to certain positions, more so than anybody else.

For French Canadians, anti-Semitism took on a different tone entirely. There, anti-Jewish sentiment was overt and directly linking to their Catholic roots. The Catholic Church held a great deal of control in Quebec politics and education; most French Canadians viewed Catholicism as an integral part of their identity. They, too, felt threatened by the presence of Jews in their schools and traditional professions, but also felt that tolerance of the Jewish religion was an affront to their own. In fact, many students who attended university with Jews staged protests and wrote angry letters to their schools and to newspapers claiming that the student population was tainted. When a Jewish student was granted an internship of the hospital of Notre Dame in Montreal, the Catholic students went on strike until he resigned. This blatant anti-Semitism was seen as acceptable by many Canadians who were opposed to Judaism on the simple basis that it was not Christian.

This attitude was more common in French Canada, where religion played a larger role in society, but it was present all over the country as well. Everywhere, Jews faced exclusion based on their refusal to abandon their religion and ethnicity. These incidents, however, were mostly individual, and not part of a larger, organized anti-Semitism. There were groups dedicated to the hating of Jews, but they were not a widespread phenomenon. Far more prevalent was the tendency of Canadians to ignore the Jews altogether when not forced to deal with them directly. Canadian antipathy would be a far greater danger to the Jewish people in the years to come than active discrimination. During the 1930's Canada developed an extremely isolationist foreign policy. Immigration was reduced to next to nothing, as very few immigrants outside of Americans and British people were permitted to enter the country, and only a few of those were allowed in. Canada was largely uninterested in the goings on of other European countries as it was far more concerned in trying to turn its own economy around. In a way, this closed doors policy was very hurtful to Canada as a nation, as the country was vast and under-populated and more immigrants could have been used to further develop the land. However, there was still an underlying sense of xenophobia and self-preservation that permeated Canadian society, as well as latent anti-Semitism. Canadians were simply not interested in the plight of Europe's Jews.

Like most Westerners outside of Germany, Canadians felt a sense of unease about Hitler's government and the changes he was making in Germany, but they were not particularly concerned with German politics and were largely unaware of the atrocities he was committing right up until the later years of the war. In the years immediately preceding World War II there were reports of institutionalized anti-Semitism leaked into the Canadian press, but national lack of interest meant that those stories were relegated to the back pages of the newspaper and those that read them quickly forgot them. Again the issue was not an outright hostility towards Jews or the feeling that they deserved what was happening to them, although some people did share that belief, but in fact the problem was that Canadians simply did not care enough about the Jewish people to come to their aid. This is why the SS St. Louis, a ship carrying Jewish refugees, was sent back to Germany: Canada was not interested in outsiders, and did not care about the Jews. Even when war became inevitable and all of Europe was involved in the fighting, Canadians were allied to the British for reasons of loyalty and heritage, and did not join the war out of desire to stop the millions of murders that nobody could deny were being carried out.

For several years, perhaps even right up to 1943, many Canadians did not even believe the stories of the atrocities being committed in Germany; they believed the stories to be propaganda. This is probably because the idea of legally implemented genocide is so horrific that it is, in fact, difficult to believe, and because during the First World War there were falsified reports coming out of Germany that served to vilify the enemy. However, an additional explanation could be that Canadians did not want to believe that the Jews were being specifically targeted for mass murder, because to believe the reports would force Canadians to care about the struggles of the Jews, and, though some Canadians were willing to be sympathetic towards them as a minority, they were not open to taking action to protect the Jews. It is this attitude that led to turning away refugees, even after the war began, and the refusal to admit refugees resulted in many Jewish deaths. Even as church leaders and other prominent members of society began to speak out against the Canadian policy of exclusion, there was never enough public support for allowing more Jews to enter the country, even during the worst parts of the war when reports of mass murder were flowing into Canada, for the Canadian government to change the immigration policy.

After the war was over and the Germans defeated, there could be no denying that the Holocaust happened. Within Canada, the relationship between Canadians of British and French heritage and Jewish-Canadians changed, as the economy improved and the atmosphere of fear and

exclusion dissipated. It became easier for the Jews in Canada to make a living and become educated, and the Canadian people finally became openly sympathetic to the Jews and stopped viewing them specifically as a problem, but that was not the end of anti-Semitism in Canada. There have continued to be individual occurrences of anti-Semitism and hatred aimed at the Jews. Such hatred is not sanctioned by the government of Canada, particularly since the passing of the multiculturalism act in 1971, but that does not mean that xenophobia and racism no longer exist. Even after the atrocities committed by the Nazis during WWII and the deaths that resulted from Canada's refusal to change its strict immigration policy Canada has continued to be apathetic towards the Jews. It did not immediately reverse its racist immigration policy of giving preference to the British and American immigrants, nor did it immediately open its doors to Jewish refugees after the war. Canada has declared itself a multicultural nation, but what that means in practice had often been unclear. In all the years since the Holocaust occurred, Canada has never nationally acknowledged the struggle of the Jewish people during that time nor has it acknowledged the lack of support shown to the Jews by the country. Canada has no national monument to the Holocaust, one of the defining moments of the 20th century and an event that has had a massive influence on the state of the western world. This indicates ongoing apathy towards the Jewish people in Canada and a lack of appreciation for their struggle.

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