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CANADIAN JEWRY: A DIASPORA COMMUNITY IN TRANSITION

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Shifting Geographic Balance / Quebec's Unique Jewish Community / Confronting the Challenge of "Jewish Continuity" / Rising Rates of Intolerance / The Pursuit of Nazi War Criminals / Hard-Hit by the Recession / Attitudes Toward Israel, the Peace Process, and Canadian Policy

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.¹ 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 resource base resulting from the global recession.

Shifting Geographic Balance

The 1991 federal census reported that 365,315 Canadians 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 45 percent of the national total (see Table 1). In fact, Toronto's Jewish community experienced a 70 percent increase in the past two decades, constituting a "demographic revolution" unparalleled in North American Jewish life (see Table 2).

The Toronto Jewish 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" (1 in 4 doctors and 10 percent of all accountants, lawyers, and judges in Toronto are Jewish), some 20,000 Jews — constituting about 13 percent of the city's Jewish population — reportedly live below the poverty line.

Symptomatic of a broader structural problem affecting Jewish life in Canada is the fact that the doubling of the size of the Toronto community largely came as the result of the abandonment of

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Table 1
The Jewish Population of Canada:
Major Centers²

City	Jewish population	Percent of total	Total population
Toronto	162,605	4.2	3,863,110
Montreal	101,210	3.3	3,091,115
Vancouver	19,375	1.2	1,584,115
Winnipeg	15,050	2.3	645,610
Ottawa-Hull	11,555	1.3	912,095
CANADA	356,315	1.3	26,994,045

Table 2
Toronto's Jewish Community:
Population Growth³

Year	Population	Year	Population
1901	3,103	1951	66,773
1911	18,294	1961	85,000
1921	34,770	1971	97,000
1931	46,751	1981	128,650
1941	52,798	1991	162,605

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 centre 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; by the 1991 census, the number had slipped to 101,210 and declining. It is not only the absolute numbers 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 — 1 in 10 doctors, 1 in 20 accountants — the community is aging rapidly, many institutions are declining, and over 20 percent of 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 goes. If Quebecers vote to separate, the Jewish community could suffer various forms of discrimination, ranging from restrictive language laws to a drop in property values to the danger of businesses being nationalized. And some community leaders have expressed the fear that if the independence referendum fails, Quebec Jewry could be accused by the nationalist forces of having quietly favored, and financed, the "non" side.⁴

While Jews living in Montreal are obviously the most directly affected by the independence debate, Quebec's Jewish community still constitutes close to 30 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.

Confronting the Challenge of "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 intermarriage. While the current rate of Jewish intermarriage in Canada (between 15 and 20 percent⁵) remains significantly lower than in the United States, the growing trend toward intermarriage — 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 intermarriage.

Rising Rates of Intolerance

In the 1990s, Jews have 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.⁶ Yet, despite their objective circumstances, Canadian Jews continue to express deep concern about traditional and new forms of anti-Semitism, racism, and intolerance.⁷

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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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.

The Pursuit of Nazi War Criminals

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 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.¹²

Hard-Hit by the Recession

Given the disproportionate involvement of Canadian Jews in fields vulnerable to severe economic fluctuations (including manufacturing, retail, 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 reevaluate priorities. The practical implication of this is that the balance of

power in the community is shifting from the 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.¹³ 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 Jewish Federations (CJF) Canada?

Attitudes Toward 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.¹⁴ A series of qualitative surveys published in the late 1980s and 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 had been to Israel at least once, compared to 35 percent of American Jewish adults.

- * 87 percent of Canadian Jews agreed with the statement that "caring about Israel is a very important part of my being a Jew," compared to 73 percent of American Jews.

- * 85 percent of Canadian Jews agree 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 66 percent of American Jews.

- * 42 percent of Canadian Jews regarded themselves as "Zionists," compared to 23 percent of American Jewish respondents.

- * 21 percent of Canadian Jews said they "have seriously considered living in Israel," compared to 13 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 Jewry of annual issues of Israel Bonds, and they have contributed generously to special fund-raising projects, including emergency Bond sales during the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars,¹⁵

"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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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 shift financial support for Israel down the list of priorities as they move to apply diminishing communal dollars to growing internal challenges.

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, as well as one undertaken in the late 1980s by Harold Waller,¹⁸ 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 community elites 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 government, *whichever government it happens to be*.

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,¹⁹ despite overwhelming evidence that the accusations of persecution levelled against Israel by these claimants — mostly former 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 national leaders move to direct more of the community's diminishing resources toward increasingly complex internal challenges.

As the Canadian Jewish community approaches this next institutional and political crossroads, a number of questions present themselves as we consider the future: Can the organized Jewish community adapt to the new challenges 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 take the form of 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?

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Notes

1. Excellent overview analyses of the Canadian Jewish community are provided by Robert J. Brym, William Shaffir, and Morton Weinfeld, eds., *The Jews in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993); Daniel J. Elazar and Harold M. Waller, *Maintaining Consensus: The Canadian Jewish Polity in the Post-War World* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America and Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 1990); Morton Weinfeld, William Shaffir, and Irwin Cotler, eds., *The Canadian Jewish Mosaic* (Toronto: John Wiley and Sons, 1981).

2. Source: 1991 Federal Census; McGill Consortium for Ethnicity and Strategic Social Planning.

3. *Ibid.*

4. For earlier analyses of the Jewish community's attitudes about Quebec separatism, see Michael Brown, "Canadian Jewry: Challenges to a Growing Diaspora Community," *Jerusalem Letter* (April 15, 1990); Irwin Cotler and Ruth Wisse, "Quebec Jews: Caught in the Middle," *Commentary* (September 1977); Harold M. Waller and Morton Weinfeld, "The Jews of Quebec and 'Le Fait Francais'," in *The Canadian Jewish Mosaic*, *op. cit.*; Morton Weinfeld, "The Jews of Quebec: Perceived Anti-Semitism, Segregation, and Emigration," *Jewish Journal of Sociology* (June 1980); Morton Weinfeld, "The Jews of Quebec: An Overview," in *The Jews in Canada*, *op. cit.*

5. There is some discrepancy about the national rate of intermarriage among Canadian Jews. The federal census counts only the members of a household by religion, which is an imprecise measure of intermarriage. There has been no comprehensive survey of the national Jewish community on the question. Local surveys indicate that Montreal and Toronto have intermarriage rates of about 9 percent and 15 percent, respectively, while smaller communities in the Maritime provinces and western Canada tend to have much higher rates of marriages in which one of the spouses is not Jewish. [Sources: Federation CJA (Montreal); Jewish Federation of Greater Toronto; Council of Jewish Federations Canada; McGill Consortium for Ethnicity and Strategic Social Planning; *The Jews in Canada*, *op. cit.*]

6. See Irving Abella and Harold Troper, *None is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933-1948* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1982); Alan Davies, ed., *Antisemitism in Canada: History and Interpretation* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992).

7. See the comments of the outgoing president of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Professor Irving Abella, as cited in the *Montreal Gazette*, May 25, 1995.

8. Based on a survey conducted by the League for Human Rights of B'nai B'rith Canada, as cited in the *Toronto Star*, March 4, 1995.

9. See the *Toronto Star*, December 16, 1994, and the *Canadian Jewish News*, December 22, 1994.

10. See "Terrorists: Not Only in America," *Toronto Star*, May 1, 1995; and "The Enemy Within: The Far Right's Racist War Against Society is Opening New Fronts Across Canada," *Maclean's*, May 8, 1995.

11. *Toronto Star*, June 1, 1995.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Toronto Star*, October 23, 1994.

14. See, for example, the author's *Foreign Policy and Ethnic Interest Groups: American and Canadian Jews Lobby for Israel* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), as well as the following: Irving Abella, *A Coat of Many Colours: Two Centuries of Jewish Life in Canada* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1990); David J. Bercuson, *Canada and the Birth*

of Israel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985); Zachariah Kay, *Canada and Palestine: The Politics of Non-Commitment* (Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press, 1978); Ronni Miller, *From Lebanon to the Intifada: The Jewish Lobby and Canadian Middle East Policy* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1991); David Taras and David H. Goldberg, eds., *The Domestic Battleground: Canada and the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989); David Taras and Morton Weinfeld, "Continuity and Criticism: North American Jews and Israel," *International Journal* (Summer 1990) (reprinted in *The Jews in Canada, op. cit.*); Harold M. Waller, "A Re-Examination of Zionism in Canada," in *The Canadian Jewish Mosaic, op. cit.*

15. Harold M. Waller, "Canadian Jewry and the Impact of the Six-Day War: Crisis, Consensus, Division," in *The Six-Day War and Communal Dynamics in the Diaspora*, edited by Leah Cohen (Jerusalem: Avraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1994); Irwin Cotler, "Canada: Overview," in *The Yom Kippur War: Israel and the Jewish People*, edited by Moshe Davis (New York: Arno Press, 1974).

16. *Canadian Jewish News*, January 6, 1994.

17. "Canadian Rabbis Strongly Reject Bonds Boycott," *Canadian Jewish News*, February 3, 1994.

18. Harold M. Waller, "The Emerging Generation of Canadian Jewish Leaders," *Jerusalem Letter* (June 15, 1989).

19. From 1989 to 1993, Canada's Immigration and Refugee Board approved a total of 297 applications for "refugee" status for individuals arriving from Israel. In 1994 alone, the IRB approved 380 cases, while rejecting 504. The acceptance rate for "refugee claimants" from Israel was 10 percent in 1992, 8 percent in 1993, and 50 percent in 1994.

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