

# The Montreal Jewish Community and the Holocaust

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**Abstract** In 1933 Hitler and the Nazi party came to power in Germany. At the same time, in Canada in general and in Montreal in particular, anti-Semitism was becoming more widespread. The Canadian Jewish Congress, as a result of the growing tension in Europe and the increase in anti-Semitism at home, was reborn in 1934 and became the authoritative voice of Canadian Jewry. During World War II the Nazis embarked on a campaign that resulted in the systematic extermination of millions of Jews. This article focuses on the Montreal Jewish community, its leadership, and their response to the fate of European Jewry. The study pays particular attention to the Canadian Jewish Congress which influenced the outlook of the community and its subsequent actions. As the war progressed, loyalty to Canada and support for the war effort became the overriding issues for the community and the leadership and concern for their European brethren faded into the background.

**Keywords** Anti-Semitism · Holocaust · Montreal · Quebec · Canada · Bronfman · Uptowners · Downtowners · Congress · Caiserman

The 1930s, with the devastating worldwide economic depression and the emergence of Nazism in Germany, set the stage for a war that would result in tens of millions of deaths and the mass extermination of Europe's Jews. The decade marked a complete stoppage of Jewish immigration to Canada, an increase in anti-Semitism on the North American continent, and the revival of the Canadian Jewish Congress as the voice for the Canadian Jewish community.

Montreal, with its large Jewish population, was the cultural and political centre of Canadian Jewish life. The Canadian Jewish Congress was headquartered in Montreal. Its executives, then, while heading a nation-wide organization, were also the leaders of

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the Montreal Jewish community. This community assumed the mantle of leadership for Canadian Jewry. The city and its community became the focal point for any actions undertaken on behalf of European Jewry. In the 1930s and 1940s the Montreal Jewish community also bore the brunt of the anti-Semitic upsurge in Canada.

According to demographer Louis Rosenberg, from 1921 to 1931 there was a trend “for the Jewish population of Greater Montreal to move from the so-called Jewish wards of St. Louis and Laurier to the neighbouring satellite cities of Outremount and Westmount.”<sup>1</sup> This departure can be explained by a desire to advance economically and to obtain better housing. However, there was also the wish by a segment of the Jewish community to assimilate into a more “Canadian” milieu, a need to become less visible as Jews in a non-Jewish environment. The departure from the Jewish area marked a move away from what many considered a ghetto, an area of the city where Jews lived in a sort of self-imposed segregation, separated from the non-Jewish communities.

This wish to shed the image of the ghettoized Jew that many Jews perceived as embarrassing and undesirable was not unique to the Montreal Jewish community.<sup>2</sup> Unlike Eastern Europe, where many of these immigrants came from, North America with its seemingly endless opportunities appeared to offer the Jew a chance to become part of the mainstream. It was assumed that discrimination could be overcome. But to overcome anti-Jewish prejudice, it was necessary to blend in, to assimilate into a society that would accept the Jew as a full-fledged citizen, as an equal among others. Assimilation, assuming an identity as a Canadian, held out hope for the future.

In Montreal, in the first and second decade of the 1900s, the arrival of new waves of immigrants led to the formation of two distinct Jewish communities. The uptown Jews were the wealthy and anglicized old guard and the downtowners were the recent arrivals who lived in the area along St. Laurent Boulevard, affectionately referred to as “The Main.” The street forms the east–west dividing line in the city. The area around this street north of the downtown core was the Jewish area of Montreal from the turn of the century to the 1950s.<sup>3</sup>

The waves of Jewish immigrants to Montreal from the 1900s onward were generally from Eastern Europe and most were Yiddish speaking.<sup>4</sup> With their language, their Jewish nationalism, their attire and their left-wing politics, these new arrivals did not identify with the members of the established Jewish community. They were outsiders both to the non-Jewish world that existed beyond “The Main” and to the assimilated Jewish community. Time and space separated them from their established brethren; they were “marked” by when they arrived in Canada and by the neighborhoods in which they lived. The Jewish community was fragmented and the divisions went even

<sup>1</sup>Louis Rosenberg, *Canada's Jews: A Social and Economic Study of Jews in Canada in the 1930s*, (Montreal: Bureau of Social and Economics Research, Canadian Jewish Congress 1939), 31.

<sup>2</sup>In a study of the Chicago Jewish Ghetto of the early 1900s, Louis Wirth writes of the Jew who desperately wanted to escape from the ghetto and become a “true” American. Louis Wirth, *The Ghetto*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1965), 261. Originally published in 1928.

<sup>3</sup>Joe King, *From the Ghetto to the Main: The Story of the Jews of Montreal* (Montreal: The Montreal Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 102.

<sup>4</sup>The biggest jump in the Jewish population was found in the census of 1911. Louis Rosenberg states that this was due to persecution in Russia and Romania in the first decade of the 20th century. Rosenberg, 11.

beyond the downtown–uptown barriers as Jews were also divided by assimilationist versus nationalist beliefs, religious convictions, and political ideologies.

The Jewish communities, although perceived by outsiders as close-knit and monolithic, were in fact split and rarely spoke with one voice. In Montreal, the downtowners had strength in numbers, but coming from areas of Europe where discrimination against Jews was widespread and where Jews had no voice in government, they lacked the ability to mobilize as an effective unit. Added to the apparent political impotency of the downtowners was the belief that they could best be served by the established Jews and thus as a rule they allotted power to both provincial and federal candidates who they assumed would best represent them in the corridors of power.

The rise in anti-Semitism in Canada led to an acceptance of the *sha-shtill* attitude, a Yiddish expression that translates as “keep quiet” or more aptly as “don’t rock the boat.” Many in the Jewish community believed that if they stayed out of the public eye, the government would be more willing to listen to representatives of the community, both those elected to government and those chosen to speak for the community through Jewish agencies. However, it was a policy that ended up in tatters as the government came to the realization that dealing with Jewish representatives at a time of economic hardship and increased anti-Semitism led to little, if any, political capital and often proved detrimental to the interests of the policy-makers.

On Monday, January 30 1933, President Hindenburg appointed Adolph Hitler Chancellor of the Reichstag, the German parliament. Jews in Montreal at that time wished to show their opposition to the Nazi government in Germany. Rallies were organized by the Montreal Jewish community and large protests were held. In an editorial in the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle*, the Montreal Jewish weekly, one particular rally held was billed as “The Mighty Voice of Humanity,” and the *Chronicle* emphasized the “expressions of horror and resentment from the eminent non-Jews who were present...”<sup>5</sup> From the time of the rise of Hitler, the Montreal Jewish community was convinced that any action on behalf of European Jewry had to be taken with the support of the non-Jewish community.

Jews saw themselves facing two threats, one from overseas and one homegrown. Of special concern was the Quebec situation, where anti-Semitism appeared ingrained in the politics of the province. Lionel Groulx, a Quebec Catholic priest, historian and one of the intellectual leaders of the Quebec nationalist movement of the 1930s, published anti-Semitic articles in his paper, *L’Action Nationale*, which appealed to an educated, well-to-do audience. Anatole Vanier, one of the paper’s directors, wrote that with the Nazi takeover of Germany, the Jews in Germany were getting what they deserved and a similar fate awaited them in Quebec: “What is happening in the new Germany is germinating everywhere where Jews are considered as intruders. And where, one may well ask, are they considered otherwise?”<sup>6</sup> David Rome, historian and archivist at the Canadian Jewish Congress, condemned both the Catholic hierarchy and Quebec for their refusal to speak out during the

<sup>5</sup>“The Mighty Voice of Humanity,” *Canadian Jewish Chronicle*, 14 April, 1933, 3.

<sup>6</sup>“Les Juifs au Canada,” *L’Action Nationale*, September 1933 in Erna Paris, *Jews: An Account of Their Experience in Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada 1980), 52. Translation by Paris.

Holocaust. “Unlike the situation in many other countries, *even in Germany*, there was, in Canada, no Catholic dissent from anti-Semitism; there was no Quebec condemnation of Nazism, there was no Quebec plea for the threatened....”<sup>7</sup>

The book *None Is Too Many* by the historians, Irving Abella and Harold Troper, examines the Canadian government’s callous disregard for the Jews of Europe. In meticulous fashion, the authors explore government measures taken to prevent Jews from entering the country before, during and after the Holocaust. The two Canadian scholars, though they write of a Canadian public that remained uncaring and unwilling to admit Jewish refugees into the country, pay special attention to and single out for sharp criticism the prevalent anti-Semitism in Quebec. A Gallup poll conducted in 1944 revealed that “[A]mong those who emphasized the need for strict racial selectivity, many, especially French-speaking respondents, specified ‘No Jews’...With the force of nativism on the rise across Canada, it was still most concentrated and vocal in Quebec.”<sup>8</sup> The French press, according to Abella and Troper, spoke with one voice against the admission of Jewish refugees.<sup>9</sup>

The Jew-hatred in Quebec reminded Jews of the anti-Semitic invective that was being spewed in the German Reichstag; it was a type of anti-Semitism that many perceived as belonging to the streets of Berlin, not those of Montreal. To the Jewish community the anti-Semitism that was seen as so vicious in nature and that echoed the language of National Socialism could not be distinguished at the time from the anti-Jewish vitriol that was sweeping through Germany. Whatever nuances and differences there were separating the anti-Semitism in Quebec from the more deadly variety in Nazi Germany, to the Jews in Montreal the drumbeats of the Nazis in Germany and the anti-Semitic rallies in Quebec sounded the same.

In retrospect, it is clear that although the situation in Quebec was far from idyllic, it could not be compared to Germany. Jews did not have to endure a state-sponsored campaign of intimidation and terror. Nevertheless, in the Montreal Jewish community there was concern for what might happen. Some may have seen the German situation as a harbinger of things to come. In Germany, Jews had been integrated for centuries into German life and culture; yet they became seemingly overnight the victims of extreme intolerance. Because of their recent arrival to Canada, some Jews would now see themselves in a tenuous position. Some felt as vulnerable as their German brethren.

These threats to Canada’s Jews made the resurrection of the Canadian Jewish Congress a necessity.<sup>10</sup> The first Congress had been established in 1919 by the downtowners.<sup>11</sup> But that Congress died a quick death, never functioning as a

<sup>7</sup>David Rome, *Clouds in the Thirties: On Antisemitism in Canada, 1929–1939*, Section 1 (Montreal, National Archives, Canadian Jewish Congress 1977), 81. Italics added.

<sup>8</sup>Irving Abella and Harold Troper, *None Is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933–1948*, (Toronto, Lester and Orpen Dennys 1983), 162.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>10</sup>“A Jewish Congress in Canada,” *CJC*, 5 May 1933, 3–4.

<sup>11</sup>Congress was created because the downtowners felt that uptown Jews were not dealing properly with money collected to support European Jewry during World War I. The downtowners wished to donate all the money to their European brethren; the uptowners who were in charge of the distribution of funds donated most of the money to local Montreal charities. “The downtowners saw red...From their frustration the idea of a United Jewish Congress was born.” Erna Paris, 35.

cohesive national organization after its first session. Even as the new Congress was reborn in 1934 so that Canadian Jewry would speak with one voice, it still faced enormous obstacles in a community racked with dissension.

Although Congress was trying to become a national organization, uniting Jews from coast to coast, it remained in actual fact a Montreal-based operation during this period. In 1933, the downtowners envisioned a Congress that would “utilize the authority of the populace instead of the traditional influence of those who were well connected.”<sup>12</sup> As David Rome has pointed out, the Congress ideology was “an outgrowth of the Jewish labour nationalist movement.”<sup>13</sup> The downtowners resented the tendency of the wealthy to assume leadership of all Jewish organizations as if by birthright; in turn the uptowners, to quote Rome again, “tolerated the presence of the Jewish Congress, but not wholeheartedly.”<sup>14</sup> The consequence was that for the first 5 years of the reborn Congress, the organization was in a constant state of financial turmoil. It became a virtual one-man operation, run out of the Montreal office on a shoestring budget by the General Secretary, H.M. Caiserman.

In Germany, conditions for Jews worsened. Jews who wanted to leave were faced with insurmountable obstacles. Besides having to relinquish most of their possessions before leaving the country, many had nowhere to go. Most western countries were still in the midst of an economic slowdown which exacerbated the unemployment situation. As the refugee crisis in Europe worsened, many countries closed their borders to immigration. Added to the closed door policy of many nations including Canada was the fear of any Jewish influx. Anti-Semitism had made the Jew a most unwelcome immigrant.

Many within the Jewish community believed not only that it was unwise to publicize any demands made by Jews, but also that it was harmful to even suggest that there was a “Jewish problem.” Many worried that too much emphasis on Jewish suffering in Europe would lead not to sympathy but to an anti-Semitic backlash. One writer in the *Chronicle* who decried the publicity claimed that any mention of Jewish hardships in Nazi Germany “has a bad effect on the relationship with non-Jews at home.”<sup>15</sup> The leaders of the community, perhaps because they feared the growth of anti-Semitism at home, began to adopt an attitude that downplayed the suffering of their brethren in Europe. It was an attitude that was to continue throughout the war years as the Jewish leadership increasingly placed the Jewish issue in a broader context of Nazi atrocities. In order to garner support from the Canadian public and Canadian government, the fact that there was an effort on the part of the Nazis to target the Jews for persecution and eventually for extermination had to be sublimated to a theme that spoke of universal suffering under the Nazis. It would become one of the ironies of the coming catastrophe that in order to save Jews in Europe it was deemed necessary not to mention them.

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<sup>12</sup>David Rome, “The National Story” in *Pathways to the Present: Canadian Jewry and the Canadian Jewish Congress*. (Toronto: Canadian Jewish Congress 1986), 2.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup>William Zukerman, “Is Publicity Good for the Jews?: The Reaction to Newspaper Reports of Pogroms,” *CJC*, 22 July 1938, 8.

On the non-Jewish side as well the “Jewish problem” was not mentioned. When government officials spoke of their inability to handle a large influx of refugees, many people knew what was being implied. Anti-Semitism, though prevalent in western countries, was becoming associated with the Hitler regime and thus to avoid charges of anti-Semitism, the plight of European Jewry was camouflaged, hidden in a language that did not specifically mention the Jew.

Both sides, Jewish and non-Jewish, manipulated language and engaged in doublespeak. For public consumption, both governments and community leaders used euphemisms when they referred to the “refugees of Europe.” The Jews in Europe became in time invisible entities, and while not forgotten by their Jewish brethren, their appalling situation was masked under the horrors of Nazism, an ideology that threatened everyone.

On November 8th and 9th 1938, the Jewish communities in Germany were attacked with a fury that surpassed any previous anti-Semitic acts of violence carried out by the Nazi regime. In a night-long rampage that became known as *Kristallnacht* or “Night of Broken Glass,” Hitler unleashed his forces on the Jewish population in Germany. This manifestation of Nazi policy shocked the Jews of Germany and stunned the Jewish communities in Canada.

The Jewish leadership tried to enlist the help of non-Jews in protesting the actions of Nazi Germany and in opening the way for refugees to come to Canada. The leadership and the Jewish press began more and more to frame the issue of Jewish suffering in a manner that gave it relevance to the rest of the Canadian population. They tried to convince the public and the government that their cause was right and just, not because it affected Jews but because Nazism would have consequences for a significant portion of the general population. In an editorial in the *Chronicle*, for example, Nazism becomes not only a threat to Jews but also a worldwide menace that would endanger non-Jews.

To-day it is the Jews who have been reduced to serfdom, decreed into helotry, made lower than the worm. But to-morrow? ... To-morrow it will be Catholics, the Protestants, all Christians whose doctrine of love is anathema to the savages who have sprung up upon the seats of the mighty in Germany. There is a lunatic abroad in Europe; and the world had better give heed.<sup>16</sup>

*Kristallnacht*, because it received much press coverage throughout North America, opened the doors for Congress to protest publicly on behalf of their German coreligionists. Congress declared November 20th a day of mourning with memorial meetings in Jewish communities throughout Canada. But these meetings held to protest anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany were to be seen as primarily Christian responses to the atrocities. Caiserman advised:

It is preferable that these memorial meetings be non-sectarian in scope and it is advisable that non-Jewish leaders in the various communities should be asked to endorse the calling of such meetings and, if possible, take part in the

<sup>16</sup>“Vandal and Victim,” CJC, 18 November 1938, 3.

arrangements.... Moreover, it is important that most speakers at these meetings should be gentiles prominent in political life, church leaders, etc.<sup>17</sup>

The Montreal memorial was held in a venue located far from the Jewish area, which accentuated the non-Jewish nature of the meeting. The *Chronicle*, with a front-page photograph of the meeting, illustrated the Christian character of the rally, as non-Jews dominated the platform.<sup>18</sup> The newspaper emphasized the need for the “full co-operation not only of all Jews, but also of good and liberal Christians...”<sup>19</sup>

In January 1939, Samuel Bronfman, a well-known figure in the Jewish community and one of Canada’s richest men, was asked to become president of the Canadian Jewish Congress.<sup>20</sup> Bronfman, with his wealth and influence, was an obvious choice. The *Chronicle* stressed the celebrity quality of the Bronfman name and his ability to bring into Congress the uptowners who had for the most part remained outside the fold: “The very prestige with which his name is associated should serve to bring into Congress activity those elements which for one reason or another, have held themselves, like expensive ostriches, blind and aloof from the major Jewish problems of the time.”<sup>21</sup>

Bronfman was determined to change Congress. He brought with him a contingent of Jews who had the means and the skills to create a more efficient and more solvent organization. The influx of members and money from the uptown Jewish community did make Congress a financially-stable organization. With more resources and more uptown members this rejuvenated institution now presented a new agenda to the community. It initiated a program that was based on the uptowners’ perception of the Jewish community.

In his opening address to Congress Bronfman set forth his aims for the Jewish community, “First, Jews had to be patriotic; second, Jews had to speak as one.”<sup>22</sup> The speech was exceptionally noteworthy for the fact that he made no reference to the situation of German Jewry or to anti-Semitism in Canada.<sup>23</sup> For Bronfman, Jews had to be seen as even better citizens than their Christian neighbours.

We as Jews, have a chance to build up a full position of citizenship and equality which is a privilege belonging to the citizens of the British Empire. It is the responsibility of Congress to see that the Jews are good citizens in their respective communities across Canada, and to so conduct themselves that they will gain the respect of their fellow citizens...the non-Jewish citizens. We have got to be just that much better to gain their respect.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>17</sup>H.M. Caiserman, Letter from the Dominion Council of Canadian Jewish Congress, November 15, 1938.

<sup>18</sup>“Montreal Voices Horror at Plight of German Jews”, CJC, 25 November, 1938, headlines.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., “What Now?”, 4.

<sup>20</sup>Michael Marrus, *Mr. Sam: The Life and Times of Samuel Bronfman* (Toronto: Viking, 1991), 259–260.

<sup>21</sup>“Mr. Samuel Bronfman, President of Canadian Jewish Congress,” CJC 27 January 1939, 3.

<sup>22</sup>Marrus, 264.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>“Verbatim speech of Samuel Bronfman, of Montreal, following his election as new president of the Canadian Jewish Congress at the Royal York Hotel, Monday night (January 23, 1939).” Bronfman, Samuel, Box No.2, Congress archives.

The Bronfman message as war approached became a kind of mantra, repeated at gatherings in an attempt to make the Jewish community understand that they lived in a country that supported them; that they were part of an empire that brought them security and hope. Even in August 1939, Bronfman's speeches, while expressing his profound love for Canada and the British Empire, all but ignored the coming tragedy. In a brief reference to the crisis facing European Jewry, Bronfman remained confident in the future.

Were it not for democracies, we Jews would face a hopeless future. If, therefore, some sections of our people throughout the world today, find themselves at sea, I am thankful that Britannia rules the Sea, because when she occupies that position, we as Jews have little to fear.<sup>25</sup>

The downtowners, for all their misgivings, came to accept Bronfman. To this community Bronfman, while coming seemingly from another world, represented wealth and power. In a community that was bereft of these two attributes Bronfman was the leader who many believed would in time influence both public opinion and government policy.

On September 1st 1939, Germany invaded Poland. On September 3rd England and France declared war on Germany, marking the beginning of World War II. Canada declared war 1 week later on September 10th. In the months following the outbreak of the war, reports of atrocities perpetrated by the German forces on the Jewish population of Poland filled the Jewish press. Although the news focused on Jewish suffering, the Jewish press and the leadership of the community were well aware of the importance of not giving the Jewish issue too much attention. Canada's entry into the war meant that the universalization of the struggle against Nazism became more and more the guiding principle for the press. In an eloquent essay in the Montreal Yiddish daily, the *Kanader Adler* (*The Canadian Eagle*), A.M. Klein wrote,

There is no doubt about it—the barbarian is loose in Europe. A lunatic is running amok. His victims today are of one kind; to-morrow, should he succeed, they will be of another. He must not succeed! If civilization is to persist, he must be destroyed.<sup>26</sup>

The community leaders and the press realized that they would also have to emphasize that this war was not one that was being fought for the Jews of Europe; it was a common struggle against a totalitarian regime that knew no bounds. Anti-Jewish propaganda had portrayed Jews as being responsible for countless wars, and the idea that this war was tied to a “Jewish conspiracy” had to be dispelled. As an editorial in the *Chronicle* explained:

Others, again, inspired by cowardice or fascism, or both, have, under the protection of the democratic privileges of freedom of speech, shouted from the roof-tops that this is a “Jewish-war.”....No, this is neither an imperialistic war, nor a “Jews’ war.” Its objectives are simple, indeed. They were succinctly and

<sup>25</sup>“Address of Mr. Sam Bronfman, President of the Canadian Jewish Congress, at the Second Session of

<sup>26</sup>“Of All Things: German Shrecklichkeit,” Adler, 12 Sept. 1939, 6. The essay was written in English.

admirably expressed by Prime Minister Chamberlain right at the outset of the war. They are “to crush Hitlerism,” to safeguard democracy, and to re-establish the rule of reason, instead of force, in international relations.<sup>27</sup>

Jewish leadership had stayed in the background prior to the start of the war, but the attack on Poland and Canada’s entry into the war meant that the leadership would involve the community in a national effort to fight Germany.<sup>28</sup> Supporting the Canadian effort and winning the war became the overriding issues for all Canadians. Ever mindful of anti-Semitism and knowing full well that the war, with Canadians serving and dying overseas, might increase animosity towards their community, the Jewish press and leadership vociferously displayed their patriotism.

Hitler’s armies began their relentless march through Europe 7 months after the invasion of Poland. The collapse of France, the evacuation of Dunkirk and the bombing of population centres in England finally brought home the horrors of war to the entire Canadian population. For the Jewish communities in Canada, the anti-Semitism of the Nazi regime and its effects on European Jewry were replaced by concern for a war that had engulfed most of Europe, and as many believed, posed a threat to life in North America.

It was not solely the words of Bronfman which created the mindset that loyalty to Canada should take precedence over all other concerns. The battle was being waged against a war machine that seemed unstoppable. The very nature of this life and death struggle made the Jewish community part of the national effort to combat Nazi Germany. The media and the government made it clear that the war against Germany was a fight that demanded the full and unquestioned support of the entire citizenry. As news of German successes and Allied setbacks filled the airwaves, as newspapers began to highlight the threats of the German juggernaut in its march through Europe, the community became part of the national effort to fight this menace. Any concerns for the fate of European Jewry were replaced by a determined effort by the leadership to enlist Jews into the armed forces and accentuate Jewish loyalty on the home front. The community, mainly through the efforts of Congress, not only concentrated on how best to respond to Canada’s war needs, but also focused on publicizing its war effort.

The need to demonstrate loyalty was highlighted in a letter from H.M. Caiserman. He sent out a confidential appeal discussing the initiation of a program to encourage Jews to enlist.

Our enemies are insinuating that the Jews are not enlisting for the military services in the present emergency...The Dominion Council of the Canadian Jewish Congress at an extraordinary session decided that a liaison registration office be opened to give information and to aid in the recruiting of Jewish men.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup>“Our War Aims,” CJC, 13 September 1939, 3.

<sup>28</sup>“Canadian Jews Organize to Help This Country in the War Against Hitler,” Adler, 11 September 1939, 1.

<sup>29</sup>H.M. Caiserman, Canadian Jewish Congress, Dominion Council, Confidential, Urgent. September 22, 1939. Box 4, ZA 1939, 32–45A, 4/35, Congress archives.

The public relations aspect of the Jewish war effort became one of the cornerstones of Congress's agenda. Groups, committees and organizations were set up by Congress to keep track of Canadian Jewry's contribution to the war. The Jewish leadership, well-aware of the precarious position of the community, sought to increase Jewish enrollment in the Canadian military and show non-Jewish Canadians that not only were Jews loyal but they also stood behind their words by enlisting in large numbers to serve their country.<sup>30</sup> During the war, Congress revealed figures highlighting the Jewish contribution to the war. In November 1943, the organization released a report stating that "The enlistment of Jews in the fighting forces of the dominion is higher than their proportion in the population of the country."<sup>31</sup>

By the summer of 1942, the so-called fog of war had lifted sufficiently to reveal what was happening to European Jewry. While this fog may have hidden more precise details on the nature of the extermination operations, there was mounting evidence that, starting with the invasion of the Soviet Union, the mass murder of Jews had developed into a planned systematic genocide. In a letter to Sam Bronfman urging action, H.M. Caiserman spoke of the carnage in Europe.

For weeks and months the newspapers have brought us the horrible items of the massacres of Jews in Europe. There has taken place a slaughtering of our brethren in Germany, Slovakia, Austria, Hungary, Romania, Italy—in all Nazi-occupied countries on a scale that no human being can conceive.<sup>32</sup>

One of the most ambitious undertakings to publicize the genocide in Europe and to bring the mass murders to the attention of the Canadian public occurred in the fall of 1942. It was planned at a time when news coming out of Europe foreshadowed the catastrophe that would befall European Jewry. Congress had begun preparations for protest rallies to highlight Germany's crimes against the Jews. The rallies were to bring to the attention of the entire Canadian population the horrific deeds that were being perpetrated against the Jews. The inspiration for these rallies came from the American Jewish Congress which held a protest demonstration at Madison Square Garden on July 21, 1942. The American Jewish Congress in a letter to its Canadian counterpart pointed out the need for such a rally:

We feel that it is important that this meeting should be held both to give the Jewish community an opportunity to register its feelings with respect to mass massacres of its fellow Jews, and also to evoke the kind of response from Democratic governments which would be a challenge to Hitler as well as a moral sustenance [sic] to the Jewish community.<sup>33</sup>

Although demonstrations were to be held across the country, the focal point was to be the rally at the Montreal Forum.

<sup>30</sup>Gerald Tulchinsky, *Branching Out: The Transformation of the Canadian Jewish Community* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998), 204–205.

<sup>31</sup>CJC Memorandum, Subject: Jewish Enlistments, November 25, 1943. National Dominion Council, 1943, Box 4 Series BA, Congress archives.

<sup>32</sup>Letter from Caiserman to Bronfman, ZA 1942, 3/30 Box 3, ZA 1942, 29–41, July 21, 1942, Congress archives.

<sup>33</sup>Letter from American Jewish Congress to Saul Hayes Executive Director, Canadian Jewish Congress, July 16 1942, CJC ZA 1942, 3/30, Box 3, ZA 1942, 29–41, Congress archives.

The announcements leading up to the demonstration issued by Congress presented the theme of Jewish suffering under Nazi oppression. As a letter sent out to the Jewish leadership in Montreal stated,

As you already know, the Canadian Jewish Congress is calling a Mass Meeting to express sorrow and protest at the inhuman atrocities directed by the Nazis against our brothers and sisters in Nazi-occupied countries.... The inhuman sufferings and tribulations of our unfortunate brethren in occupied countries should arouse the conscience of every civilized man and women.... We must let our voices be heard! We must arouse public opinion!<sup>34</sup>

Two days before the rally the cover page of the *Chronicle* announced in boldface print “Protest Against Monstrous Treatment of Jews in Occupied Europe!”<sup>35</sup> Its editorial stated that the demonstration would bring to expression “the sense of horror which has shuddered the civilized world at the Nazi record of unrelenting and ruthless inhumanity to the Jewish population held in its clutches.”<sup>36</sup> The rally was a major turnabout for the Jewish community, which had generally shunned protests and chosen “quiet diplomacy” from its leadership.

But the demonstration strayed from its original objective; it was orchestrated in such a way that very little was said of the Jewish tragedy. The rally was managed in a manner that buried the message of Jewish suffering and mass murders under a torrent of information that emphasized Jewish loyalty and Canada’s war against Germany.

Most of the speeches by the participants of the rally focused on the war effort. Norman A. McLarty, Canadian Secretary of State, praised the demonstration since it gave Christians and Jews an opportunity “to join hands in a rededication of our energies, our fortunes and our very lives to the cause of freedom and to total victory of the United Nations.”<sup>37</sup> Mr. J. Pierrepont Moffat, the United States Minister to Canada, “paid tribute to the great contribution the Jews have made in this struggle.”<sup>38</sup>

Samuel Bronfman, chairman of the meeting, did mention the mass killing of Jews but the Jewish catastrophe became part of the greater struggle, “Not we alone are its victims, Frenchmen and Czech, Norwegian and Dane, Pole and Yugo-Slav, Dutchman and Greek, all have learned the meaning of that New Order whose monuments appear—on the cemeteries of Europe.”<sup>39</sup> Bronfman emphasized the Allies’ sympathy for the Jews and especially the Canadian government’s compassion for the Jews in Vichy France.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>34</sup>“To The Heads of Jewish Organizations in Montreal” Canadian Jewish Congress, Michael Garber, September 23 1942, CJC ZA 1942, 2/25, Box 2, ZA 1942, 15–28, Congress archives.

<sup>35</sup>CJC, October 9, 1942, 1.

<sup>36</sup>“A Meeting of Protest and Self-Dedication”, CJC, 9 October 1942, 3.

<sup>37</sup>“Thousands Attend Protest Rally,” CJC, 12 October 1942, 1.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>“Great is Our Mourning, But Greater Still is Our Determination Not to Pause: Sam Bronfman,” CJC, October 1942, 12.

<sup>40</sup>The Summary Report at the Sixth Plenary Session states that the formal complaint by Samuel Bronfman to Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King regarding the deportation of French Jews to Poland resulted in King’s subsequent protest to the Vichy Government. It was one of the few requests by Congress that resulted in any action by the Canadian government. “Efforts to Rescue the Surviving Jews of Europe.” Summary Report (1942–1944), Congress archives.

The rally did get some coverage in the non-Jewish press but atrocities against European Jews were not mentioned. Massacres by the Nazis were described with no reference to Jewish victims. The *Gazette* focused on McLarty's outline of Canada's war role and the need to press on to final victory, "The winning of this war is the one and only purpose to which we must devote ourselves."<sup>41</sup> The *Montreal Daily Star* provided similar coverage and the ongoing mass murder of Jews was buried in a language that spoke of the "persecution of temporarily conquered people."<sup>42</sup>

There were other attempts to publicize the plight of European Jewry. In December 1942, a "Day of Mourning" was declared, but it drew few participants and was criticized by A.B. Bennett, an executive of Congress. Bennett in an article in the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle*, viewed these demonstrations as counterproductive, "Can we therefore afford to divert our attention and energy from the practical tasks at hand and indulge in an orgy of unproductive hysteria."<sup>43</sup> In April 1943, a petition campaign to bring Jews to Canada was initiated by Saul Hayes, Director of the United Jewish Relief Agencies of Canada and Executive Director of Congress. Hayes was one of the few figures within Congress who actively and at times vociferously criticized the government for its failure to act on Jewish immigration. But Hayes's efforts were not limited to bringing the issue of European Jewry to the attention of the government. He also tried to rally the Jewish community and the leadership to do all that they could to protest the systematic mass murder of the Jews. For all his efforts, Hayes met with little success. Hayes not only had to contend with an unsympathetic government but also had his detractors within the Jewish community. Some were wary of any moves that might be seen as pressure tactics that would embarrass the government by highlighting Jewish suffering.

The decisive attack against Jewish immigration came on November 7, 1943, when Maurice Duplessis, leader of the Union Nationale and former premier of Quebec, in a pre-election meeting, threw a political bombshell at the opposition Liberals, both federal and provincial.<sup>44</sup> Brandishing a letter that he claimed proved that his political opponents had joined forces with the "International Zionist Brotherhood," Duplessis charged that in return for financing Liberal candidates this "International Zionist Brotherhood" would be permitted to settle one hundred thousand Jews in Quebec. His anti-Semitic outburst found a welcome audience.

Duplessis was elected premier. While Duplessis's ploy was not pivotal to his victory, the incident in Quebec had repercussions in Ottawa. Prime Minister Mackenzie King and his party could not help but notice the uproar in Quebec. King knew that the mood across the country was decidedly against immigration. The type of anti-Semitism displayed by Duplessis and echoed by nationalist groups in Quebec may have been more vocal than the bigotry in the rest of the country, but the

<sup>41</sup>"McLarty Outlines Canada's War Role: Calls for All-Out Effort in Addressing Rally to Protest Nazi Atrocities," *Gazette*, 12 October 1942, Section 2, 13.

<sup>42</sup>"Jews' War Efforts All-Out, Hon. Pierrepoint Moffat Tells Rally," *Montreal Daily Star*, 12 October 1942, 3.

<sup>43</sup>A.B. Bennett, "Emotional Orgies", *CJC*, 11 December 1942, 6.

<sup>44</sup>Abella and Troper (1983), 162–164.

message was the same.<sup>45</sup> Canada may have been battling a rabid anti-Semitic regime overseas, but at home nativism and bigotry still had a firm foothold. While the petition campaign was to continue, it was outpaced by the anti-Semitic sentiment that swept the country.

After the revelations that most of European Jewry had been destroyed, the Jewish leadership in January 1945 issued reports to describe their activities during the Holocaust. In the *Summary Report at the Sixth Plenary Session of the Canadian Jewish Congress*, the “accomplishments” of Congress are contained in a two-page document entitled “Efforts to Rescue the Surviving Jews of Europe.” The report was issued in full cognizance of the tragedy that had befallen Europe’s Jews and acknowledged the failure of Congress as its efforts had proved “unavailing against the heedless fury of the enemy.”<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, it presented an image of a determined Congress that had maintained a working relationship with the government which was amenable to the pleas for help and rescue that emanated from the organization.<sup>47</sup> The reports made no mention of government intransigence. Despite Congress’ claims, the efforts mounted by the community and its leadership had been for the most part ineffectual.<sup>48</sup> They could not have been otherwise, considering the policies of the Canadian Government and the anti-Semitism that was endemic in a large portion of the Canadian population.

Following the war, the Holocaust, for more than a decade, received scant attention. The event was forgotten in a world that focused on the Cold War, as former enemies became allies, and former allies became enemies. Thus, the issue of the Nazi genocide was seldom raised in North America. West Germany, its past whitewashed, became the so-called fortress of freedom in the fight against the totalitarian state, the Soviet Union.

How strange it is that the systematic extermination of millions of Jews was overlooked in a world that now sees the Holocaust as a pivotal event of twentieth century history. The Jewish communities throughout the West succumbed to the same kind of blindness that infected the non-Jewish populations, their governments, and the press. The non-Jewish population may have “missed” the significance of such a catastrophe, as it affected the coreligionists of a group which was marginalized in Canadian society and was viewed with suspicion and prejudice by a substantial segment of the Canadian population. What is perplexing is that a large part of the Jewish population and its leadership failed to react as European Jewry was being destroyed.

The Montreal Jewish community, during the 1930s and 1940s, looked at the non-Jewish world with a combination of fear and envy. The fear was a reflex to centuries

<sup>45</sup>David Rome in his description of English Canada’s anti-Semitism states, “...even though more discreet, the campaigns of Anglophone Canadians...were no less lethal in their blocking of refugee admissions.” David Rome, “The Beginnings” in *Pathways*, 20.

<sup>46</sup>“Efforts to Rescue the Surviving Jews of Europe,” *Summary Report (1942–1944): Presented to the Delegates Sixth Plenary Session Canadian Jewish Congress, January 13–16, 1945*, Congress archives.

<sup>47</sup>Frank Bialystok, *Delayed Impact: The Holocaust and the Canadian Jewish Community* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000), 26–27.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid*, 27.

of anti-Semitism that had made the Jews acquiescent, willing to defer to the whims and decisions of the non-Jewish majority and its government. Fear of the non-Jewish world was also tinged with envy. Jews were being excluded from a society to which they wished to belong. Many Jews desired to be just like their Christian neighbours. And being like them meant they had to act like them, think like them and therefore not consider the Jewish perspective on what was happening in Europe. Although some may have been ardent assimilationists who wanted to completely submerge themselves into a non-Jewish milieu and thus cut themselves off from any Jewish issue, others thought it was simply more convenient to ignore the Jewish issue, especially when the country was at war. The Jewish leadership's message of loyalty to Canada resonated well with many in the community.

The leadership, especially the uptown component, was enamoured with the government, and any hint of protest, any words that might be misconstrued as "anti-Canadian" were to be avoided at all costs. The leadership, it seems, did not want to embarrass the government and more importantly did not want to embarrass themselves, especially in front of a non-Jewish audience that did not share their concerns. Speaking too loudly on Jewish issues to a non-Jewish audience was avoided; it was considered off-limits to mention the Jewish nature of Hitler's extermination policy. The leadership began using code words for the Jews, and made Hitler's crimes more of an offence against humanity than against the Jews. Appeals to the Canadian government to help their European brethren were issued in near secrecy. It was both fear of an anti-Semitic backlash, and a desire not to be seen as "too Jewish"—to be pleading too hard for their Jewish brethren, while others were dying in the field of battle—that made Jewish leaders avoid referring to any Jewish issue.

Although there was information available on the Holocaust during the war years, especially in the Jewish press, most of the Jewish community in Montreal seems to have paid little attention. Other issues transfixed Montreal Jews. They were riveted by the war in Europe and its repercussions at home and so the Jewish issue faded into the background of the war. The Holocaust was not viewed as such an important event while bombs were falling on London or the bloody Battle of Stalingrad was being waged.

But while the sheer scale of World War II may have contributed to the submergence of the Holocaust, the Canadian Jewish Congress helped make the slaughter of millions of Jews a relatively inconsequential event for Montreal Jewry. Instead of being the focal point of community concern, the Holocaust was rarely discussed publicly; it was deliberately made peripheral.

After the liberation, after Congress had sent delegates to Europe, and after Jewish leaders confirmed that European Jewry had been decimated beyond belief, there was sorrow and some questioning of the wartime activity of the leadership. The Holocaust was then again buried and forgotten for years by the community as it was by the rest of the world.

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