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CANADIAN JEWRY: CHALLENGES TO A GROWING DIASPORA COMMUNITY

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[Editor's Note: The Canadian Jewish Community plays a role even larger than its numbers would indicate, one different from that of either American or European Jewry, although it shares some of the characteristics of both. We focus here on the implications for Canadian Jewry of the continuing French separatist movement, a subject also treated in the Jerusalem Center's newly-published book, Maintaining Consensus: The Canadian Jewish Polity in the Postwar World by Daniel J. Elazar and Harold M. Waller (Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and University Press of America, 1990).]

The Fifth Largest Diaspora Community

Canada is a country of immigration and the Canadian Jewish community, numbering some 310,000, is a growing one. It is at present the fifth largest diaspora community and seems likely to overtake British Jewry within the next two decades. Toronto is today the second-largest Jewish community in the British Commonwealth.

It is not only the size of the Canadian community that makes it noteworthy, but the quality of Canadian Jewish life. Zionism is a good measure of that quality. Over the years, Canadian Jews have been very generous financially toward Israel; approximately a third of all Jewish adults in Canada are affiliated with a Zionist organization; and Canada has an aliya rate double that of the United States. Moreover, the official Canadian Jewish community is almost a mouthpiece for the Israeli government. The kind of criticism of Israeli policy that one hears in Britain or the United States simply is not heard at the official levels of Canadian Jewry. Among its new immigrant communities, Canada now includes a very large group of former Israelis, who serve to cement the tie to Israel.

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How Canada is Different from the United States

The differences between Canada and the United States are what make the country interesting. Canada was not born in revolution like the United States, but, rather, in opposition to revolution. It tends to be a rather conservative country, a place where traditional notions maintain their currency much longer than in many other places. Orthodox Judaism has almost always fared better than in the United States. Reform Judaism, until very recently, fared badly in Canada, partly because newfangled notions of all sorts were suspect in Canadian eyes. Zionism, too, benefitted from Canada's conservatism. It became popular not so much as a radical, revolutionary movement, but, rather, as a way of strengthening Judaism, reinforcing Jewish ties, and returning to Jewish national roots.

Another difference from the United States can be seen in Canadian attitudes to church-state issues. On the one hand, Canadians have not generally been reluctant to think of theirs as a Christian country, an approach which sometimes makes life awkward for Jews. On the other hand, religion, in general, has been a traditionally respectable enterprise in Canada, and Judaism is sometimes fortified by such an attitude. There is less reluctance in Canada than in the United States to using public funds for religious institutions. Jewish schools in Quebec and Alberta, for example, are subsidized by the provincial governments.

Respect for tradition has also meant that ethnic divisions in Canada are more legitimate and more pronounced than in the United States. (That many Canadians are recent immigrants or second generation also serves to strengthen ethnic barriers.) Strong ethnicity results in a Canadian national identity which is considerably weaker than that of the United States or Britain, which, in turn, reduces pressure to assimilate to national norms. Canadians often like to speak of their model of ethnic relations as that of the mosaic, as opposed to the American melting pot. In the Jewish community, one manifestation of this ethnicity is that more than half of all Jewish children who receive a Jewish education in Toronto and Montreal go to day schools -- a percentage unthinkable in the American context.

Another difference of Canada is its binational character -- French and English. While the French colonized first, the English encroached gradually on the periphery of French Canada and then conquered the French-Canadian heartland in 1759-60. Relations between the two groups have often been troubled, although not usually violent, ever since.

The Recent Recrudescence of French Separatism

Since the 1960s, independence for Quebec -- French Canada -- usually referred to in the Canadian context as "separatism," has been a serious issue. Agitation has been ongoing and occasionally violent. In the 1960s some 200 bombings were carried out by the Quebec Liberation Front (FLQ). The violence culminated in 1970 with the murder of the Quebec Minister of Labor, Pierre Laporte, an event which was followed by the imposition of something close to martial law (the War Measures Act) by the Canadian federal government. The violence subsided after that, but separatist sentiment did not. In 1976, the separatist Parti Quebecois (PQ), under the leadership of Rene Levesque, won the provincial elections, handily defeating the federalist Liberals. The PQ remained in office for two terms, until 1985; and during that time, events pursued an uneven course towards separation.

In 1980 the independence issue was brought to the Quebec voters in a referendum and defeated by a comfortable 3-2 majority. Still, during the eight years that the PQ was in office, perhaps a quarter of the English-speaking (Anglophone) population left the province. Also, many large companies moved their headquarters out of Quebec during that period; and Toronto became the undisputed financial capital of

the country.

Partly because of the flight of capital and people, there occurred a general economic decline in the province. In addition, scandals erupted around a number of figures within the PQ, which had come to office with a mandate to clean up the Liberals' corruption. In the 1985 elections, the PQ lost by a large majority, winning only 26 seats to the Liberals' 71. The Liberals were headed by a resurrected political leader, Robert Bourassa, a 52-year-old economist educated at Harvard and Oxford. Many Canadians in Quebec and elsewhere breathed a sigh of relief, assuming that separatism was dead.

Five years later it may be said that, like the news of Mark Twain's death, reports of the demise of French-Canadian separatism were premature. Separatism has not gone away, nor have the emotional and political issues that sparked it. In the last year, Quebec, still headed by Liberal Premier Robert Bourassa, has again been asserting its demands for greater autonomy and for what is called "Francization" (Frenchification).

In 1987, a proposed new Canadian constitutional arrangement, called the "Meech Lake Agreement," was negotiated by the federal prime minister and the provincial premiers. It was an arrangement designed to give the ten provinces increased autonomy and to decrease the power of the federal government. It was intended, in part, to satisfy the demands of French Canada for more autonomy; and Quebec was the first province to approve the new agreement. Most of the other provinces have since fallen into line; but "Meech Lake" requires unanimous approval before it can take effect and, at last word, it may not get it by the June 1990 deadline. This would be extremely upsetting to Quebeckers and certainly to Mr. Bourassa, who has a great deal invested in the new arrangement.

The Language Issue

A unilateral move in the direction of independence occurred last year in the very sensitive area of language, an issue which may seem trivial to an outsider, but for Quebeckers creates a great deal of friction. Officially, Canada is a bilingual country. In fact, however, only Quebec and, to a degree, New Brunswick have really been bilingual provinces. In the others, French is little in evidence and sometimes just barely tolerated, especially where French Canadians are a very small percentage of the population.

In Montreal, the largest city in Quebec, which in the first half of the nineteenth century actually had an English-speaking majority, Anglophones have long played a major role. They spoke English among themselves, made English the language of the workplace, and established it as the language of success in virtually every area of life, except, perhaps, for politics.

In 1977, after a number of preliminary moves over many years by Liberal governments, the PQ enacted Bill 101, which made French the language of the workplace in Quebec and imposed restrictions on the public display of written English (and other languages). Further legislation limited rights of anyone other than a second generation, English-speaking Quebecker to English-language schooling in the province. Bill 101 was struck down by the Supreme Court of Canada in December 1988. In the period between 1985, when the Liberals returned to power, and 1988, its enforcement had been rather more lax than earlier; and Anglophones had reason to believe that the Liberals were going to ease up on the whole issue. Backbenchers in the Liberal camp, however, were nervous. In the summer of 1988 a language vigilante had appeared in Montreal spray-painting over English signs; and after the Supreme Court decision, the language issue heated up. M. Bourassa, who faced a provincial election in 1989, could not -- or would not -- refrain from acting on the language issue. He invoked what is called "the notwithstanding clause" of the Canadian constitution, which allows provinces to override the Charter of [Individual] Rights in order to assert communal rights. The

Liberals enacted Bill 178, which once again disallowed the use of English on outdoor signs.

Three of the four English-speaking ministers in Bourassa's cabinet resigned over the issue, including the only Jew, Herbert Marx. Anglophone Quebeckers worked themselves into a frenzy, fearing that English would become a Marrano language in the province. There occurred a backlash in English Canada as well. By February, 1990, twenty-six towns and cities had declared themselves monolingual (English-speaking).

In the September, 1989 provincial elections, the Liberals in Quebec once again received a very large majority, 92 seats to 29 for the PQ. In fact, however, despite Bill 178, the separatists improved their standing dramatically; the Parti Quebecois garnered over 40 percent of the vote, while the Liberals received only 49 percent. Moreover, the PQ had returned to a percentage of the vote just about equal to that which had put them in power in 1976, when their opposition had been divided. Their return to power in the future again seemed probable.

Jewish Reactions to French Separatism

Jews have been especially strident in opposing the separatists. According to polls taken of Montreal Jews in the late 1960s and again in 1980, approximately 80 percent said that, while they understood the grievances of French Canadians and favored some redress, they would leave if the province became independent. Jews have been highly visible in groups formed to lobby for Anglophone rights in the province, such as Alliance Quebec.

In 1976, on the eve of the provincial election, Charles Bronfman, then the undisputed magnate of Canadian Jewry, who was scheduled to become president of the Canadian Jewish Congress, made an election speech to a Jewish gathering in Montreal, in which he threatened that he and his company would leave Quebec if the PQ were elected. Although Bronfman's statement probably reflected the sentiments of many in the audience, Quebec Jews were terrified of the reaction likely to come from French Canadians. The terror grew when the PQ won the election. Bronfman had to withdraw his candidacy for the Congress leadership.

Between 1960 and 1980, many of Quebec's Jews behaved as Bronfman had prophesied; although he, himself, remained. The demographic decline was not as steep as predicted, but it was significant. A 1977 survey of Jewish university students in Quebec reported that 45 percent of those in their last year expected to leave the province. Emigration from the province was especially marked among the young and well-educated, those who are most mobile and least rooted. Certainly a vital Jewish community remains in Montreal. In the face of resurgent French Canadian nationalism, however, it will continue to diminish; and the effects of the decline will be aggravated as the community ages, the ratepayer base shrinks, and it becomes less able to look after itself financially.

More recently, Jews have been prominently involved in the formation of a new political party in Quebec, an English-speaking, backlash, protest party called the Equality Party. The leader of the party is a 29-year-old Jewish architect, Robert Libman. The party managed to win four National Assembly seats in the September, 1989 provincial elections. Its leader was elected in a riding (district) the population of which is about 80 percent Jewish. The other three successful Equalitarians were not Jews and were elected in ridings without large Jewish populations, much to the relief of many Jews in Montreal, nervous about the Jewish presence in the Equality Party.

Why Jews are Concerned

Why are Jews concerned about French Canadian nationalism? Anti-Semitism is hardly absent from English Canada any more than it is absent from most other places in the world. There is increasing anti-Israel sentiment in English Canada as

elsewhere. Generally speaking, however, Canadian Jews see English Canada as a hospitable place to live, while many fear that an independent French Canada would be hostile. Why?

Historically, Jews have integrated into the general society in Canada more slowly than into American or British society. In both Anglo-Canada and French Canada over the years, Jews were, to a degree, outsiders and sometimes found themselves squeezed between the two national groups. In fact, one of the reasons that Zionism has done so well in Canada is that Jews were not able to be either French Canadian nationalists or Anglo-Canadian nationalists. The option left in a charged nationalist atmosphere was to become Jewish nationalists, that is, Zionists. Yet, in the final analysis, Anglo-Canadians have accepted Jews, while French Canadians essentially have not. Over the years, Jews became overwhelmingly Anglophone. There is today a Francophone Jewish community in Canada, mostly of North African immigrant origin. Many live in Montreal and some in Toronto, as well. But even many of them -- and not only in Toronto -- learn English and assimilate into the Anglo-Jewish community.

In more secular and more pluralistic English Canada, with its connections to Britain and the United States, doors have been more open than in French Canada. French Canada has remained largely monolingual, monoreligious (Roman Catholic), and monoracial. The French-Canadian population of over 7 million is almost entirely descended from the 50,000 Frenchmen who lived in Quebec in 1759. Virtually no immigration occurred afterwards and there was little integration into the community on the part of non-French Canadians. Italians, Francophone Belgians, and even Frenchmen, who came to Quebec, found it difficult to break into French-Canadian society and often moved into the Anglo community instead. Jews were unwelcome like other outsiders, but doubly unwelcome on religious grounds.

It is not only history that disquiets Quebec Jews. The rhetoric of some contemporary French Canadian nationalists has been very disturbing. In 1969, Claude Ryan, now the minister who deals with language affairs in the Liberal government, told the Christian-Jewish Dialogue in Montreal that "very few French Canadians maintained friendly private relations with Jews," and most of them look upon the individual Jew as "first and, above all, a money-maker," who will do "practically anything in order to make a fast buck. Most French Canadians," Ryan said, feel that Jews have been "born to suffer and to be persecuted," because of the crucifixion, and care "little for morality." Ryan urged Jews to affiliate with French Canada and with French-Canadian nationalism to improve their image.

In 1973, Michel Chartrand, a prominent French Canadian trade union leader and a former Quebec Liberation Front separatist leader, told a convention of the Federation of Canadian Arab Societies that the Jewish people of Quebec enjoy "more privileges than any other minority in the world," and he expressed the hope that they would "not poison the air of this country any further." In February 1978, a year after the PQ came to power in Quebec, Ici Quebec, whose publisher was the head of the Montreal branch of the PQ, published an article written by its editor-in-chief attacking Zionism as racism. In 1982 an official delegation of the PLO was invited to the annual convention of the Parti Quebecois.

Le Devoir, the paper of the Quebec intelligentsia, accused two Jewish journalists in 1982 of having defamed the Province of Quebec in a Jerusalem Post article published in January of that year. The two sued the paper for libel. Four years later the paper settled out of court and apologized, but the damage had been done.

Besides history and rhetoric, issues of public policy disturb Jews as well. In 1970, in the debates over the War Measures Act in the federal Parliament, there was widespread recognition of what was called "the anti-Jewish character of

separatism." The FLQ had, among other things, tried to bomb the home of the Steinberg family, then in control of a chain of supermarkets which bears the family name. And the kidnapping and murder of Pierre Laporte in 1970 occurred after a failed attempt to kidnap an Israeli diplomat in Montreal.

Overt violence, however, is not the main worry. Issues such as language, race, schooling, and community control touch almost all Jews and arouse more concern than sporadic violence. Quebec Jews have historically been part of the larger English-speaking world with family and business ties to Jews in the United States, to Jewish communities in Anglo-Canada, and to the Jewish community in Great Britain. To be forced into becoming French-speaking would, in a sense, be to sever roots and ties to a larger community, and from family.

With regard to race, Jews question whether they can be a part of Quebec society on an equal basis with others or whether they will always be outsiders. A recent survey conducted by the Montreal Catholic School Commission asked respondents to state whether they preferred separate schools for "pure" Quebeckers (that is, French Canadians). Being an outsider in Quebec can have economic as well as emotional consequences. In the 1930s, for instance, French Canadian nationalists waged a campaign to persuade fellow French Canadians not to patronize Jewish shops and professionals. In an independent Quebec, government contracts might go first to French Canadians and only later, if at all, to others. And in matters of "race" there can be no amelioration over time. If one was not born French Canadian, one will always be an outsider, never able to function successfully in the society.

Schools are another issue that causes anxiety. Legislation enacted by the nationalists has required Jewish day schools to teach in French subjects which would normally be taught in English, in order to retain government funding. A more serious problem is that immigrants to the province cannot choose an English-speaking school. This creates considerable difficulty for a Jewish community that is losing many of its members and would like to replace them with new immigrants.

A final problem is community control of various institutions -- health-care and old-age institutions, community centers, etc. -- which now may be required to come under provincial control in order to receive provincial funding. According to the leader of the Equality Party, blending Jewish health-care facilities into the provincial system will result not only in a loss of autonomy, but also in "inferior service for a community used to receiving superior service." Even if that does not happen, Jews would not welcome opening their institutions to non-Jews, especially in the Canadian ethnic-religious context.

For many reasons, then, French-Canadian nationalism is uncongenial and perhaps threatening to the Quebec Jewish community. And while the future will undoubtedly witness the growth of Canadian Jewry, most of that growth will likely occur in Anglo-Canada.

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