

# Jewish history well

has prospered. Yet, its attitudes are still affected by the events of the 1940s. Abella notes the impact that Holocaust survivor groups have had on Canadian Jewry's



attitudes vis a vis Nazi war criminals, racism and hate propaganda. As well, the State of Israel — smaller than Quebec — occupies a priority position on the agenda of Canada's Jews. However, Abella notes that organized Canadian Zionism has become a "spectator sport" for many Canadian Jews as we head into the 1990s.

As a book that sets out to document 300 years of history in 250 pages, *A Coat of Many Colours* is conceptually a survey crash course. It is decidedly user-friendly, with wide margins and short pages, and chock full of photographs.

There are no footnotes, which may irritate those concerned with sources for sweeping statements that inevitably appear in such works. A bibliography is included, but I don't expect this to satisfy the scholarly reader. Clearly, *A Coat of Many Colours* will be gracing the coffee tables and bar mitzvah present collections of households across Canada.

Interestingly enough, more than one quarter of the funds were contributed by local Christians, and the dedication event was attended by, among others, Mayor Shaw. Although Jewish communities appeared in smaller cities such as Hamilton, Saint John and Victoria, the centre of Canadian Jewry was Montreal.

The arrival of large numbers of Russian Jewish immigrants between 1880 and 1914 irrevocably changed Canadian Jewish life. Spurred by official anti-semitism and programs, Russian Jews flocked to Canada. Many of these

new immigrants were shipped out west in order to fulfil Canada's need for farmers in the region.

For the most part, these new immigrants spoke Yiddish and tended to be more religiously observant than the already established Canadian Jewish community, and their presence created an "uptown-downtown" friction in the large Canadian cities. As well, many Russian immigrants brought with them radical socialist ideologies that were popular among the downtrodden Jewish masses of Eastern Europe.

Tragically, "as the number of Jews in the country increased, so did the opposition to their presence." Although anti-semites seemed to be popping up everywhere in Canada, nowhere were they as prevalent or as venomous as in Quebec.

In that province, xenophobic nationalism combined with Christian prejudice to produce a fearsome tide of anti-Jewish activities. Jews were portrayed as the agents of change, of disruption. "In the writings and speeches of many leading church and nationalist figures in Quebec, the Jew was commonly depicted as a parasite, a germ spreading an insidious disease that was undermining the national health."

The cure? Quarantine. The political elite of Quebec lobbied hard in Ottawa to prevent Jewish immigration to Canada, even as Hitler planned the mass destruction of Europe's Jews. On the eve of the Holocaust, the world seemed divided into two camps: countries like Germany which desired to expel its Jews, and countries like Canada which refused to have them.

While the scholarship of *A Coat of Many Colours* is compromised, Abella's intelligence and writing ability carries the day. Abella, after all, redefined Canadian history with his chilling *None is Too Many*, the book that exposed Canada's shameful complicity in the Holocaust. His clarity of style and language will bring important information home to many people.

*A Coat of Many Colours* is impressive in its breadth.



Sephardic Jewish immigrants from Morocco arrive in Montreal in 1960. The French speaking Jewish community continues to thrive there, Irving Abella writes in *A Coat of Many Colours*.

Although there are difficulties in organizing so much information (for example, Abella moves chronologically, yet sometimes organizes events thematically), Abella manages to include information on the problems experienced by anglophone Quebec Jews (as opposed to the francophone Sephardi group) and the subsequent rise of Toronto as the predominant Canadian city for Jews.

Ultimately, there are important lessons to be learned from *A Coat of Many Colours*. Against the context of Quebec's wartime anti-

semitism, who can be surprised by Quebec publishing magnate Pierre Peladeau's statement this past winter that Quebec Jews "take up too much space?" Keeping in mind the anti-Jewish riot in Toronto's Christie Pits, who can stand for the slightest sign of bigotry and racism?

Clearly, histories such as *A Coat of Many Colours* teach that communities subject to political scrutiny and harassment must fight — and, fight hard — for their rights. Bar mitzvah boys: sit up and listen!

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