

Coat covers Canadian

The Canadian Jewish experience has been excellent at times.

by Menahem Neuer

A Coat of Many Colours written by Irving Abella published by Lester & Orpen Dennys

In the biblical account in the book of Genesis, the patriarch Jacob gives his son Joseph a coat of many colours. A beautiful gift, no doubt; but, the coat brings to boil the long-simmering jealousy that Joseph' brothers feel towards him. They sell him into slavery, precipitating the drama of the enslavement of the Jews in Egypt.

A Coat of Many Colours is the latest offering from Glendon scholar Irving Abella; it is essentially the companion volume to the exhibition of the same name

refers to Canadian Jewry's varied contributions to the country (the "Canadian mosaic"), one cannot but be struck by the inherent irony.

In a way, the Canadian Jewish experience as described in *A Coat of Many Colours* has been excellent at times, terrifyingly bad at other times. Essentially, Abella chronicles the birth, growth and development of the Jewish community in British North America from a handful of adventurers to the approximately 330,000 souls that Canadian Jewry now numbers.

Throughout its eventful history, Canadian Jews have dealt with the internal and external pressures that both threaten and challenge it. About that history, Abella writes, "It was not easy; Jewish history never is."

The story of Canada's Jews really began with the English conquest in 1759. Although French Jews helped keep New France alive through investments of cash and supplies, Jews were barred from settling there, were considered "enemies of the Christian name" by the French Crown. The British, on the other hand, thought of Jews as potentially beneficial because of their perceived mercantile interests.

Most Jews arriving in British North America at this point were of Germanic origin. Bold, adventurous and aggressive, they were predominantly young men who felt they had nothing to gain in the Old World and nothing to lose in the New World. Many prospered and played leadership roles in the

fledgling British colonies.

Although Canada's first synagogue was erected in Montreal in 1768, by 1800 there were only 120 Jewish men out of a total population of 300,000. Furthermore, because there were few Jewish women, many converted or married native or French-Canadian women.

Early on, Abella writes, Jews had to fight for their religious and political rights. Tensions came to a head in 1807, when Ezekiel Hart, a scion of the influential Hart clan of Three Rivers, Quebec, won a seat in the Legislative Assembly of Lower Canada, the first Jew to do so.

A furor erupted when Hart took his oath of office on a Hebrew Bible, and with his head covered. Although Hart agreed to swear on The New Testament, his candidacy was refused, since, as a Jew, his swearing on the Gospels meant nothing. Although better off than their English counterparts, Jews (and, for that matter, other non-Anglicans) did not yet fully enjoy political rights in Canada.

The achievement of full religious and political rights for Jews in Canada did not come until the 1830s after a long and bitter fight, principally by other Hart family members. The Canadian Jewish community were aided by Louis-Joseph Papineau, the famed French Canadian reformer and patriot. Abella notes the theory that the Quebec reformers were anxious to undermine British-Anglican power any way it could, using the issue to chip away at colonial authority, even though there were only 2,000 Jews in Canada at the time.

The period of 1840-1880 was a

prosperous and peaceful one as Jews branched out geographically and socially. The Toronto Jewish community crystallized around 1849, and built its first synagogue in 1856. This synagogue, called Sons of Israel, later changed its name to the Holy Blossom when it moved to a Richmond Street address in January, 1876.

Although Quebec lobbied hard against Jewish immigration to Canada, Mackenzie King's wartime government needed no prodding to be cruelly dismissive of the plight of Europe's Jews. Despite intense lobbying by the Canadian Jewish Congress, the Canadian government stuck to its policy of no immigration.

Indeed, Canada has the shameful distinction of having accepted the fewest refugees of all countries in the western world. This fact alone illustrates the ridiculousness of the claim of all modern anti-semites: for all its supposed power, the organized Canadian Jewish community could not change government policy when it really counted.

Institutionalized anti-semitism did not stop there. Quotas against Jews in Canadian universities remained intact until the 1950s. It was only in the post-war years, the post-Holocaust years, that Canadian Jewry undertook to fight entrenched discrimination. Abella writes that the struggles of groups such as the Canadian Jewish Congress and B'nai B'rith helped develop the human rights laws which were codified in the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

In the wake of the post-war economic and immigration boom, the Canadian Jewish community



The Byward Market, Ottawa, circa 1900. The first Jewish resident of the city appeared there only 50 years earlier.

which has been shown in Ottawa's Museum of Civilization, and will be shown in Toronto in September. While the title probably

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