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**Representations
of
Jewish
people
in
Canadian
literature of the
1940s and 1950s**

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Contents

Introduction	7
Historical background	9
The beginnings 1760–1850	9
Development of the Canadian Jewish community 1850–1939	10
The outbreak of World War II 1939–1945	11
Post-war time 1945–1960	11
Theory: literature of travel and exploration and life writing	13
Jewish life writing: Kreisel and Waddington	19
Novels: Graham and Wiseman	31
Conclusion	43
Selected bibliography	45
Archives	46

Introduction

This dissertation will examine Jewish Diasporic experience in Canada during the 1940s and 1950s, through literature of travel and exploration and life writing as well as through fiction written by Jewish and non-Jewish writers. My project will involve Canadian Jewish cultural history, close textual analysis, comparative study and theoretical work, as I explore differences and similarities in these representations.

Henry Kreisel presents a horrific picture of the Jewish society affected by the pogroms, which cannot find its own place in the world. That is why all of the stories are representations of people who are in a constant search for their own home, culture, tradition and faith all set against a vibrant aspect of Jewish Diaspora. They are examples of both travel writing and life writing. His writing was profoundly based on his own life in which his main occupation became the investigation of notions of home and homelessness. Miriam Waddington also represents the life writing genre. In contrast to Kreisel her writing gives the reader an insight into her childhood, growing up and adulthood. Through readings of her essays we can notice the notion of cultural hybridity. Living in between cultures provoked her to find her own tiny space where she felt free to be herself and express her own identity. This private space gave her a different insight into the notions of her life, her background and helped her to accept and express her triple identity, as a Jewish, Russian and Canadian female poet-writer. Gwethalyn Graham based her novel on her observations of Anti-Semitism in Canada and Europe. Through irony she presents strong criticism of racial inequality in which Jewish people have to live. Thanks to different narrations the reader is introduced to various points of view on Jews in Canada and is able to make his own statement on stereotyping and labelling them. The plot also reflects some of the elements of the author's life, where in fact she had a relationship with a Polish Jew. We are also introduced to the novel by Adele Wiseman, in which she gives a realistic description of the life of a Jewish-Ukrainian family in Winnipeg. In her story we notice lack of social mobility of the characters due to their immigrant origin. Their lives are full of alienation, exile and displacement. The novel is a perfect example of how life writing and travel writing come together. All of the diasporic writers try to create their own space, in between cultures, where they can be themselves and be free to present their cultural hybridity.

Historical background

The beginnings 1760–1850

*Only the misfortune of exile can provide the in-depth understanding
and the overview into the realities of the world.*

Stefan Zweig

At present Canada is regarded as one of the most cosmopolitan countries, whose diversity is determined by a mixture of different cultures, habits, customs, languages and denominations. Throughout many years of its history the country has become a shelter for various immigrant minorities, including Czechoslovakian, Ugandan, Asian, Vietnamese as well as Northern and Central Europeans. Despite the fact that the Jewish minority was considered as one of the smallest groups in the beginning, its influence on shaping Canadian culture and identity is still undervalued. The emergence of the first Jewish immigrants is dated soon after The Treaty of Paris of 1763 that called a halt to Seven Year's War, which resulted in the takeover of most possessions of New France by the British Empire. The First record of Jewish people in Canada comes from British Army documentation of the French and Indian War, depicting North American involvement in the Seven Year's War. Emmanuel de Cordova, Aaron Hart, Hananiel Garcia and Isaac Miramer are mentioned as the first Jewish officers who fought with General Jeffrey Amherst in 1760 and took part in the historical event of winning Canada for the British. In 1807 Ezekiel Hart, one of Aaron Hart's sons, won the election to the legislature of Lower Canada establishing himself as the first Jewish official in the British Empire. On the day of swearing an oath in preference he took it on Hebrew Bible, not on Christian Bible.

The majority of the first Jewish Canadians devoted themselves either to the fur trade or to service in the British Army. Fewer became merchants and landowners. Despite the fact that the Jewish community was still in a minority, the first Canadian synagogue was built in 1768. With help of Ezekiel Hart in 1832 the law was amended to provide Jews with equal political and spiritual rights to Christians. At the end of the nineteenth century, around year 1850, Canada was inhabited by 450 Jews centred mainly in Montreal and Quebec city. The 1890s saw the establishment of the

Quebec Hebrew Sick Benefit Association, the Quebec Hebrew Relief Association for Immigrants, and the Quebec Zionist Society.

Development of the Canadian Jewish community 1850–1939

*If we were to wake up some morning and find that everyone
was the same race, creed and color, we would find some other causes
or prejudice by noon.*

George Aiken

In the 1880's the pogroms of Russia started. Along with the twentieth century came the rancour and hostility towards Jewish people, who having faced the emergence of anti-Semitism started to seek shelter in the West. Most of them headed for the United States, which was flooded with the large influxes of immigrants. Thanks to Government of Canada and Canadian Pacific Railway and the endeavours to build up Canada after Confederation, the country also welcomed the flows of immigrants growing to 155,000 in years 1880 and 1930. The majority of the Jewish refugees decided to settle down in big cities. In 1871 Canada conducted the county's first census which stated that there were 1,115 Jews living in Canada mainly in Montreal and Toronto. A group of 100 established themselves in Victoria, British Columbia where they successfully became shop owners and provided sourdoughs with goods and services during the Cariboo Gold Rush. In 1862 the opening of a synagogue took place in British Columbia¹.

During those years the majority of Jewish inhabitants of the Canadian West devoted themselves either to trade or they became storekeepers². Large number of them opened shops on the newly launched rail lines providing the construction workers, mainly Jewish, with products. Due to the extension of the railway most of the colonies developed into thriving towns. Soon after came founding of the first significant Jewish charitable organisation called B'nai Brith, which is well known for helping the community in pleading and arguing for their rights and social service³.

Just before World War I Canada was inhabited by around 100,000 Jews mainly centred in Montreal or Toronto. The majority initially hired themselves as peddlers slowly moving into launching their own businesses as retailers and wholesalers. Jews

1 Abraham J. Arnold, *The Contribution of the Jews to the Opening and Development of the West*, <http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/transactions/3/jewsandwest.shtml>, accessed 11.06.08.

2 Faith Jones, *Yiddish Books in the Canadian Hinterland: Some Collectors and Collections in Western Canada*, <http://www.jewishlibraries.org/ajlweb/publications/proceedings/proceedings2003/jones.pdf>, accessed 10.07.08.

3 Cameron Smith, *Unfinished Journey: The Lewis Family*, Summerhill Press, Toronto 1989, p. 123.

also became significant in the growth of Canadian clothing and textile production. The majority still worked as labourers in sweatshops, only a few possessed business enterprises. Jewish workers scattered from cities into villages, leaving signs of their existence by establishing synagogues, schools and common goods.

In 1930 the Canadian Government, after having faced the Great Depression and its main consequence – lack of jobs, again restricted its immigration policy. Racism and lack of religious freedom were still present, not only in the country, but also in Prime Minister Mackenzie King’s cabinet. In 1917 the second Jewish person elected to the House of Commons was Samuel William Jacobs of Montreal and soon after that in 1925 Abraham Albert Heaps of Winnipeg became the third, and in 1930 Sam Factor of Toronto the fourth. All of them struggled to increase the number of incoming Jewish refugees from Europe during the inter-war years⁴.

The outbreak of World War II 1939–1945

During World War II Canada was the only country that allowed extremely few Jews during the time of Holocaust. Throughout twelve years of Nazi rule (1933 to 1945), the United States found home for 200,000 Jews; Palestine, 125,000; Britain, 70,000; Argentina, 50,000; Brazil, 27,000; China, 25,000; Bolivia and Chile, 14,000 each; on the contrary Canada accepted less than 5,000⁵. During the Second World War twenty thousand Jewish Canadian volunteers participated in the war⁶.

Post-war time 1945–1960

With the end of war the Canadian Government loosened immigration policy. In the late 1940s around 40,000 Nazi terror survivors entered the country, all of them aspiring for better lives. “Canada in the 1940s was a country in which anti-Semitism was a fact of life”⁷. In the 1950s thousands of North African Jews decided to move to Canada, due to the independence movements in the country. The majority of them inhabited Montreal and Quebec City because their knowledge of French

⁴ Cameron Smith, *Unfinished Journey...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 210–211, 213–215.

⁵ Abella Irving and Harold Troper, *None Is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe 1933–1948*, Lester & Orpen Dennis, Toronto 1983.

⁶ Ester Reiter, Roz Usiskin, *Jewish Dissent in Canada: The United Jewish People’s Order*, paper presented on May 30, 2004 at a forum on „Jewish Dissent in Canada”, at a conference of the Association of Canadian Jewish Studies (ACJS) in Winnipeg.

⁷ Ross Lambertson, *Repression and Resistance: Canadian Human Rights Activists 1930–1960*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2005, p. 186.

was a huge advantage in the process of getting used to new social circumstances. In years 1941 to 1961, in Canada, there was a dramatic increase in the Jewish population extending from 170,000 to 260,000. This was the period when Jewish writing became the first ethnic writing to be visible in Canadian literature and at the same time the best economically organised group.

The Tailor Project⁸ was launched by Workmen's Circle and Jewish Labour Committee, led by Kalmen Kaplansky and Moshe Lewis, in order to provide Jewish immigrants in Montreal with the needle trades. It was part of the Canadian Government's 'bulk-labour' project, whose aim was to find workers, most of whom were European Holocaust survivors, for all sorts of vacant industries⁹. Thanks to Lewis' work soon after he passed away, which took place in 1950, Montreal's branch changed its name to Mosihe Lewis Branch¹⁰. Jewish Canadians set up various cultural systems such as: 'schools, summer camps, historical societies, and musical groups' since the 1930s and 1940s.

Toronto became the biggest Jewish establishment in Canada. Straight after comes Montreal's Jewish group. Other major ones are in Vancouver, Ottawa, Winnipeg and Calgary. Jewish post-war refugees began to integrate into Canadian surroundings, though there were still social problems all through the 1950s and 60s, as my study of individual writers texts will show. The cornerstone for all ethnic minorities came in 1971 with the federal policy of Multiculturalism introduced by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau culminating in the Multiculturalism Act of 1988.

⁸ Cameron Smith, *Unfinished Journey...*, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 218.