
"Refugee!" The Adjustment of Jewish Refugees from Nazism to Canadian Life

The 1970s were years of political and social ferment in French Canada. At that time I was conducting a series of interviews with former refugees from Nazism, most of them Jews, many of them residents of Quebec. As English-speaking Quebecers these men were concerned, as were many Jews, with the rising tide of French-Canadian nationalism and its consequences. The possible resurgence of flagrant anti-semitism was on everyone's mind. Indeed some of these men, now in their fifties and sixties, had already moved to Ontario, and others were contemplating relocation.

My questions seemed self-evident. After all they had been through under Nazism, was it not doubly hard for *them* to move yet again? Their answers surprised me. It was not difficult at all! Once a refugee, I was told, always a refugee. It was a lesson they had no need to learn twice. For forty years they had been mentally packed and ready. I had encountered the tenacity of the refugee mentality.

Forty-five years ago a group of over two thousand men and boys, German and Austrian refugees from Nazism, were shipped from temporary internment camps in Britain to prisoner of war camps in Canada. For the next three and a half years they remained prisoners or parolees in a country which did not welcome Jewish immigrants. By 1944 half of these men were released to live in Canada — the remainder returned to Britain through frustration, free will or force.

For those who stayed in Canada conditions varied. Students, sponsored by Canadians, fared well and quickly prospered. Others went to work on farms and in factories where they were sometimes exploited and their adjustment was more difficult. All entered Canadian life with the same stigma — "refugee".

The peculiar circumstances which brought the interned refugees to Can-

ada and the probationary nature of their release from the camps made them wary of fully entering Canadian life.

The only thing that was told to us . . . is behave well and be sure that we don't make any trouble . . . otherwise we'd be returned immediately. This fear was with us all the time. . . So with that kind of attitude you don't mingle in politics, you don't join anything, you don't do anything wrong.

The interned refugees were hesitant to complain when exploited and were unfamiliar with means of redress. The Nazis had taught German and Austrian Jews that friends could quickly become enemies and so fear and suspicion marked the early years of their adjustment to Canada.

The unusual character of this group of refugees also contributed to their Canadianization. Many had been Jews only in accordance with Nazi racial definitions and they found it easier to lose the dual stigma of "Jewish refugee" through complete assimilation. However, most gravitated to the Jewish community where they discovered that their background gave them minority status.

Despite the fact that many of these refugees from Germany and Austria worked in companies dominated by Eastern European Jews, they mixed quite easily. The internment process had provided opportunities which most refugees never received and experiences which, many recall in retrospect, permanently altered their perspectives. Most of the internees had come from upper and middle class backgrounds. They now confronted manual labour jobs. If they worked with their hands, often for the first time, so, they soon learned, did the vast majority of the Canadian Jewish community.

What impressed me the most, coming to Canada, is the lack of

the caste system. In Canada I learned very soon that the only thing that counts was money, more or less, to determine your status. Another thing that I admired very much and that I was not used to from Europe was that Jewish people were workers here. That means that it was not a shame here to be an electrician or a plumber or a glazier or whatever. . . Well in my background you wouldn't dream of it. People would look down on you if you were in a trade. . . This impressed me very much in favour of this part of the world.

At ease in their jobs, most interned refugees were able to make friends with their co-workers. For many it was a whole new lifestyle. "It made me a much better person", recalled one internee.

All the experiences. Because I was rather spoiled. I came from a wealthy home and, terribly spoiled. . .

First of all, mixing with the working people and seeing their point of view. . . They got a much bigger kick out of life than we did because they took it much easier. . . And I learned to relax a little, which I never did before.

Intra-Jewish tension, between German and Austrian refugees and the larger Eastern European community, receded with contact in the work-place but was never completely absent. Some refugees blamed neglect or indifference in the Jewish community for prolonging their internment. The few released refugees who put on airs of superiority to the largely working class Jewish community caused bitterness in return. In his book, *The Street*, Mordecai Richler recalls the first released interned refugees he encountered in Montreal.

I think we had conjured up a pic-

ture of the refugees as penurious hassidim with packs on their backs. We were eager to be helpful, our gestures were large, but in return we expected more than a little gratitude. As it turned out, the refugees . . . were far more sophisticated and better educated than we were. . . They found our culture thin, the city provincial, and the Jews narrow. . . But what cut deepest, I suppose, was that the refugees spoke English better than many of us did, and, among themselves, had the effrontery to talk in the abhorred German language. Many of them also made it clear that Canada was no more than a frozen place to stop over until a U.S. visa was forthcoming. So for a while we real Canadians were hostile.

Yet these problems evaporated in the work-place.

This was a funny thing, and I gave up after a while to tell people. When I told people I came from Austria, they'd say "Oh, you're a landsmensch of mine. You come from Galicia too." And I tell him no, I came from Vienna. "You come from Austria. So you must come from the same part that I come from." So after a while, I'd say sure. I gave up. . . I learned how to speak Yiddish. With my German background it wasn't too hard. I got along very nicely.

For the majority of men who successfully adjusted expectations and made conscious efforts to adapt, life in Canada in the 1940s was full of promise.

These men, some as young as seventeen and some in their sixties, had to start their new lives from scratch. The survivors of the Holocaust who followed them to Canada would have similar experiences. No one was going to make it easy for them.

In my mind the injustice of the whole thing still rankles. After all, we were anti-Nazis. We were genuine refugees from German oppression. We lost our families to the Holocaust. We lost our chance for education in Germany. We lost all our possessions. I left Germany with the proverbial ten marks which were used up by the time I

crossed Holland. And we had to start life anew in England, and due to the internment experience we had to start life anew in Canada again, penniless and without support. It has taken practically the whole of my youth and my formative years, I would say to about the age of thirty, before I could actually start to live again. . . Somehow, between the cooperative efforts of the Nazi government and the British Home Office and the Canadian

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authorities, as far as they prolonged the experience of internment here, somehow our youth was stolen away from us. By the time we came out, mentally, we were already beginning to be middle-aged. We had gone through too much. . . It's a pity, but that's what happened. It's irreversible; crying about it makes no sense and I have never even talked about it until this very opportunity. Life goes on.

Young as many of them were in years, the refugees released from internment into Canada were no longer youthful. Some were completely broken; most were anxious to pick up the pieces of their lives and many were fueled by an ambition which knew no bounds. There was no longer time to waste. Bitterness, instilled by years of unjust treatment, had to be overcome. After years of uncertainty followed by years of incarceration, the interned refugees deserved time to adjust to Canadian life.

This was not to be. Many had prepared, as best they could, by gaining a fluency in English. Others were wary and unprepared. No one was exactly sure what to expect and experiences differed.

"I found adjustment relatively easy", recalled one ex-internee, "because I stayed in Germany until 1939. So my memories of Germany were not the best. . . I found the freedom in Canada and the relatively open society as rather worthwhile."

For another adjustment was difficult. "I came from a very small place in Germany. . . And being a free man and walking around in Montreal, it irritated me that everything was so fast — the traffic. And people were running only after money. Money meant everything. Money and nothing but money. It was shocking."

Indeed adjustment to Canadian life was easiest for two groups — the students and the orthodox Jews. The students found Canadian social contacts in school and through the help of their sponsors.

The orthodox melted easily into the religious community. Yet they, too, an internee explained, had problems.

It was always my impression that English, and perhaps French, was the vernacular of Canadian Jewry. To my astonishment I found out that the older and also middle-aged Jews speak mostly Yiddish . . . My limited English seems to be a great deal better than many of my Canadian friends'. They, in turn, cannot comprehend how a European Jew cannot speak Yiddish.

Integration into the Canadian Jewish world was one difficulty that all the Jewish refugees faced. Canadian Jewry, divided along organizational, language, and class lines, presented an unusual dilemma to the incoming refugees. The refugees were a group of well-educated and assimilated German and Austrian Jews. Some harboured old-world prejudices. And they were, with the exception of the students, entering a working class milieu dominated by Polish and Galician Jews. Some were told bluntly, "I want you to know that we don't like German Jews".

In return many refugees behaved arrogantly, which only served to further alienate them from the community. Until the war ended and the full extent of the Holocaust was known, feelings of alienation from fellow Jews played

a significant part in the adjustment of these new immigrants.

Yet the overall experience of the refugees as they became integrated into the Jewish community was far from negative. For Germans who needed to learn Yiddish the task was not too difficult. Those truly interested in finding their place among the Canadian Jewish community found no real impediments.

There were certainly surprises. A young student, released to attend Queen's University, heard about a rabbi in Ottawa who had stolen a car, chased women and gambled.

I was so shocked. I was a very innocent young boy and I was so shocked that I wrote to my friends in Camp: "Canada is such a terrible country, even the rabbis are a bunch of crooks". That letter was intercepted by the Commandant . . . So he called Mr. Samuel Bronfman and he said: "Look, we let these fellows come out and immigrate to Canada and look what they write about your community". So Mr. Bronfman called me on the carpet: "Listen, you'd better be cautious in what you write here about Canada".

The refugees found themselves entering a Jewish community which was as interested in helping them as it was in assuring they behaved. In Montreal and Toronto the Canadian Jewish Congress provided loans and clothing, free access to doctors and advice; homes were located, religious needs provided for and Jewish families encouraged to open their homes to the refugees. The help was appreciated. "I found the Jewish community an extremely warm community", explained one refugee fondly. "For the first time in my life the doors opened up to me and I felt extremely comfortable".

Nonetheless, the first years of Canadian life were difficult for some — more difficult, recalled one internee, than he expected.

I really found it a traumatic experience after internment camp coming to Toronto and being *nobody* all of a sudden. There's tremendous trauma attached to being a refugee. My parents were respected people in the commu-

nity. I was always a top student in school. I usually had a whole circle of people around me. . . . And here nobody knew me — "Refugee" — very difficult to live with that kind of thing.

In the years that have passed since internment, none of the refugees have forgotten their experiences. It marked their lives and determined the progress of their adjustment to the Canadian and Jewish communities.

Some of the internees found comfort in retaining their internment camp friends. They had already lost much, but the comradeship of fellow internees allowed them to share experiences that all felt. Every internee might ask: "Why was I protected? Who protected me? How was I chosen? How come the other ones all went to Dachau, Buchenwald and never came out? All my cousins are dead. They cleaned up all my friends. All my friends are dead." And so their fellow refugees became their anchor. "This was my family. These were the people I was closest to. These were the people I understood." For most, marriage, schools and jobs brought new contacts and eased adjustment.

Some who never overcame the despair of internment denied the experience, refusing to socialize with other refugees. "Every once in a while", a reluctant interviewee explained, "I speak to somebody about it and usually I don't sleep for three days, even now. So I'm very hesitant to talk about it. I never think about it. I have it in the back of my mind."

Others openly reflect on their internment experience, sometimes seeing it as part of the common adjustments all survivors of the Holocaust must endure. "Naturally you lost several years of your life", explained one internee. "My whole life didn't develop the way I wanted it to. But these are romantic dreams. . . . You make things do." "I think of it every day of my life", explained another. "Till I die, I will never forget it. I can't."

With time, most interned refugees eased into their places in the Canadian community. For some there is a realization that the internment experience, scarring as it was, saved their lives and opened new horizons.

You feel, in one way, a wasted time — you lost two or three years — on the other hand you are happy to be saved by these circumstances. Millions of people lost their lives. So I regard it as a happy accident to come through the war like this . . . The experience itself wasn't always pleasant . . . but this is what war is. It displaces people. And if you look around you just can thank your stars you're in a country like Canada.

Indeed many of the refugees succeeded in Canada and their achievements far exceeded anyone's expectations of them. For some this serves to magnify the irony of their internment and intensifies their pride in their achievements. According to several internees, internment and the resulting hardships has created its own motivation to succeed in all they do.

We all received a drive — to make up for the lost years we had as kids. The totally useless two years . . . We had to make up fast, quick and get somewhere and try and recreate the type of life that we remembered as children. . . . it's because we had nobody to rely on. They had to make it on their own . . . We just couldn't afford to fail. We had to succeed. . . . In my particular case every living minute was spent learning and working and producing, at the cost of my teens. I had no youth.

If you have no parents you are thrown on yourself. You can go two ways. One way, you give up. Or — I'm going to make something. I'm going to show them. Even though I may be a dirty Jew and a refugee. . . . I'm just as good as everybody else.

Perhaps it is just this determination — won through suffering, loss and forced immigration — that separates the refugee from other immigrants. For the refugee, the past is never reconciled and the future never certain.

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