

A GLOWING DREAM: A MEMOIR

Roland Penner. Introduction by Howard Pawley. J. Gordon Shillingford Publisher, Inc., Winnipeg, 2007. 272 pages.

Reviewed by Roz Usiskin

A “red diaper baby” from Winnipeg’s North End to Attorney General of Manitoba to the Order of Canada? Unlikely? This is the life story of Roland Penner, which he recounts in his new book *A Glowing Dream: A Memoir*.

The book originated, as explained in the introduction, as an extension of the 2000 video titled *A Glowing Dream: The Story of Jacob and Rose Penner*, two major players in the radical and colourful history of Winnipeg’s North End. For Roland, the book is meant to reflect the “glowing dream” of his parents, the dream of a society dedicated to social justice and equality.

While the book is described as a memoir, its scope is much broader than what is generally recognized as a memoir. It is more than “a record of events based on the writer’s personal observation and knowledge,” as Webster defines memoir. This is a well-researched social history that brings in as evidence government documents, RCMP files (plenty of those for the “highly suspect” Penner family), historical research, oral histories, etc. In many ways, in a fascinating and often humorous account, Penner skillfully weaves together

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the personal and the political.

The intervening period from the “red diaper era” to Roland’s stint as Attorney General was incredibly productive as Roland experienced many career changes, changes that enlarged his social interactions with numerous groups and communities, primarily but not exclusively in Winnipeg’s North End. Describing this formative period, Roland views life in the North End of his early years as a microcosm of the multicultural dream that decades later was enshrined in the Canadian constitution.

With three older brothers, twins Roland and Ruth were born in 1924, the offspring of Rose and Jake, two contrasting personalities: Jake came from southern Ukraine, of Mennonite conservative stock, a political radical but always conservative in dress and demeanour, while Rose (Rachel Shapack) was from a small town near the cosmopolitan city of Odessa, born to a Jewish, non-religious family, fiery in temperament, always outspoken on behalf of her children and her beliefs. Both were radicalized in the 1905 revolutionary upheavals in Russia. In Canada, they were brought together at a 1907 Emma Goldman meeting. Notwithstanding their different backgrounds, in 1912 they went “through the ordinary rituals of marriage... without the benefit of clergy” and for years their devotion and compatibility withstood the trials and tribulations they faced as communists. Roland writes that “their love for each other, for their children and for the working class” guided their life together.

For those of us who grew up during some of the great upheavals of the early twentieth century, this memoir takes us back in time and place to our unforgettable youth: the Russian Revolution; the founding of Communist Parties around the world (in Canada in 1921 with Jacob Penner as one of its pioneers) and the party’s various transmigrations; the Spanish Civil War in 1936; World War II with Roland and his brother Norman serving overseas; and in the late 40s and early 50s, the Cold War and the McCarthy era. Closer to home, there were the May Day parades; Jake Penner’s internment in 1940 and his election to City Hall in 1936 representing the North End’s Ward 3 for 25 years; and the concerts and meetings at the various ethnic, left-wing Labour Temples—the Liberty Temple, home to the radical Jewish movement, the Ukrainian Labour Temple, and the Russian Hall. These events are vividly described as life-altering experiences that charted Roland’s future. The “hangouts” of our youth—Kelekis, Farmers’ Market, Luxton School and the unforgettable experience of attending St. John’s High School—are all included as background to growing up in Winnipeg’s North End.

As a mature student under Canada’s Veteran Benefit Program, university was an exciting time for Roland. At the University of Manitoba he won three Isbistor Scholarships and a Gold Medal in English, and as a debater he won the McGoun Cup. Thereafter, his reputation as an orator was firmly established. He was also review editor of the *Manitoban*. During this

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time, he headed the Canadian delegation to the First World Youth Festival in Prague in 1947, the festival that brought to world attention the slogan of “peaceful co-existence” at a time when World War III seemed a distinct possibility.

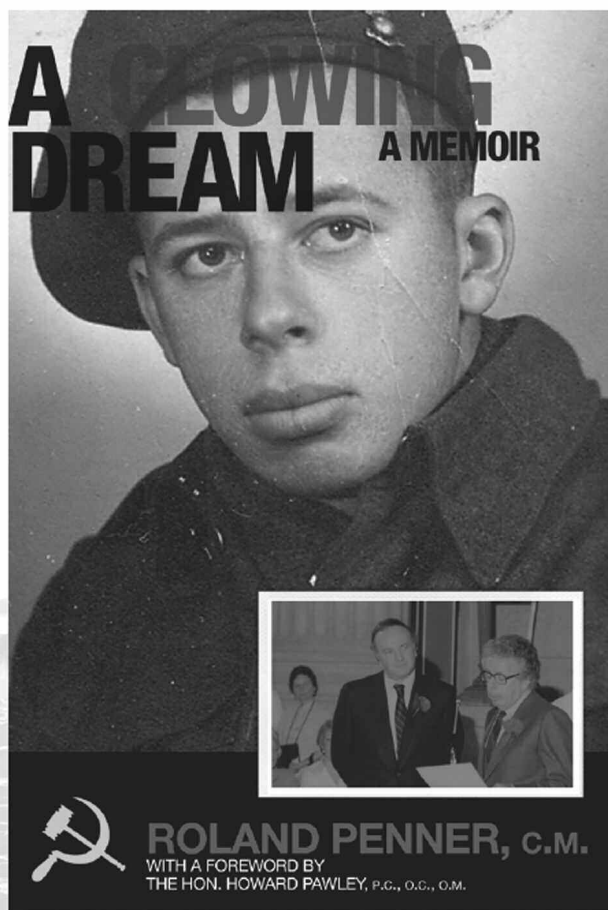
Ideological indoctrination was a given for the Penner children. It was after the Khrushchev revelations in 1956 that the “glowing dream” began to fade. As Roland said: “Looking at what I still believed was the centre of the socialist universe through rose-coloured glasses like so many others, I saw the roses and not the thorns.” Although there was no public renunciation, Roland slowly withdrew from the Communist Party, but he repeatedly

reassures us “that he never stopped believing in the socialist ideal.” More than twenty years later he joined the NDP, to the dismay of some and the delight of others. In 1981, NDP Premier Howard Pawley convinced Roland to become a candidate in the Fort Rouge constituency, and his career as an MLA began.

In the late 1940s and 50s, career changes were unlikely. Whether by design or chance, Roland was an exception. Before settling into his legal profession, he was active: as an amateur actor with the Winnipeg New Theatre, a radical alternative theatre group attracting left-wing intellectuals and supporters such as Joe Zuken, Fred Narvey, Sybil and Saul Cherniack; as an

impresario, when he brought to our doorstep at the height of the Cold War leading artists such as Pete Seeger, Odetta, Theodore Bikel, and Stars of the Bolshoi; as a freelance broadcaster with the CBC; as the manager of a left-wing bookstore; as an associate with the Winnipeg Film Society, bringing to Winnipeg foreign art movies. While these careers were exciting and of a high-profile nature, this was a difficult economic period for the growing Penner family. As Joe Zuken’s law partner, Roland’s economic situation was still tentative as the firm had the reputation as being the “poverty law firm” in Winnipeg.

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A GLOWING DREAM A MEMOIR

Roland Penner, C.M.

with a Foreword by
The Hon. Howard Pawley, P.C., O.C., O.M.

Filled with fascinating, personal anecdotes and peopled with colourful characters, Manitoba’s former Attorney General takes the reader on a historic, and often tumultuous, journey. Roland Penner was appointed as a Member of the Order of Canada being cited for his contribution to legal aid and human rights.

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Roland describes his strong bonds, as a practicing lawyer, with Joe Zuken, his mentor and friend. He shares with us some humorous anecdotes of his “legal escapades” as “being stranger than fiction,” the Ken Lieshman Case being a prime example. Early in his career, he became the first chairman of Legal Aid Manitoba, now still in existence after 33 years. Roland assesses in hindsight both the positive and negative aspects of legal aid as a transformative instrument. Despite his hopes to include the poor in the governance committee and in the delivery of legal services as a means of dealing with the “war on poverty,” it has “not been the success we had all hoped for.” Roland concludes, perhaps reaffirming his Marxist analysis, that the legal system is “a product of the establishment that it serves, that it cannot be turned into the front line for law reform and even more obviously for social transformation.”

In 1967 Roland embarked on

a new career. As law professor at the University of Manitoba, Roland began teaching Criminal Law, then Labour Law and finally Constitutional Law. Since unionism was “in his blood,” Penner successfully campaigned to unionize faculty. After a bitter struggle, the University of Manitoba Faculty Association (UMFA) was certified, making the University of Manitoba the first major university to unionize. Continuing his union activities, Roland became chairman of CAUT (Canadian Association of University Teachers) in 1979. By 2005, over 50 Anglophone and Francophone universities were unionized.

“Living in the eye of the storm” is how Roland describes his six and a half years (1981–88) in the Pawley NDP government, a turbulent period provincially and nationally. As a “rookie” he was appointed Attorney General, along with four other portfolios. With much humour in the retelling, the Treasury Board portfolio was quickly dispensed with, as it soon became apparent that Roland “loved spending.” His main efforts were confined to his work as Attorney General. During his stewardship, Manitoba made tremendous strides in enlightened, progressive legislation. While there are many examples one could dwell on, the Human Rights Code, “one of the most advanced human rights statutes in North America,” and Legal Aid became the two linchpins of Penner’s career. In both areas, Manitoba was recognized as the model. In 2000, in recognition of these two major achievements, Roland Penner was awarded the Order of Canada.

While these were the more positive, satisfying aspects of Roland’s experience in government, two of his “worst” experiences were the “French-Language crisis” (1981-85) and the Morgentaler abortion issue. The first, the French-Language issue, dates back to the Manitoba Act of 1870 which proclaimed the equality of the French and English languages. With the influx of anglophones from Ontario, this act was superseded in 1890 by the Official Languages Act. English became the sole language for all of Manitoba’s legislation. Roland upheld the supremacy of the Manitoba Act, viewing this as a “principled position,” one that would require the revision of previous legislation into both languages. In a heated political climate pitting French- and English-speaking Manitobans, Roland’s position, as anticipated, became highly unpopular and controversial. In 1985, Roland felt vindicated when the Supreme Court upheld the primacy of the constitution by declaring the Official Languages Act invalid.

Roland’s second most controversial experience was the abortion issue and the setting up by Henry Morgentaler of an abortion clinic in Manitoba. Eighteen years later, this issue still has the power to haunt him and remains a point of contention for many women’s groups in Manitoba. At the time Roland was Attorney General, abortion was severely restricted by the Criminal Code—certain “therapeutic” abortions could only be performed, under restricted procedures, in certified hospitals. Hence, Roland was unable to

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agree to Dr. Morgentaler's appeal for an assurance that he would "stay" any prosecutions once the clinic was opened. In his defence, Roland argued that the Attorney General can't "stay" a constitutional law. Moreover, there was already a pending constitutional challenge in Ontario to the restrictions on abortion in the Criminal Code. In a "never to be forgotten afternoon" in the late fall of 1983 or the late spring of 1984, Roland suffered "in relative silence" as angry demonstrators in front of his home accused him of being "little short of a traitor." A few years later, in 1988, the Supreme Court of Canada struck down the abortion provisions in the Criminal Code and ended the "criminalization of abortion in Canada." Nevertheless, this was a painful chapter for Roland, for the NDP government and for many Morgentaler supporters.

The Meech Lake drama brought Roland onto the national stage. Although he considered

his role in this drama as that of a "bit player," he is able to bring to his readers an insider's view of the machinations of the bureaucracy and government at that time. A strong supporter of the Meech Lake Accord, Roland felt that "though imperfect as all compromises are, [it] was objectively a reasonable solution of outstanding issues and most importantly, a workable means of keeping Canada as one united country." With the failure of Meech, "Canadian unity had been dealt a serious blow from which it has not yet fully recovered." While one can apportion blame to many, especially to those who failed "to understand or misinterpreted many of the provisions," Roland especially targets Mulroney and Trudeau as the two who killed Meech, Mulroney for being manipulative and secretive and Trudeau for consistently attacking the Accord during the debate's last two years.

Having "crossed the great divide" from the North End to the South End of Winnipeg, from a working-class to a middle-class

existence, Roland concludes his memoirs with the reflection, "Life with its ups and downs, its troubles and its triumphs, took the boy out of the North End but thanks to two remarkable people, my parents 'Jake and Rose,' it did not, I like to think, take the North End out of the boy." He takes great pride in knowing that his children carry on the struggle of a "Glowing Dream." In his eighty-third year, Roland has lived his life, mainly in the public spotlight, with courage and determination, facing the stigmatization attached to those with a high-profile communist history. Because of his communist past, Roland often felt vulnerable to critics from both the left and the right—the left expected more progressive policies, the right fought for less. Penner proudly proclaims his many achievements, while also acknowledging his frailties, his failures and disappointments, which in the end are characteristics common to all human lives. This is a life well lived, and *A Glowing Dream* is a book that deserves to be read. ♦

IN/OUT...

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gauleiters in Ottawa are defeated (I hope) at the next election.

Jewish Book Fair

From Nov. 24-29 the 23rd Annual Cherie Smith Jewish Book Festival will take place at the Jewish Community Centre of Greater Vancouver. It promises to be, as usual, a diverse event with something for everyone, including some writers and participants who may be familiar to *Outlook* readers—Seymour Levitan, Tom Wayman, Gabor Mate, Nancy Richler, Ruth Panofsky (her book *The Force of Vocation* was reviewed by Paul Headrick

in our May/June issue), and Rhea Tregebov (her anthology *Arguing with the Storm* was reviewed by Helen Mintz in the March/April issue).

What with the Jewish Book Festival, and November being Jewish Book Month, I thought I would share a charming tribute to the written word which I came across in *A History of the Jewish People* (ed. H.H. Ben-Sasson).

Discussing the reverence toward books during the "Golden Age" of Spanish Jewry (and the medieval Diaspora generally), Sassoon quotes from an "ethical will" left by the physician R. Judah ibn Tibbon (1120-1190) to his son. R. Judah advised his son, "My son, make books your

companions and make your bookcases and shelves your groves and pleasure gardens. Graze in their beds and cull their flowers, and if your soul grows weary and exhausted, move from garden to garden and from flower bed to flower bed For then your will shall be restored and your spirit will become beautiful."

Jottings—Not!

Alas, my column this month took up so much space so as to leave no room for Sylvia's Jottings column. My apologies—I know all our readers enjoy Jottings (so do I!) We promise to start the year off right and restore it in the next issue. ♦