

CANADA'S JEWS: A PEOPLE'S JOURNEY

Gerald Tulchinsky. University of Toronto Press, Toronto/Buffalo/London, 2008. 630 pages.

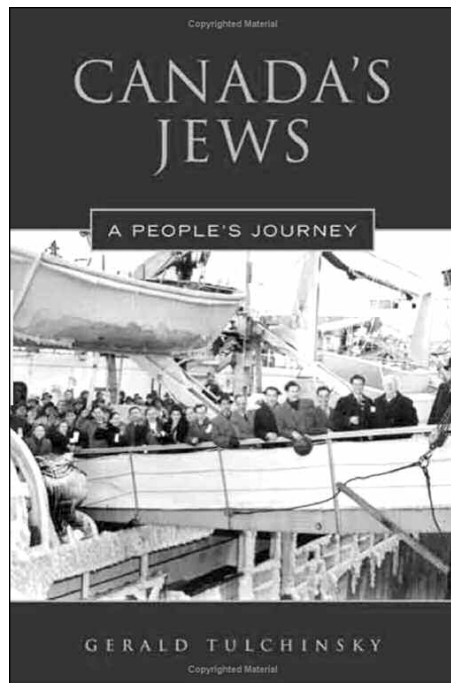
By Shirley Sharzer

Author Gerald Tulchinsky has provided as exhaustive a history of a “journey” as one could possibly hope to find on a book shelf. This is a hefty 495-page (plus) tome compiled with toil and dedication. Author Gerald Tulchinsky is not skimming shallow waters in this exploration of Jewish immigration and participation in Canadian life. He delves into the total experience of Jewish newcomers to this country, replete with fascinating anecdotal detail.

Consider that the index alone consists of 23 pages, the bibliography six pages, and explanatory “notes” fill 95 pages. So I would suggest that readers might want to keep this fat volume beside a comfortable easy chair. This will allow for an initial first scan of the back of the book to seek out familial names and familiar events. The main body then deserves to be read section by section.

The author, a Professor Emeritus in the Department of History at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario, pays tribute to forerunners such as Louis Rosenberg and David Rome and other more contemporary historians, as well as to his research assistants, most of them students at Queen’s. Tulchinsky is also the author of two previous historical books on the Canadian Jewish community¹, and describes this current publication as a “replacement and an update.”

During a teaching career that took him at various times to Loyola College, the University of



Saskatchewan and finally, Queen’s, he has consistently pursued his lifelong need to explain how Canadian Jewry has gotten to its present place, “from immigration to integration, in a country in transition from colony to nation.”

This is a large, scholarly effort and could be intimidating at first glance. But it is compelling reading, comprehensive and thorough. At the end of his epilogue, the author avoids speculation on the future of the Jewish journey—“not the province of the historian”—but does suggest that his history could activate confrontation and fragmentation over sensitive questions like “Who is a Jew?” An interesting query, “You Jewish?”, for some reason was an occasional jocular greeting in my youthful social circles in Winnipeg’s North End many years ago. Tulchinsky offers a wide choice of answers to that question as he describes the Jewish jour-

ney from the time 14 Jews formed Canada’s first congregation in Montreal on Dec. 30, 1768, to the 240th anniversary of the founding of the first organized Jewish community.

Tulchinsky and his team have made impressive use of Jewish archives and community resources in the search for documentation and fresh information. The mass of detail is truly remarkable and the statistics revelatory.

Tulchinsky notes that Canada’s Jews, numbering nearly 400,000 at the beginning of the 21st century, “have entered the Canadian mainstream to a degree undreamed of two generations earlier and constitute a much different community—if they are really still a single body—than they once were.”

He sees “strength, confidence, pride and commitment” as the current norm among Canadian Jews. The book opens with the 1768-1890 “beginnings” of the Jewish community in this country. A sprinkling of Jews had already arrived on Canadian shores even before the formation of the first congregation in Montreal. Tulchinsky cites evidence that Jews traded with the early French colonies in the Americas. These Jews had Spanish and Portuguese-sounding names. Even before they settled in Quebec, there was some Jewish mercantile contact with the British colonies in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, and with the French fortress at Louisbourg on Ile Royal (Cape Breton). One street in the fortress was even known as “rue des Juifs.” By the 1750s, there were many Jews in Halifax among the army and navy purveyors and the merchants supplying the civilian population. Tulchinsky notes that the newly Canadian Jews were in the same economic and political camp as the Anglo-Saxon elites that governed the colony and

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¹ *Taking Root: The Origins of the Canadian Jewish Community* (Lester Publishing Toronto, 1993) and *Branching Out: The Transformation of the Canadian Jewish Community* (Stoddard Publishing, 1998). See Gil Levine’s review of the latter book in our July/August 2000 issue. – Eds.

dominated its commerce. In Montreal, a synagogue was built, a cemetery acquired, and an identity affirmed. And as Jews laid foundations across the country in later years, the same pattern occurred.

Tulchinsky refers to the “Jew bill” of 1831, giving Jews full entitlements, which was passed in the Lower Canada Legislative Assembly. This bill was a first in the British Empire, preceding by a generation the extension of full civil rights to Jews in Britain itself. In the United States, most Jews had already enjoyed full civil rights for almost a century.

Tulchinsky devotes much space to the development of Jewish pioneers in the clothing business in early Canada, as early as

the mid-1840s in Quebec. In urban Toronto, meanwhile, Jewish pursuits were focused heavily on “jewelry and fancy goods.”

But off in the “hinterland,” Jewish pedlars and storekeepers operated, mainly transitorily, in towns and villages that served as local market centres. Such was the brief history of my own storekeeper father in the Saskatchewan town of Foam Lake. If there was anti-Semitism, it never approached the viciousness of the pogroms in the Ukraine, as recalled, though seldom and with some reluctance, by my immigrant parents.

Dealing with the earliest east-and-west coast Jewish communities in the 19th century, Tulchinsky notes that most of the initial

settlers came from nearby areas of the United States. This migration was not dissimilar to that of their Christian contemporaries. But until the late 1890s there was no unified Canadian Jewish community.

The book offers much background on colonization by Jews in western Canada. Tulchinsky maintains that colonization was a “significant chapter” in the history of Canadian Jewry, whereas it seemed much less significant in U.S. Jewish history. Nevertheless, it became clear that Jews preferred to migrate to urban centres in Canada. In the early 1900s, “the Eastern Europeans had arrived, and the semblance of a Canadian Jewish community had come into view.” ♦

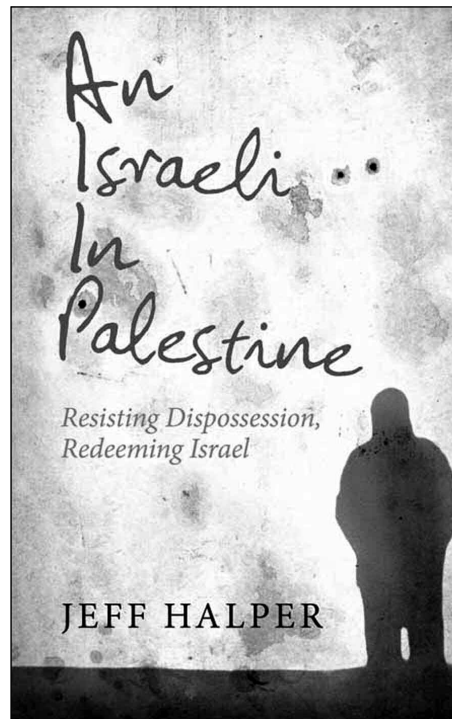
AN ISRAELI IN PALESTINE: RESISTING DISPOSSESSION, REDEEMING ISRAEL

Jeff Halper. London: Pluto Press 2008. 317 pages

Reviewed by Mark Golden

An Israeli in Palestine, Jeff Halper was once a Jewish boy growing up in Hibbing, Minnesota, home of Gus Hall—longtime head of the Communist Party U.S.A.—and Bob Dylan. This fact-filled yet passionate book is his account of his move to Israel (where he has lived for thirty-five years), the movement he helped found (the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions [ICAHAD]) and the analysis and arguments that have made him one of his country’s most creative critics. And one of the most courageous: the book includes photos of Halper chained to a home about to be demolished and standing in front of a bulldozer. Throughout, it interweaves the personal and the political. We are introduced to the

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Palestinian family whose suffering (their home was destroyed) first set Halper pondering about its causes. We learn that his wife Shoshana’s parents were given an

Arab family’s house when they first came to Israel in 1949, and are asked to understand an Israeli electorate prepared to vote for anyone who can offer them personal security, no matter what the means. In the end, Halper offers a new road map to an Israel at peace with the best of Jewish tradition and with the non-Israelis in Palestine.

An Israeli in Palestine is carefully organized, clearly written, full of helpful itemized lists (the seven stages of dispossession of the Palestinians, the four strategic modes of Israeli control, the four decisive actions by which Ariel Sharon sought to carry out his aims, the five elements of a solution). Nevertheless, it is not an easy read. The history Halper outlines is very different from the account familiar to most of us, and the Israel he describes much less admirable. The Israel of *Exodus* and Zionist summer camps, beset by fanatical neighbours bent on its destruction and surviving, miraculously, as an isolated outpost of decency and democracy, is invoked only to be erased. For Halper, political Zionism is a remnant of the late nineteenth/

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