

# NATIONAL POST

## Canada and the Jews

**Brian Mulroney, National Post**

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Canadians talk proudly of our tolerance and fair-mindedness. Often a tone of moral superiority insinuates itself into our national discourse. But these virtues, such as they are, are of fairly recent vintage. The truth is we have little to be smug about.

For instance, in 1933, Toronto witnessed the Christie Pits riot when local anti-Semites terrorized a Jewish baseball team in a street battle that went on all night. The next year in Montreal all the interns at Hospital Notre-Dame went on strike to protest the hiring of a Jew as their colleague. The offending Jew in question, one Samuel Rabinovitch, had graduated first in his class at l'Universite de Montreal but was forced to resign after a few days because, as *Le Devoir* reported, Catholic patients would find it "repugnant" to be treated or touched by a Jewish doctor.

In 1938, the Canadian Jewish Congress decided not to publish a study of the status of Jews in English Canada because the findings were so profoundly unsettling. But overt anti-Semitism, and an abject failure to appreciate its ultimate consequences if unchecked, were not parochial considerations, nor were they limited to minor players in Canadian society.

On Feb. 10, 1937, Canada's prime Minister Mackenzie King records in his diary a friendly chance encounter he had the previous Monday night with an elderly man on Wilbrod Street in Ottawa. The man, a Russian immigrant called Mr. Cohen, tells the prime minister that he built a furniture and clothing business on Rideau and Banks Streets, that he had 3 sons and a daughter, that he had divided all he possessed among them and was now living in retirement with his daughter. In other words, a true Canadian success story.

The prime minister listened to Mr. Cohen thoughtfully, treated him kindly and then recorded the following in his diary: "The only unfortunate part of the whole story is that the Jews having acquired foothold of Sandy Hill, it will not be long before this part of Ottawa will become more or less possessed by them. I should not be surprised if, some time later, Laurier House was left as about the only residence not occupied by Jews in this part of the city."

A few months later, prime minister King visited Germany to meet Chancellor Adolf Hitler. King recorded the following impressions of that meeting: "He [Hitler] smiled very pleasantly and indeed had a sort of appealing and affectionate look in his eyes. My sizing up of the man as I sat and talked with him was that he is really one who truly loves his fellow man. His face is much more pre-possessing than his pictures would give the impression of. It is not that of a fiery over-strained nature but of a calm, passive man deeply and thoughtfully in earnest. His skin was smooth. His face did not present lines of fatigue or weariness. His eyes impressed me most of all. There was a liquid quality about them which indicates keen perception and profound sympathy. Calm, composed and one could see how particularly humble folk would have come to have profound love for the man. As I talked with him I could not but think of Joan of Arc. He is distinctly a mystic."

The following day, our prime minister had lunch in Berlin with the Nazi Foreign Minister von Neurath, who delivered himself of some interesting opinions: "He admitted that they [the Nazis] had taken some pretty rough steps in cleaning up the situation, but the truth was the country was going to pieces at the time Hitler took hold. He said to me that I would have loathed living in Berlin with the Jews, and the way in which they had increased their numbers in the city, and were taking possession of its more important part. He said there

was no pleasure in going to a theatre which was filled with them. Many of them were very coarse and vulgar and assertive. They were getting control of all the business, the finance, and had really taken advantage of the necessity of the people. It was necessary to get them out to have the Germans really control their own city and affairs. He told me I would have been surprised at the extent to which life and morale had become demoralized -- that Hitler had set his face against all that kind of thing, and had tried to inspire desire for a good life in the minds of young people."

And how did Canada's prime minister react to these diabolically racist and extremely ominous comments by one of the most powerful leaders of the Third Reich? Mackenzie King wrote: "I left him feeling that I had met a man whose confidence I would continue to enjoy through the rest of my days... After returning to the hotel, I wrote a letter of some length by hand to von Neurath whom I like exceedingly. He is, if there ever was one, a genuinely kind, good man."

The prime minister sets both the agenda and the tone in Ottawa. Is it any wonder then that the door to Canada was slammed shut to Jewish immigrants before and during the War and that when asked how many Jews would be allowed into Canada after the War, a senior immigration official famously replied: "None is too many." Most regrettably, the government of Canada even refused entry to a ship called the St. Louis, bearing a shipload of Jews desperate for Canada to admit them, but who instead sailed back to Europe on a voyage of the damned.

This was a moment when Canada's heritage and promise were betrayed. Canada's conduct was absolutely disgraceful and I continue to be deeply troubled by the insouciance of our federal government confronted by such a stark and transparent moral challenge. To this day, I cannot watch footage of the faces of Jewish mothers, fathers and children consigned to the gas chambers in German concentration camps without, as a Canadian, feeling a great sense of sorrow, loss and guilt. The government of Canada ignored not only the plight of the Jews, but also the protests of the Canadian people, and the pleading of the press. A prominent Montrealer, William Birks, called the government's closed door policy "narrow, bigoted and short sighted." Socialist leader J.S. Woodsworth said he felt "helpless and ashamed" as a Canadian. The Toronto Star and the Winnipeg Free Press condemned Ottawa's "cowardly policy."

Canadian leaders should be careful therefore when they speak of our legendary sense of tolerance. It was not always or often the hallmark of our early history and although recent years have brought marked improvements, only last Thursday an adjudicator awarded a Jewish public servant a major human rights victory against the federal government after she complained that her workplace at the Ottawa headquarters of Passport Canada was poisoned by anti-Semitism.

Canada has evolved into an imperfect but marvelous country that has provided sanctuary and opportunity to millions. But we should never forget that many groups of immigrants to Canada have suffered injustice and discrimination. From the Jews to the Japanese to the Ukrainians to the Irish to the Italians to the Chinese-- and many others -- the streets of Canada turned out not to be paved with gold and the voyage to Canadian citizenship was often marked by sadness and despair.

But times change and incremental progress continues to be made.

James Joyce wrote that "the past is consumed in the present and the present is alive only because it gives birth to the future." The Jews of Israel have already emerged as a valorous people who have made the deserts bloom and the Jews of Canada have found a home whose future is immeasurably brighter and whose values have been powerfully enriched because of their presence and their contribution to Canada and to all mankind.