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Feelings of Isolation and Trauma from the Holocaust in the 20th-Century Canadian Jewish Short Story

Sentiments d'isolement et de traumatisme liés à l'Holocauste dans la nouvelle canadienne-juive

Marián Gazdík

Abstract

Canadian Jewish writers of short stories belonged to dual contexts and thus had to adapt to two different contexts – a mainstream one and a minority one. This article analyses short stories mostly from an anthology edited by Norman Ravvin and devoted to works of Canadian Jewish authors: *Not Quite Mainstream Canadian Jewish Short Stories*. In this anthology, the reader finds examples of subtle discrimination or a cultural shock (in Chava Rosenfarb's "The Greenhorn" or in Robyn Sarah's "A Minor Accident"), but also short stories dealing with the great suffering of Jews fleeing from German concentration camps to safety in the Soviet Union (in Rochl Korn's "Bluma Zelinger" and Roma Gelblum-Bross's "The Black Valises"). In addition to some Canadian Jewish authors, I examine two stories by Barry Callaghan, coming to the conclusion that Callaghan's stories offer a similar kind of experience. The stories examined in this article express the feelings of anxiety, trauma, nostalgia or horror experienced during the Second World War, but they also depict Canadian society through the eyes of a minority. The values present in these stories contribute to humanism and understanding among a variety of ethnic and social groups.

Keywords: Canadian Jewish authors; Chava Rosenfarb; Robyn Sarah; Rochl Korn; Roma Gelblum-Bross; Barry Callaghan

Résumé

Les écrivains juifs canadiens de nouvelles appartenaient à deux contextes et devaient donc s'adapter à deux contextes différents : un contexte traditionnel et un contexte minoritaire. Cet article analyse des nouvelles tirées principalement d'une anthologie éditée par Norman Ravvin et consacrée à des œuvres écrites par des auteurs juifs canadiens : *Not Quite Mainstream Canadian Jewish Short Stories*. Dans cette anthologie, le lecteur trouve des exemples de discrimination subtile ou de choc culturel (dans « The Greenhorn » de Chava Rosenfarb ou dans « A Minor Accident » de Robyn Sarah), mais aussi de nouvelles relatant les grandes souffrances des Juifs fuyant les camps de concentration allemands pour se mettre en sécurité en Union soviétique (dans « Bluma Zelinger » de Rochl Korn et « The Black Valises » de Roma Gelblum-Bross). J'examine aussi deux nouvelles de Barry Callaghan et en conclus qu'elles offrent une expérience similaire. Les nouvelles examinées dans cet article expriment les sentiments



d'anxiété, de traumatisme, de nostalgie ou d'horreur éprouvés pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale, mais elles décrivent également la société canadienne à travers des yeux d'une minorité. Les valeurs présentes dans ces nouvelles contribuent à l'humanisme et à la compréhension entre divers groupes ethniques et sociaux.

Mots-clés : auteurs juifs canadiens ; Chava Rosenfarb ; Robyn Sarah ; Rochl Korn ; Roma Gelblum-Bross ; Barry Callaghan

In this paper, I deal with the theme of the Canadian Jewish short story as a phenomenon and a specific literary genre section or subsection over the course of the 20th century. It is defined by belonging to a dual identity – being Canadian, due to living in this country, and being Jewish by belonging to a cultural, religious and family background in which belonging to this ethnic and religious group represented one of the strongest elements of one's identity. In this article I am interested in the issue raised by Fabienne C. Quennet in an article dealing with one of Mordecai Richler's short stories: "What it means to be Jewish in Canada and how the relationship between Jews and gentiles manifests itself..." (Quennet, 151). In accordance with this question, I am going to examine my chosen body of texts and try to establish the kinds of feelings their protagonists feel in their relationship to the majority society in the country of their exile, i.e., Canada. I also consider the way they cope (if they cope at all) with trauma and other consequences of the Holocaust or similar associated experiences (like exile to the U.S.S.R. during the Second World War) as well as nostalgia for the past and feelings of the diminishing Jewish communities.

I would like to note that I do not take into account the particular religious worldviews of the authors included – but neither do I examine stories by these authors that do not display any Jewish cultural traits. Furthermore, I wish to point out that the chosen authors were able to express a particular experience pertaining to this minority in a most aesthetically pleasing and condensed way within such a short space. In this connection, I mention a quote from Palmer and Rasporich: "A. M. Klein, Irving Layton... and others, have so skilfully articulated Jewish experience in Canada that it has penetrated the mainstream sensibility, earning Jewish writing a major place in modern Canadian literature" throughout the 20th century (Palmer and Rasporich, 796). This text also reflects one of the most frequent topics among the short stories analysed, the Second World War experience and the Holocaust: "Jewish literature in Canada characteristically reflects an international vision, a minority sensibility and the profound experience of the WWII Holocaust..." (Palmer and Rasporich, 796).

Though a Jewish population in the American continent was present in American continent in the 17th century, it became more palpable later on. With the onset of

pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe from the 1880s onward, the numbers of Jewish immigrants embarking on the journey to the countries of the New World, mostly to the U.S.A., but also to Canada, rapidly increased.¹ According to existing sources, there was only a small number of Jews in Canada around the middle of the 19th century: “In 1851 there were barely 450 Jews in Canada...” (Fuerstenberg, 1213). However, this number increased markedly over the forty years after 1881: “The Canadian Jewish population increased from 2,456 to 126,201 in 1921” (Weinfeld, 862). This tendency also continued later, although immigration was curtailed in 1931 due to government policy; it did resume after the Second World War, and data from the end of the 20th century show that “By 1991 ... 369,565 persons... claimed to be wholly or partially of Jewish origin...” (Weinfeld, 862 and 865).

However, this is only the starting point to the discussion of how this historical situation found its reflection in literary works, specifically in short stories. My main source has been the anthology of short stories *Not Quite Mainstream: Canadian Jewish Short Stories* (Ravvin 2002), but I have also used literary material from other sources.

I will now analyse particular stories from the above anthology and from other sources with regard to the features mentioned above. In the sketch-like story by Yaacov Zipper “That First Morning” (Zipper, 17–22) (translated from the Yiddish), we can see a newly arrived immigrant whose first-day experiences include a policeman playing with children (unthinkable in the “homeland”), which contrasts with a socially moving theme of a poor peddler collecting junk. A similar story is also represented by “The Greenhorn” by Chava Rosenfarb (Rosenfarb, 75–86). In it a survivor of concentration camps in Poland finds himself in Montreal, where he fights for better working conditions but encounters the prejudices of others who regard him as a greenhorn. In the story the protagonist is intimidated by his superior at work: “you should know that I am the boss here and not you, greenhorn!” This designation, which is felt as a pejorative curse, is also reiterated by others: “This one is a real greenhorn from a greenhorn land” (Rosenfarb, 84 and 85).

Rochl Korn’s “Bluma Zelinger” (53–74) is a moving story of a Jewish family travelling through the U.S.S.R. and away from Nazis, travelling by train through Siberia to a place near Samarkand, in modern-day Uzbekistan. A mother, whose daughter is lost, leaves her family and loses them in order to rescue her daughter. This story is noteworthy for its powerful symbolism: the last item of earrings given by the grandmother to the protagonist empowers Bluma. She can hear the words of her grandmother in a sort of hallucinatory way, which helps her keep her faith and thus find the lost child. In this story its protagonists fled successfully from the atrocities

1) This historical phenomenon can also be shown in the example of one of the authors selected in this article, Mordecai Richler, whose grandfather settled in Montreal trying to avoid a similar fate: “having come to Canada in 1904 to escape the Eastern Europe pogroms” (Quennet, 149).



of German soldiers inflicted on Jewish persons only to meet with less destructive but still quite active discrimination against this ethnic group on the part of the Soviet authorities (the secret police NKVD). In their uneasy ordeal the protagonist finds her personal identity in the family roots, traditions and in her faith, as we can see in these words: “Suddenly Bluma had heard her grandmother’s voice...: ‘Stop weeping and grieving. It’s a terrible sin to lose faith in God’” (Rosenfarb, 65–66). After Bluma hears the imagined voice of her grandmother, she feels imbued with new energy to keep on fighting the unfavourable fate.

The plot of the story “The Black Valises” by Roma Gelblum-Bross parallels that of the story “Bluma Zelinger.” In this story the parent is substituted for a scholar who values education highly and the lost child is represented here by lost baggage full of lost books, his long-time research. And, although his life is not literally threatened during the journey of his group of Jewish refugees to the place of their safe exile, his values – the results of his life-long research, stored in his luggage – were stolen through the indifference of the majority society. And yet he was able to empower members of the next generation, children, who acquired belief in reading books and thereby gaining knowledge once the war was over: “You know, when the war ends and you come back to Poland, the stores are going to be loaded with books.” However, he laments that the results of his life-long research are lost and his life has lost its purpose: “As for me, all is lost” (Gelblum-Bross, 238). And here we are offered the tragedy of the man and, although he physically survived the Holocaust and war, his life ceased to have its meaning and thus he has become a symbolic victim of this war.

The story “Hair” by Elaine Kalman Naves, coming from Hungary, appears to be totally different than the previous story. In this story the protagonist is not only symbolically threatened by the hostility of her environment but she has to literally fight for survival in a Nazi concentration camp. This is indicated by an episode in which she, at that point still a young girl, refuses a dish of soup because it is very thin; she chooses another, and the guard “beat[s] her raw” as a result. But the Jewish camp doctor, Blanka *néni*, complained to the camp commandant and he had the guard replaced – sent him elsewhere. However, the narrator realises that the whole situation could have ended differently and it could have cost the doctor her life: “But it could just as easily have gone the other way. ... She had risked her life over Lilli’s buttocks” (Kalman Naves, 197). And this example shows how the personal heroism of some person can save human lives. Thus, by contrast, the camp doctor’s heroic deed at the risk of her life preserves her own integrity.

In the story “A Minor Accident” by Robyn Sarah, we do not witness any tragic event or suffering associated with the war or Holocaust. On the contrary, it is the discriminatory attitude of a character, a kind person, who was perhaps convinced of her good motives and behaviour. Its central conflict is a scandal detailed by the

narrator when a teacher, of WASP background, accuses some parents of greed (but without explicitly mentioning their Jewish ethnicity). Some students, like Rhonda, took it as a criticism of her Jewish background and traditions. At first the narrator views it in terms of a simple binary opposition: did the narrator like her teacher despite her being anti-Semitic or because she did not believe she was anti-Semitic? But later she accepted the possibility that both extremes could be correct, although it remained puzzling to her: “Later, painfully, having allowed that both could be the case, I wondered which of us I had let down the most” (Sarah, 150). And yet another possibility exists: that the oversensitive character of Rhonda and her parents, without reason, accused an innocent teacher whose motives were positive.

On the other hand, the story by Irena Eisler, coming from the former Czechoslovakia, “Chestnuts for Kafka” (Eisler, 202–211), reflects the situation when two sisters of Jewish origin hiding in Prague during the war could have been sent to the extermination camps. The irony of their situation is that they were seeking shelter in a brothel visited by German soldiers. Yet in their life-threatening situation, when they are visited by two German officers, they are saved by their bodily reaction: “What angel looked after them, they didn’t know, but the sight of two retching girls in grey flannel nightgowns was enough of a deterrent: the officers looked annoyed, but they had turned around and left. So, that night did Emma and Eva” (Eisler, 206). Another powerful irony employed in the story comes later, namely, through the motif of the nuns hiding the sisters from a German soldier who “made them kneel on the freezing blue tiles, bottling blessed water from the Eagle’s Nest Mineral Water” (Eisler, 207). The irony lies less in the fact that they are Catholic than in the fact that bottling the “blessed” water helps the sisters to survive, and the name of its brand is identical with one of the main residences of Adolf Hitler – The Eagle’s Nest.

Now I would like to deal with the works of two writers who provided this genre in Canadian literature with highly sophisticated and mature specimens, namely, Matt Cohen and Mordecai Richler. Even though “neither Klein nor Richler made his mark as a writer of the short story” (Ravvin 13) – a stance also supported by the claim that the stories in the collection *The Street* have a “fictional status [that] is indeterminate” (Darling, 6) – Richler nevertheless proves to be a master of this genre due to the authenticity and verisimilitude of the Jewish Montreal setting he employs and creates. This view is highlighted by one critic who, in the review of the author’s collection *The Street*, compares it to the quality of the environment in many of Faulkner’s novels: “... William French compared Richler’s St. Urbain Street to Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha” (Quennet, 151). It is hard to define the plot of his story “The Street.” It seems like the core of a novel in its primordial state, something like a work in progress. Most of it resembles the memories of an older man recalling his youth in Montreal – on St Urbain Street, the centre of the Jewish district in this city. Although the story touches



on many themes, it revolves around the theme of Jewish identity embodied by the motto: “A Jew is never poor. ... Broke? Sometimes. Going through hard times? Maybe. In a strange country? Always. But poor? Never” (Richler, 52). It is interesting that, unlike many stories where the references to anti-Semitism are only hidden or implicit, here we can find open criticism of this attitude: “Capital, he said, had no conscience and no fatherland. Besides, the Jew was behind it, and the Jew hated Russia worse than hell. ... ‘Yes, sir, he is the man who is ruling the world just now, and has his knife in the Empire of the Tzar, because his aunt was outraged and his father flogged in some one-horse location on the Volga” (Richler, 46–47). This is a memory of the unnamed first-person narrator’s, who recalls this was in a book by a British writer who stood for British values, as the pupils were informed by their teachers.² And, much as he wanted to like the super-hero of this writer, he could not do so, as he says “without betraying myself” because, as he explains, his grandfather “had gone in fear of being flogged in some one-horse location on the Volga, which was why we were in Canada” (Richler, 47).

The Matt Cohen story “The Sins of Tomás Benares” (Cohen, 303–325) is of similar interest. Although the action takes place in contemporary Canada, through its character Tomás and his father the story moves to Spain and back in time by 200 years. (At some points of the plot, Tomás is 94 years old and his father is said to have been 123 years old when he died.) This story too, like Sarah’s “A Minor Accident,” portrays ethnic discrimination more or less explicitly: “He remembered a friend who had been beaten by a gang of Franco’s men saying he felt sorry for them” (Cohen, 312). The protagonist’s friend is so generous that he can forgive those who were harming others in the fascist political establishment of Franco’s Spain. However, the protagonist Tomás is not capable of such generosity. Maybe that is why he cannot imagine returning to his country when Franco is still in control: “Return? Yes, it had occurred to him... Franco was still in power then... And yet, what would have been the life of an exile returned? The life of a man keeping his lips perpetually sealed, his thoughts to himself...” (Cohen, 317). And even though this passage expresses a criticism of fascist anti-Semitic attitudes, it has more general connotations also. It resembles the situation of a free-thinking person in all non-democratic dictatorships, whether they are represented by fascist states or the socialist countries in Europe before 1989. Similar feelings were typical for emigrants in Canada from Czechoslovakia or other socialist countries who wanted to return to their homeland but were afraid of persecution or of being put in prison by the authorities. And even if they escaped persecution, they could never know who of their friends and relatives were spying for the secret police.

2) The book in question is *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, by John Buchan, 1st Lord Tweedsmuir, Governor-General of Canada from 1935 to 1940 (i.e., when Richler was a boy).

I would now like to refer to the story of the important Canadian Jewish author Norman Levine, who spent most of his adult life abroad – in England. Perhaps that is why he was sensitive towards the feelings of nostalgia of members of Jewish communities in places where their presence is diminishing. Precisely such an attitude is reflected by a character in the author’s short story “By a Frozen River.” As a literary historian noted, this story, “presents the artist’s transformation of two ... unrelated events ... into an understated but moving story about dying traditions and contemporary insecurity, set in a small northern Ontario town” (Jackel, 65). The narrator meets him during his brief stay in Canada during which he symbolically returns to his childhood. Not only does he admire the snow-covered country but he also searches for kosher food and visits a small synagogue accompanied by his guide, Mr. Bischofswerder. And he expresses his sadness in a sigh lamenting the dwindling number of Jewish settlers in the given town: “In 1920, when we came, there were ten families. By the end of the last war it was down to three. No new recruits came to take the place of those who died or moved away. ‘When we go,’ said Mr. Bischofswerder, ‘all that will be left will be a small cemetery’” (Levine, location 2579). And although we are not confronted here with the open atrocities of the Holocaust, nor with the hostility of the majority society or open discrimination, we can still feel a strong sense of regret that this man and his wife represent the last members of the Jewish community and with them its presence in that place will vanish.

And finally, after dealing with the stories of Canadian Jewish authors, I will attempt a view from the other side. Instead of an insider’s view, that is, one provided by a member of a Jewish community, I will offer a view of someone who writes about Canadian Jewish identity from the outside, as an outsider. I have in mind two stories by the renowned contemporary Canadian poet and novelist Barry Callaghan. In one of them, “The Cohen in Cowan,” he tells the story of an entrepreneur of Jewish origin whose trauma is that the death of his father was derisively commented on by an English Canadian cop as “the old *sheeny*’s dead” (Callaghan 1982, 55). He decides to suppress his Jewish background and become a smart man – an inconspicuous member of the WASP majority: “which made me want to kill him but instead I grew up and got smart and changed my name to Cowan so my kids don’t get that kinda crap in case I die in the street” (Callaghan 1982, 55). But once he gets rid of his Jewish cultural background, he is depressed, hates eating non-kosher food even though he wanted to do enjoy ham, for example, and mocks celebrating Christmas and eating plum pudding with neighbours (Callaghan 1982, 47–57). He simply finds out that the identity he wanted to escape from is the only one in which he feels at his ease.

In the other story, “Our Thirteenth Summer” (Callaghan 2018), the author contrasts two Jewish families. One of them preserves their religious and cultural habits, whereas the other claimed to be English. And although it is only a minor



subplot of this story, this family came from Vienna and they tried to forget they were Jews probably due to the misery and atrocities they had to undergo. And when the grandfather from this family tells the narrator that he would make a good Jew, and the narrator retorts that “How can you know it, you are not a Jew,” he admits, “You are right. I am the man from Mars” (Callaghan 2018, location 928). With this quip the grandfather wants to underline the absurdity of racial prejudices and also separate himself from any nationalistic context. In my opinion, Callaghan, even though he is not Jewish, was able to detect and express feelings that can concern the members of any minority living in the majority society: a sense of exclusion, marginalisation or even overt discrimination.

To conclude, I would like to note that I wanted to show the world from the beginning of the 20th century almost up to its end through the prism of members of the Jewish ethnic, religious and cultural entity being a part of Canadian reality. Furthermore, I can state that the works of several authors reveal traces of their origin in specific European countries (e.g. Elaine Kalman Naves from Hungary, Irena Bisler from the former Czechoslovakia, etc.), even though the best-known writers, such as Mordecai Richler and Matt Cohen, are already accepted as members of the majority English-speaking population. In some of the stories their authors depicted the fates of their ancestors or relatives from distant countries (the U.S.S.R., Poland, etc.), in other stories we see the experience of a newly arrived immigrant – a “greenhorn.” But in most of the stories we can see a mix of the casual everyday reality of contemporary Canada with echoes and memories of the past with its traumas, anxieties and feelings of nostalgia for the past time, with the antagonistic attitudes of the WASP majority in Canada against the Jewish minority but also atrocities – the concentration camps during the Second World War or discrimination against Jews in the Soviet Union. As Norman Ravvin states, “Yaacov Zipper, Rochl Korn, and Chava Rosenfarb transported to Canada a European Jewish world that informed their work in Canada” (Ravvin 15). Reading literary works by Canadian Jewish authors often makes for a valuable experience. I think that the stories, fates and ordeals of the Jewish community have a universal validity and may well represent the multifaceted and mosaic nature of Canadian society and thereby add to our understanding of its culture and life. If people find a viable way of coping with past injustices and wrongs, it can help all of us to better understand not only those members of the marginalised groups amongst us but also our own selves. And that is the role that literature has played and will always play as long as people remain human.

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