

**"ISRAEL AT FIFTY:  
A CANADIAN VIEW"**

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My first memories of Israel were not pleasant. I was six years old. My parents had just moved from the heart of the Jewish community on Robert Street near Harbord to Queen and Spadina where Jews worked but where few lived.

It was the fall of 1947 and a key vote was looming at the United Nations. The vote which would take place on November 29 was whether to partition Palestine into Jewish and Arab sections. If the vote were favorable then for the first time in 2000 years there would be a Jewish State in the Middle East.

Like everybody else in the Jewish community 50 years ago my father was caught up in the excitement. And what better way to show his support than to give his son a Jewish flag to take to his new school. And so off I went oblivious to the world around me.

I did not get far. I remember walking along Queen Street jauntily waving the flag when two older boys jumped me, shouting something that I later understood to be "dirty Jew". They grabbed my flag, broke it and began pummeling me until a nearby storekeeper ran out and chased them away.

My saviour – his name was Mr. Fine, a name I still remember fondly – carried me back to my parent's tiny <sup>restaurant</sup> ~~apartment~~. I was bruised, battered and had a bloody nose. My father took one look at me, understood what had happened, closed the restaurant and for the first time in his life hailed a cab. We drove directly to the brand new Jewish day school. Though he could barely afford it, he enrolled me, so that I could continue my education amongst Jews.

Thus thanks to Israel and a couple of hooligans I became a student of the Hebrew Day School where I would remain for the next eight years. It is to these two bullies I owe my Jewish education.

But it was not in school, that my generation learned to love Israel. It was in our Zionist summer camps. And mine, I like to think, was the very best, perhaps because it had the very least.

Camp Kvutza had nothing but spirit. There were no cabins – only tents; no boats – Lake Erie was too rough; no athletic equipment – too bourgeois according<sup>to</sup> the camp's socialist founders; no facilities of any sort. But we loved it. Located near Dunnville Ontario, it was a hotbed of Labour Zionism. Everything revolved around Israel – the songs, the stories, the culture, the activities. In reality it served as a recruitment center for 'aliya'.

It was a Kvutza that I meet my first Israeli, learned my first Hebrew folk songs and danced my first hora. But it was also at camp where I came face to face with the life and death struggle of the Jewish State.

On the first day of camp in the summer of 1947 all of us were gathered around the flagpole to hear the camp director. He told us that we would see strange things over the course of the summer and that there would be many people we did not know wandering in and out of camp. But under no condition were we to tell anyone – including our parents – what we saw.

And sure enough over the next few weeks we saw trucks arrive full of boxes which were then carried off to a site near the garbage dump and buried. There were regular visits by small boats to our beach which could off-load

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packages and pick up the buried boxes. Most exciting however was the weekly arrival of the Mounties, resplendent in their red jackets, Stetsons, and leather-riding boots. They would stay for several hours talking to the staff, snooping around our tents, tramping through the nearby fields and digging holes on the beach. Clearly they were looking for something, but they always left empty-handed.

All the campers, especially those of us in the youngest section were constantly warned by our counselors to ignore the R.C.M.P. and not to say a word about anything. It was all very secretive and exciting. It was as if we were part of a great mystery.

And of course, as I learned later, we were. Camp Kvutza was the center of a gun-smuggling operation, collecting and sending arms to the beleaguered Jewish population of Palestine. It was then illegal to ship arms to the fledgling Jewish army so everything had to be done with the utmost secrecy. Since our camp was located on Lake Erie we were a convenient transit point for shipments to and from Cleveland, Ohio, just across the lake. And because of the cooperation of some sympathetic Canadian and American government officials there was a steady supply of armaments arriving in the camp.

Though I did not realize then these two experiences symbolized both the worst and the best of Canada in this period.

Think back a generation ago to a Canada that is today scarcely recognizable, to a Canada that was racist, xenophobic and anti-Semitic, to a Canada represented by the two bullies.

There is a commonly held belief among Canadians today that the Jewish community is politically and economically powerful and always has been. Yet just over fifty years ago the Jew was the pariah of Canadian society, the target of abuse, excluded from most professions and legally prevented from living and vacationing in a wide variety of areas from coast to coast.

Few opportunities were available to Jews. Most firms did not hire Jews; Jews were largely barred from the civil services; most hospitals were closed to Jewish doctors – and when one was finally given a job as an intern in Montreal, his fellow interns went out on strike until he was fired. Universities publicly restricted Jewish student enrolment; shockingly, there was not one Jewish professor in any Canadian university in the period, in a world awash with renowned Jewish refugee scientists and academics from Germany desperately seeking jobs. Indeed, as we now know, the country ~~was~~ closed itself to Jews; in one of the most shameful acts in its history, Canada turned its back and locked its gates to the doomed Jews of Europe frantically seeking to escape the Nazi scourge and had the worst record of any Western country in providing sanctuary to Jewish refugees.

But there was another Canada, a most recognizable, generous Canada symbolized by the gunrunning. There were in this country 50 years <sup>ago</sup> many who did not subscribe to the encompassing anti-Semitism of the period and who were enthusiastic supporters of the nascent Jewish State.

The most representative of them was the man I much later discovered to be the key figure in making it possible for Canadian armaments to be shipped to

Palastine to allow a struggling, largely unarmed, Jewish Community to protect itself from the invasion of five Arab armies.

In 1947 Alex Skelton was the Assistant Deputy Minister of Trade and Commerce. He was a Judeophile in a government that had very few of these. He had been horrified by the Holocaust, and ashamed of Canada's role in keeping potential Jewish refugees as far away from our share as possible. This was a particular sensitive and painful issue for him since his father O.D. Skelton had been Deputy Minister of External Affairs in the Mackenzie King government, and had been the Prime Minister's advisor on Jewish refugee policy and one of the architects of Canada's closed door policy.

Alex Skelton was close to the Jewish Community. Two of his best friends were leading Zionists, Sam Zacks and journalist Moe Appel. Determined to help the beleaguered, surrounded Jewish community of Palestine Skelton sounded out his friends how to help. Amongst them they hatched a scheme whereby Skelton would give departmental approval to the shipping of armaments and war supplies to Palestine. It was he who arranged the shipment of airplanes, and weapons declared surplus by the Canadian army to the Jews of Palestine.

Since it was illegal to ship armaments to the area Skelton made certain that crates and shipping documents were labeled farm machinery. It was some of these boxes of weapons that ended up in Camp Kvutza. Others somehow appeared in such places as the Levy Auto Parts plant on Weston Road and the Rappaport Bottling Company on St. Lawrence Boulevard in Montreal. It was here that, surreptitiously, volunteers would re-crate supplies and purposely mislabel

boxes, all with Skeiton's approval. Thus boxes of guns were ~~classified~~<sup>labeled</sup> as technical equipment; military radios as typewriters; bullets as agricultural supplies and flame-throwers as insect-sprayers.

Once these boxes were collected either in Canadian or American harbors they were loaded on freighters for Palestine. All the shipping bills were made out to describe the contents of the crates as exhibits and supplies for the annual Tel Aviv Spring Fair. There was of course no Tel Aviv Spring Fair.

And that is how a guilt-stricken Canadian public servant helped equip the hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned Jew army in Palestine. His airplanes, and weapons, and his radios and walkie-talkies became the backbone of the Israeli armed forces.

Skelton of course was not alone. It is worth recalling that 50 years ago there were large number of Canadians who were willing to sacrifice their lives for the Jews of Palestine and not all of them were Jewish. Close to 300 Canadians veterans volunteered to fight. Led by the remarkable Major David Dunkelman who had won the Distinguished Service Order fighting with the Queen Own Rifles of Canada in Europe and Sydney Shulemson Canada's most decorated Jewish serviceman, these Canadian volunteers performed heroic service for the inexperienced Israeli army and helped assure its ultimate victory. A dozen of these lost their lives, including several non-Jews.

One of the important aspects of Canadian Zionism that is not well known but should be, is the role of non-Jews. When I was researching my history of Jews in Canada, *A Coat of Many Colors*, I discovered to my absolute delight that

the first Zionist in Canada, was not a Jew but a respected Anglo businessman by the name of Henry Wentworth Monk who took up the Jewish cause around the 1870s. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s Monk spent a great deal of time and money crusading for Jewish homeland in Palestine. Long before Theodore Herzl – the Austrian founder of Modern political Zionism – even thought of a Jewish State, Monk began campaign to raise funds to buy land in Palestine for European Jews. In 1881, Monk even proposed setting up a Jewish National Fund. He issued manifestos, wrote long articles, spoke to assorted meetings and lobbied extensively in London and Ottawa to realize his dream.

Nor was Monk alone. There were a number of others, mostly clergymen but some politicians and journalists who took up the Zionist cause in there years. Indeed for a time it seemed that Zionism in Canada, was largely a Christian moment, and when the Zionist Federation was founded in Canada in 1899, there was scarcely a convention over the next 50 years that was not attended by a number of leading Canadian Christians. And there were always, effusive greetings from Cabinet ministers and other government officials. In fact one of them Arthur Meighen, who would soon become the Prime Minister of Canada declared that "of all the results of the (First World) War none is more important and more fertile in human history than the reconquest of Palestine and the dedication of that country to the Jewish people". No Zionist could have said it better.

Of course aside from friendly rhetoric Canadian governments did little to aid the establishment of a Jewish State at least until 1947 when Lester Pearson

was appointed Minister of External Affairs. In the pantheon of Canadian supporter of Israel, Lester Pearson has always ranked near the top. As Pearson was always ready to point out he had a strong emotional attachment to the Holy land as a result of his childhood education and also had much sympathy for the plight of the <sup>(Emnants)</sup> ~~remnants~~ of European Jewry. But in truth, he was a faithful servant of Canadian political leaders. It was their policies he was carrying out, a policy which was also consonant with Canadian national interests. On the issue of Palestine, Pearson was no maverick. It was only later that he evinced any strong support for a Jewish State, and in this he was encouraged by a Canadian who was probably more important to the creation of Israel than Pearson, Ivan Rand, a Justice of the Supreme Court was the Canadian appointment to a special United Nation Committee on Palestine. It was largely because of his persuasive power that the Committee in a close vote recommended partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab States. It was that policy that Pearson adopted ~~as~~ his own and helped push along.

I do not intend to demean Pearson's role. Certainly his creative statesmanship was important to the Jewish State at the United Nations, and he helped convince a reluctant Canadian Cabinet, fearful of angering the British, to vote for the creation of both a Jewish and an Arab State. And later he would win the Nobel Peace Prize for the creation of the United Nations. Emergency forces during the Suez War of 1956. As Pearson later remarked, it was the Middle East that made his career, brought him to public attention, gave him a role on the international stage, and thus made it possible for him to become Prime Minister.

Canadian policy towards the Middle East has changed little over the past 50 years. At the heart of its policy is support for the survival, security and independence of the state of Israel. Obviously there have been differences between the two countries and some rocky moments, but the relationship is rooted in the knowledge that the 2 countries share the same basic political and social values.

The creation of the State of Israel resulted in 2 fundamental changes in Canada. Until 1948 Jews were still being kept out of Canada. As the Displaced Person Camps were being emptied, Canadian immigration officials were told to keep out as many Jews as they could and to give priority to other groups. And indeed until 1948, with the exception of one or 2 refugee projects, Jews were barred from Canada, as they had been for the previous 15 years ever since 1933 and the establishment of a Nazi government in Germany.

The Canadian fear, as expressed by the Deputy Minister of Immigration, was that if Canada allowed in Jewish refugees, she would be flooded by them.

But the creation of a Jewish State changed all of that. Jews, now had a homeland, a place to go. The vast majority of refugees would go to Israel, not to Canada.

And so once the State of Israel came into being, restrictions against Jewish refugees were dropped, and immigration officials were expressly ordered to go into the camps and recruit the most "suitable" Jewish refugees.

The irony of this change in attitude was that over the next decade, 40,000 Holocaust survivors would immigrate to Canada, Next to Israel today's Canada

has a higher percentage of survivors and their children than any other Western country. While survivors make up less than 5% of the Jewish population of the United States, the numbers in Canada is 6 to 7 times higher. About 35% of Canada's Jewish community consist of survivors and their families. And it is the intensity of Jewish feeling emanating from their families that has had a <sup>found</sup> ~~profound~~ impact on Canadian Jewish and may help explain why assimilation ~~is~~ rates are so much lower here than in the United States.

It is for Holocaust survivors that Israel has been of the most importance.

These were people from different nations, whose cultural roots had been simply snuffed out by war and genocide. Many arrived in Canada with unimaginable emotional scars; most were fixated simply on survival; on desperately holding on to whatever small material achievement or ~~families~~ happiness they had been able to acquire. Faith, the center of Jewish identity for most, had been ~~shocked~~ by the horrors witnessed or experienced. The Jewish life they had known was gone and there seemed little inspiration or drive to begin ~~a~~ new in the religious and cultural sense. Israel became the focus of Jewish ~~life~~ and a new cultural source of identity. It became for many the substitute for all ~~that~~ <sup>at</sup> had been destroyed; it gave a new confidence to people ~~whose~~ <sup>whose</sup> faith, and self-worth were ~~often~~ <sup>often</sup> gone. Those who felt helpless were empowered and given a new purpose to reshape their future.

The second fundamental change is Canada as a result of the creation of the Jewish State was on the country's attitude toward its own Jewish community. Surprisingly, all the research, ~~study~~ and polling indicates that in Canada anti-



Semitism was much higher after the war than during it. And in every year subsequent to the war, rates kept getting higher. It seemed that the Holocaust had made little difference. Poll after poll indicated that the immigrants least wanted by the Canadian people were the Jews and the Japanese. Even Germans scored much higher on the popularity poll, and this despite the Nuremberg Trials, and the newsreels and photo magazines being full of pictures of the death camps and mass graves.

Simultaneous, with the creation of the State of Israel, the rates begin their inexorable drop to the present day. Jews were no longer seen as victims, but as victors. The hardy, handsome, romantic, fighting ~~sebra~~ replaced the emaciated Jewish survivors or the better-known Jewish peddlers as the Jewish stereotype. In fact as all the studios show anti-Semitism peaks both here and in the United States in 1948, but recedes dramatically with the establishment of the State of Israel.

Like Canada, since its formation, the State of Israel has been periodically faced with large waves of immigration. In the first decade following the foundation of the state, Israel faced a dramatic increase in its population with the arrival of Holocaust survivors and other immigrants from European countries and, more

significantly Jewish immigrants from Muslim countries. The melting-pot model adopted by the government was reinforced by the prevalent expectation that the immigrants relinquish their "diasporic" identity, language, customs, and values and become "absorbed" into Israeli society. A paternalistic and often ignorant attitude toward the new immigrants, reinforced by a national ideology that associated their foreign languages, customs, and beliefs with the condemned Diaspora life, created a strong pressure on them to conform and transform.

In coping with the more recent waves of immigration from Ethiopia and Russia, the government, taking note of the Canadian experience, has attempted to learn from errors made in the 1950s and to modify its "immigrant absorption" policies. The integration of massive numbers of immigrants has put an enormous strain on the state and required adjustments on the part of both the immigrants and their relatively small host society. Given these inherent difficulties, Israeli society has managed to withstand the inevitable pressures and tensions that this process invoked in a remarkable way. Slow in modifying its self-image, the society has nonetheless become more pluralistic, and the evidence of this change is most apparent in the political and cultural arenas.

Of course, the Israeli record is imperfect, yet Israel remains an astonishingly impressive work in progress. In fifty years, Israel has built a thriving democracy and economy whose per capita GNP exceeds the combined total of its four contiguous neighbors - Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt - seven universities that contribute to advancing the world's frontiers of knowledge, a life expectancy that places it among the healthiest nations, a thriving culture utilizing an ancient language rendered contemporary, and an agricultural sector that has shown the world how to conquer an arid land.

In the final analysis, even more than of these truly significant milestones, the story of Israel these past fifty years, above all, is the wondrous realization of a 3,500-year link between a land, a faith, a language, a people, and a vision. It is an inspiring story of tenacity and determination of courage and renewal, of the ascendancy of hope over despair.