

Shaking the Family Tree

A Personal Exploration of Anti-Semitism

by Robin McGrath

Des études récentes révèlent que contrairement à la croyance populaire, Terre-Neuve n'était pas un refuge par excellence

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pour les Juifs. L'auteure fait part des préjugés antisémites qui existaient à l'intérieur de sa famille et de sa communauté tout en réfléchissant sur l'attitude des gens de Terre-Neuve envers la communauté juive en général.

Newfoundlanders have recently had to reassess their island's record as a refuge for Jews prior to Confederation. Most Newfoundlanders believe the myth that no tradition of anti-Semitism exists in Newfoundland. As a British colony, we thought, anyone could enter our country through Britain without a visa, by right of transit. The Canadian policy "none is too many" was a stain on our national character that we, as Newfoundlanders, did not have to bear since we were not at that time part of Canada (Abella and Troper). Gerhardt Bassler, a German historian at Memorial University, has been exploding that myth. Bassler's book, *Sanctuary Denied: Refugees from the Third Reich and Newfoundland Immigration Policy 1906-1949*, proves that Newfoundland was not the liberal, welcoming, refuge that we imagined.

As a Newfoundlander, what distressed me most about Bassler's revelations was our self delusion—the fact that we were able to convince ourselves that we were somehow exempt from the taint of anti-Semitism that seems to have permeated every society on earth. We had been complacent. Alison Khan's history of the Jews in Newfoundland, *Listen While I Tell You*, has something to say about these gentile assumptions, because the Jewish community apparently shared them as well. Khan insists that although Jewish Newfoundlanders said that they never encountered overt anti-Semitism, she detected an underlying uneasiness, a sense of self-doubt and inferiority which Newfoundland's predominantly gentile society engendered in its Jewish citizens.

My own position with regard to the Jewish community

here is quite different from either Bassler's or Khan's. I am a native-born Newfoundlander, a convert to Judaism, and I struggle daily to educate myself in *Torah* and *Yiddishkeit*¹ with the help of the elders in the synagogue, the Hebrew School teacher, and occasionally, an email study partner. I raised my children as Jews, I keep a kosher house, I attend synagogue regularly, and I serve on the executive of the congregation. According to Jewish tradition, it is taboo to refer to a convert's previous affiliation, but in reality most cradle-Jews assume that the experience of anti-Semitism sets them apart from converts. The assumption is that if you have not grown up with anti-Semitism, you can never be a real Jew. The first time I heard my sons called Jew-boys and my daughter a kike-bitch, that particular myth exploded in my face. Anyone who thinks I don't know how humiliating, enraging, and frustrating anti-Semitism can be is dead wrong. I know! But Bassler's book set me a new question: Was it possible that I had grown up in an anti-Semitic society and did not realize it?

St. John's in the 1950s and '60s was full of the usual run of anti-Semitism that could be found in any Christian society, but it didn't seem particularly spiteful or serious, probably because none of us thought of the Jews in the nursery rhymes as being the same Jews as Dr. Miller, or Mel Fried's dad, or Leah Ferman who played duets with my sister in the Kiwanis Music Festival. We used to sing "Holy Moses, king of the Jews, / Sold his wife for a pair of shoes," but we knew Dr. Miller wouldn't have sold his wife—it wasn't allowed, and besides she made him laugh and he'd have missed her. "There's a place in France / Where the alligators dance / And the dance they do / Was written by a Jew." When we were out of earshot, we would substitute "where the women don't wear pants" for "where the alligators dance."

When I was in the Girl Guides, we used to sing a song called "The Three Old Jews." I can't remember all the words, but I did find a version of it in Greenleaf's *Ballads and Sea Songs of Newfoundland*, and the text, summarized, reads something like this:

Once on a time there were three old Jews
And the first Jew's name was Abraham
And the second Jew's name was Isaac
And the third man's name was Jacob
And they went down to Jerico
And they buried them in the cold, cold clay
And that put an end to the three old Jews

One thing I do remember about our Girl Guide version was that it was a "shocker"—a rhyme or joke that includes forbidden words or topics. The three old Jews were

in Newfoundland

supposed to go to Amsterdam; emphasis on “dam.”

Folklorists generally agree that children’s street rhymes reflect the attitudes of the adults around them, and this was certainly the case in St. John’s. Although these are typical minority taunts and teases (“Chinky Chinky Chi-

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naman” and “Taffy was a Welshman” are others I remember) there simply weren’t very many Jews in our children’s world. Almost all adults in Newfoundland had at least some interaction with Jews, who were clothing merchants here throughout most of the century, but my constant exposure to Jewish playmates was the exception rather than the rule. Most children of my generation either didn’t know any Jewish kids or didn’t identify them as Jewish.

The attitude I absorbed in the streets wasn’t so bad. What I got in school, however, wasn’t quite so benign. As a child, I went on Saturday mornings to the Presentation Convent to take lessons for First Holy Communion and Confirmation with an elderly Irish nun called Mother Patrick. Mother Patrick, who was blind, was immensely kind but she had an unfortunate taste for the horrific. In Chaucer, you will find the story of the child of Toledo who had his throat cut and was thrown in a sewer for singing one of the four antiphons of the Blessed Virgin Mary while he walked through a Jewish section of the city. The child’s tongue was cut out and his heart torn from his body by the wicked Jew; his dead body continued to sing the hymn of praise and the child’s mother, led by the song, finds the body. I was in my third year at the University of Western Ontario when I came across the story of the Alma Redemptoris Mater and recognized it as one I had heard from Mother Patrick.

In later years, I was unable to comprehend what motivated this dear old nun to tell such wicked tales, but at the time they seemed normal. I would lean on her knee while she stroked my braids, and listen with dread to these horrible stories knowing that I was going to agonize about them all week. I had a keenly developed taste for morbid literature by the time I was confirmed. I cannot help but wonder, though, how much my attitude towards Jews was

shaped by people like Mother Patrick.

I was raised in Newfoundland as a Roman Catholic but at nineteen I married a non-observant Jew I’d been dating for two years. He had come to Newfoundland to attend university, and he completely captivated me with his exotic flamboyance. He was a small, wiry twenty-two year old with a flaming brush of red hair, a million freckles, and a dashing little goatee. He was outrageously funny, sprinkled his conversation with Yiddish, and conversed with my parents in fast, fluent French he had learned while selling fruits and vegetables in Bonsecour Market in Montreal. There was still a compulsory dress-code on campus in the 1960s, and he wore the mandatory tie and jacket with sneakers and jeans, an unheard-of deviation at that time. Friends called him A. J., acquaintances called him Superjew, but I called him Yankel, the Yiddish name he was given in memory of an uncle who died in Auschwitz. Even today I find it easier to think of him kindly if I use that name—it explains so much.

When I first met Yankel, he was living in one of the university residences. He thought it hilarious when the first year students from the outports came to “look at the Jew,” and he used to sweep his hair back off his forehead in a dramatic gesture and offer to show them where his horns had been cut off. He said they would hover in the doorway and then lean into the room for a closer look, and I’m sure some of them imagined that they saw the scars on either side of his widow’s peak. Yankel acted as though it was a huge joke. I knew he came from a family of Holocaust survivors, but I had no idea what that meant. After 12 years of marriage that included travel, babies, jobs, degrees, affairs, nervous breakdowns, separation, and divorce, I began to have an inkling.

When I married Yankel, my mother received a most unexpected phone call from one of her sisters in the United States. It seems that my aunt, at about my own age, had developed an attachment to a young man by the name of Isaac “Izzy” Cohen, whose family were merchants on Bell Island. Her father had found out about it and threatened to horsewhip them both if the connection wasn’t broken. The relationship ended, but by then the war had begun and Newfoundland was flooded with American servicemen. My aunt, like many thousands of other Newfoundland women, fell in love with an American soldier. His name was Ian Campbell, and he was a jazz pianist at the USO. His Scots Presbyterian background might have earned him a horsewhipping, too, had he appeared on the scene a few years before, but by this time my grandfather had loosened his grip on the family a little and the marriage was given grudging approval. This story, while new to me, was not new to my mother. What was

new to her was the revelation that Ian Campbell was not Ian Campbell at all, nor was he Scots Presbyterian—he was Jewish and his name was ... Isaac Cohen. Not the same Izzy Cohen, of course, but Isaac Cohen nonetheless.

When I decided to marry a Jew, my own father was more accommodating than my grandfather. For Yankel's amusement, Dad hauled out and dusted off an old story about a relative of ours who claimed he could trace his descent through the kings of Ireland right back to Adam. The old guy once boasted of this to a pedlar, who pointed out that he must, therefore, be a Jew as only the Jews survived the

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flood in Noah's Ark. The old man assured the pedlar in no uncertain terms that "The McCarthys of Red Island always had a boat of their own." The message was clear—the Jews might begin as pedlars and end up owning the whole shop (or in the case of Yankel, begin by flogging fruits and vegetables and end up as a professor at the university), but the McGraths, the McCarthys, the Kearneys, every chick and child of us, had a boat of our own and would not be signing on with Noah's clan.

Yankel might have got the message—I never asked him—but I didn't. Some years later, after an agonizing period of soul-searching, I decided to convert to Judaism and to bring my children with me. My father's response arrived scrawled across a sheet of paper: "You are no longer my Rose of Sharon but a weed in the garden of Jehovah!" How infuriatingly Irish! I suppose I could have treated it as a joke, the way Yankel treated the business of the horns, but I didn't. It wasn't funny, and my close, loving relationship with my father was shattered almost beyond repair. We spoke only once after that and he died of a heart attack a few short weeks after I appeared before the *Bet Din*² and completed the conversion process I had started so many years before.

Even today, I am often asked what my father thought of my conversion, but only rarely does anyone ask what my mother's reaction was. My mother, a devout Christian, suffered a severe, crippling disease; nevertheless, she made a point of putting her response in writing too, painfully, haltingly carving her message onto a sheet of paper which my father must have mailed for her as she was unable to buy a stamp or walk to a post box. She said "I'd rather see you a good Jew than a bad Catholic."

When I look back, I realize that my mother was what I have recently heard called a philo-Semite. She loved Jewish culture, she cultivated the friendship of Jews, she

never wished to be a Jew herself but she fully understood and appreciated the contribution to her own spirituality made by the Old Testament and the Judeo part of the Judeo-Christian tradition. My father was another matter. While many non-Jews saw my mother as cold, stand-offish, a bit of a snob perhaps, my father was a universal favourite, a real stage Irishman. He was a healer, a discreet and generous contributor to charities both public and private, a favourite at any dinner party, a father any small child could adore and boast about at school. But he was, I'm afraid, something of an anti-Semite. I have not just my memories to support such a charge; I also have the documentation, although my sisters say it is weak evidence and my standards too harsh.

It has now been close to 25 years since my father died and I have been sorting out my father's papers for deposition in the university archives. Aside from his voluminous and engaging personal correspondence, which describes pre-Confederation life in a Newfoundland outpost in vivid and captivating detail, his professional papers have considerable historic value because he served in the Legislative Assembly and in Cabinet for many years. But every now and again, as I went through these stacks of papers, I found some small and unexpected "shocker" hidden away among the press clippings and laundry bills. Each time I felt as if I had been dealt a sudden and unexpected blow, the same kind of blow I felt when my father called me a "weed in the garden of Jehovah."

One of these blows came in a letter, undated, written to my father by an older, and to me unknown, cousin. The cousin was jokingly referring to their mutual great-grandmother Sparrow, and commenting on the fact that his grandfather had married her niece, a first cousin. "If you sometimes wonder" he wrote, "why I am more eccentric than you, this may be the answer." And then, in brackets, he added "like the two Jews who were travelling together and shared a room. When they were undressing the first night, Abie said 'Oy, Ikey, you are a lot dirtier than me.' 'Vell,' Ikey pointed out, 'you must remember I am ten years older than you already.'" At the time it was written, a reader might have understood this bracketed comment to be a sweet, intimate little exchange between relatives, and yet all it says to me today is that the cousin thought my father would, like himself, assume all Jews were dirty. The fact that both men would be close-to or more-than a 100 years old today is not an excuse or an explanation. My mother would never have said such a thing, or tolerated such a joke in her presence.

My father was an amateur historian and among his papers were numerous transcriptions of Irish and Newfoundland songs, ballads, and poems. I published an article tracing the origin of several of them, including transcripts of two previously unpublished variants of rare "Treason Songs," and discussed the sectarian problems that lay at the bottom of some of them. I neither discussed nor published the bawdy and decidedly anti-Semitic "Ballad of Chambers Street" which I found among the rest.

My father was a doctor, and in the spirit of gallows and other such medical humour, he both wrote and collected material which was perhaps best confined to the annual medical students' revue. "The Ballad of Chambers Street" was not one of his compositions. It may be a classic for all I know, up there with "The North Atlantic Squadron." I only know that it involves the pregnancy of a Jewish whore and it offends me, as a Jew and as a woman. I quote here, with reluctance and embarrassment, the least offensive verse of the 17 my father recorded that conveys its essentially misogynistic and anti-Semitic nature:

She does not report one concrete example of anti-Semitism directed against any individual Jew, yet again and again her Jewish informants said that Newfoundlanders assumed they couldn't be Jews because Jews were dirty, evil, and greedy.

For twenty years this flame of love
Had kept herself quite busy,
Dispensing screws to lustful Jews
To Abe and Ike and Izzy.
The male West End called her their friend
With scalped and eager penis,
They climbed aboard and oft explored
This much-frequented Venus.

You will have to take my word for it that the rest is nastier. I found no other sexually explicit material in the thousands of pages I sorted, so I assume it was the anti-Jewish humour that made him save this particular piece.

What to make of such things? What do I do with jokes, verses, and flippant comments such as those, particularly in the light of my father's strong relationships with Jews, my mother's attachment to and reliance on her Jewish friends, my own marriage and conversion? Were my family, my fellow Newfoundlanders, anti-Semites? I still don't know.

One way I tried to deal with these suggestions of anti-Semitism in myself and in my society was by putting it all in an academic context. I opened a file, marked it "The Figure of the Jew in Newfoundland Oral Tradition," and began tucking into it all those problematic scraps of paper and snippets of memories. One of my first contributions to this file was a recitation I had heard at a wedding in St. Mary's Bay sometime in the early 1960s, which folklorist Kenny Goldstein later recorded. It was John Joe English's "Lobster Salad." Known variously as "Burke's Dream," "Kelly's Dream," or "Kelly and the Wren Beer," in this recitation, the narrator dreams he has died and gone to heaven, where he watches as a number of supplicants come and beg entrance from St. Peter. Each is turned away, until an Irishman shows up, tosses his slouch hat over the gate,

and when he is ordered to fetch it, slams the gate on St. Peter and refuses to open up:

Through the keyhole Paddy cried, "I'm skipper now you see.
I'll give up the key, St. Peter, if you set old Ireland free."

At this point the narrator wakes up, suffering the after-effects of a surfeit of lobsters.

In "The Lobster Salad," the first applicant to come after the narrator is the Jew:

The next to come was a Hebrew, a friend who I knew well,
And I listened to the story that he had to tell.
"Oh goodly Father Peter, I come to you at last,
And one question that I ask of you, if you let me pass.
On Earth I kept me clothin' store, me clothes are good and strong,
Just to show you an overcoat that I got to fetch along."
"You go now," St. Peter said, "and very well you know,
There's little use for overcoats in the place where you got to go."

Each of the supplicants is turned away for a reason; the narrator because of his gluttony, the spinster because she refused to marry, the German because he committed suicide. St. Peter gives no reason for turning away the "Hebrew," whose only fault seems to be his friendship with the gluttonous narrator. For the life of me, I couldn't find anything anti-Semitic in this recitation, and yet, there was something that stirred a thought. None of the supplicants can enter heaven because they are dishonest or sacrilegious or gluttonous. The Jew, who is none of these things and who is not contradicted when he says the clothes he sold were good, nevertheless has got to go where a warm overcoat won't be needed, he's got to go to hell.

In *Listen While I Tell You*, Alison Khan documents the ambivalent and contradictory treatment by gentiles that Newfoundland Jews experienced in this province. She does not report even one concrete example of anti-Semitism directed against any individual Jew on the island, yet again and again her Jewish informants said that gentile Newfoundlanders assumed they couldn't really be Jews because Jews were dirty, evil, and greedy. The text of "The Lobster Salad" seems to reflect this contradiction—the Hebrew is a friend, a trustworthy merchant, but he is going to burn in hell.

This explains the uneasiness of those outport boys who came to "look at the Jew" and see where his horns were cut off. Unfortunately, it does not explain to me my parents' attitudes toward Jews. They have both been dead a great many years now, and this is something with which I have to live. The anti-Semitism I have found in my family is

simply incomprehensible to me.

There is a comforting postscript to at least part of this story for me, though not an ending any rabbi or orthodox Jew would call positive. My aunt—the one who married the Jew who changed his name from Isaac Cohen to Ian Campbell so that he could pass as a Scots Presbyterian—was widowed not too many years ago. Among the letters of sympathy she received was one from the other Isaac Cohen, “Izzy,” her old flame from Bell Island. He, too, had been widowed, and after a period of grieving and correspondence, they were married and are now living happily in the United States. I, too, have remarried recently, not a Jew but a very open-minded agnostic who attends synagogue with me and who is studying Hebrew for the fun of it. We were in kindergarten together, so although it isn’t as romantic as the story of the two Isaac Cohens, it is a very cherished compromise between my longing to rejoin Newfoundland society and my need to maintain Jewish observance.

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¹Strictly speaking means Jewishness, but usually refers to knowledge of Jewish culture as distinct from Jewish religion.

²Jewish religious court.

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LYN LIFSHIN

For Me the Holocaust Started in 33 in a Small Village

I was in a class
and the teacher said I
hear we have a Jew
pig in this class
I shook he said I’m
going to show this
Jew pig how much
pain a Jew can survive
he took a stick out
of the desk and
hit and hit I don’t
remember the pain
she said but only
the kids who’d been
my friends once
laughing and laughing

Lyn Lifshin’s most recent books include The Marilyn Munroe Poems (Quiet Lion Press, 1995) and Blue Tattoo (Event Horizon, 1996). A collected volume of her poetry, Cold Comfort (Blacksparrow Press), will be released in February 1997.



Jeannie Kamins, “Hug in a Snow Storm,” fabric appliqué, 32” x 45”, 1992. Photo: Henri Robideau