

On-the-Job Lessons About Being Jewish

by Claire Helman

L'auteure raconte son expérience en tant que jeune étudiante et travailleuse juive en Alberta, il y a quarante ans.

When I began adult life in 1940s Alberta, three incidents helped shape my self-image as a western Canadian Jewish woman. The first occurred when I was still in high school. My best friend had decided that we were going to be different from our girlfriends. We were going to work Thursday nights and Saturdays at a department store and become financially independent of our parents for spending money. At least that was the plan.

We found it unbelievable that our applications at the first store, which in those days listed information such as "religion," were not accepted as it was the beginning of the pre-Christmas season. "We are not hiring at the moment," the personnel office told us icily. Fortunately, they were hiring a few blocks away at another department store. This seemed to bear out the unconfirmed rumour that certain department stores in town did not employ Jews at the time.

The next instance to show me my place in the social order happened while I was working as a reporter for *The Gateway*, the student newspaper at the University of Alberta. It was 1952 and the newly-formed Council of Christians and Jews was going to hold its first-ever Brotherhood Week. The university was to host the event and a fellow student-reporter and I were helping to organize the opening ceremonies. Our task was to line up dignitaries by inviting clergymen of various denominations, academics, and government officials.

Our most important assignment was to invite a major politician to officiate at the opening. So it was that

my friend Bob, a pleasantly devout young Christian, phoned the offices of the local government and was transferred to a major politician, who was also a minister, while I sat expectantly beside him.

I heard Bob, in his most formal and polite tone, explain the reason for the call and issue the invitation. I did not actually hear the reply—but I saw the look on Bob's face and heard him say, "But sir, we are not inviting you in your capacity as a minister of the gospel but as a representative of the Alberta government."

Again the politician spoke. Bob's face flushed. Then he murmured, "I see, sir. Well, thank you for your time." Then poor Bob had to face me and explain that the government official had declined the invitation because he could not sit at the same table with members of the Hebrew persuasion.

It took me a moment, in my nineteen-year-old naïveté, to fully comprehend. Then I had what I now realize was a very strange reaction. While part of me was vaguely insulted, another part could not help

scape and had to tread quietly in Alberta society.

Jews were not part of the civil service either. There was one breakthrough though. An energetic, humorous, electrical engineer who, it was whispered, had fought "illegally" for Israeli independence in 1948, was hired by the government for a senior position. They had no choice, really. This engineer had designed a system adopted by Alberta Government Telephones. Since no one else really understood the system as well as he did, he was needed to supervise its installation. For a time, he was in great demand as a speaker by Jewish groups to talk about his work experience and to encourage, or caution, other would-be civil servants from within the Jewish community.

By the time I returned from Europe and eastern Canada in 1959, the atmosphere had mellowed somewhat. Not only were Jews being hired by the government here and there, but so were university graduates, another category that had previously been "discriminated" against in the civil service. In fact, the Edmonton office

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thinking how amazing it was that this politician-preacher stood by his principles no matter what the public relations fall-out might be. The fact is, even if we had spread the story, there would not have been much fall-out. That was just the way things were during that time, when Jews were simply not part of the public land-

of the provincial Department of Public Welfare had no less than half-a-dozen workers with a BA out of a staff numbering 60 or so, and two others had actually been to a school of social work!

My experiences in Europe had made me appreciate the good life we had in Canada and I had a vague

desire to do something of a "helping" nature. Thinking that the welfare department might be a good place to start, I sought the advice of a young Jewish university graduate on staff.

"If you're hired, just keep quiet," she cautioned. "Don't draw attention to yourself. They still prefer people who work from the heart, not the head." That rather appealed to me, so I applied for a position and was duly engaged. However, I was unable to swear the Oath of Allegiance required of all new staff because the bureaucrat in charge had only the New Testament available. An omen, no doubt. Nevertheless, my new career, as an untrained social worker, was officially launched. Unfortunately, so were the paranoid suspicions of my supervisor, a plump, bespectacled woman with a Grade Ten education who viewed the latest hirings with alarm.

A new public health nurse and a psychologist also came on staff about the same time as I did and the three of us became quite friendly. Hiring a psychologist was a first for the department. Most of us were intrigued by the psychologist's array of personality and aptitude tests—and certainly interested in the kind of information the nurse had. In those pre-*Cosmopolitan* days, virtually no one but medical personnel had access to sex education and birth-control techniques. Our supervisor was not intrigued. Rather, she was terrified that our views and knowledge would corrupt the rest of her staff. During the year, she prepared scathing, detailed reports on all three of us and submit-

ted them to the head of the department. We did not know about this until the day he called us in, one by one, to discuss these unbidden "evaluations."

When my turn came, I encountered a man trying to appear in command while looking extremely uncomfortable. He prefaced his remarks by saying my supervisor was now on a paid leave of absence and also under psychiatric care. This was a total surprise. But what came next was even more astounding as he read out the main parts of her report. The gist, as I recall, was that the psychologist was "godless," relying on tests that twisted Biblical truth; the nurse was immoral because she was purveying filthy, and illegal, birth-control information; and I, the Jew, was designated the office Communist. I was also accused of using a government car too often.

Ignoring the ill-founded political charge, I pointed out that I had to interview unwed mothers in cubicles with only partial partitions. Often, the young women were understandably loath to divulge details of their most intimate moments when their remarks could be heard by passers-by or by people in the next compartment. So, sometimes I used the car as a kind of mobile interviewing room.

"Now, now" the Department Head interrupted smoothly, "you mustn't feel you have to defend yourself. Let's talk about your future instead." Did I have any plans to attend the School of Social Work at the University of British Columbia? In an instant, I knew I had.

"Good, I'll be happy to write you a reference," he said, laying the report carefully in a drawer. "And nothing will ever be held against you."

"Wait a minute," I protested. "Why don't you rip up that nonsense? Or give me her report? You said she was under psychiatric care."

"Oh, I couldn't do that," he replied, in a tone of finality. "She is your supervisor, after all. And she did hand in an official report." He shut the drawer and I knew both it and its contents were closed to me forever. But would they be opened to others?

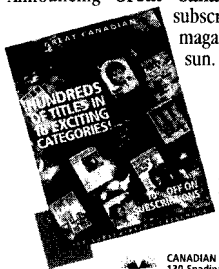
I never did hear about this report again but the circumstances of its existence may explain why I was accepted sight unseen by the School of Social Work at the University of British Columbia without the usual qualifying interview required of applicants. Perhaps, noting where I worked, UBC wisely decided that anyone applying from Alberta for a little modern training should be helped to achieve it!

Over the years, at other places of work, I sometimes wondered whether being Jewish played a role in whether or not I was hired or promoted. But after 40 years in the workplace, in a variety of positions, I concluded that nearly everyone faces some type of subtle or not so subtle discrimination. What I encountered at the beginning of my young adult life was nothing personal, mainly just a product of time and place. The real question is, what do other young people face nowadays and is our Human Rights legislation working for them?

Until recently, Claire Helman was a filmmaker at the National Film Board. Her last production, "Wanted: Doctor on Horseback," profiles Mary Percy Jackson, a pioneer doctor who came from England to northern Alberta, and will be released this fall. She has also been a social worker, CBC-Radio broadcaster, and the author of an urban studies text, The Milton-Park Affair, Canada's Largest Citizen-Developer Conflict (Vehicule Press, 1987). She is now teaching film studies at Ibaraki University, Japan.

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