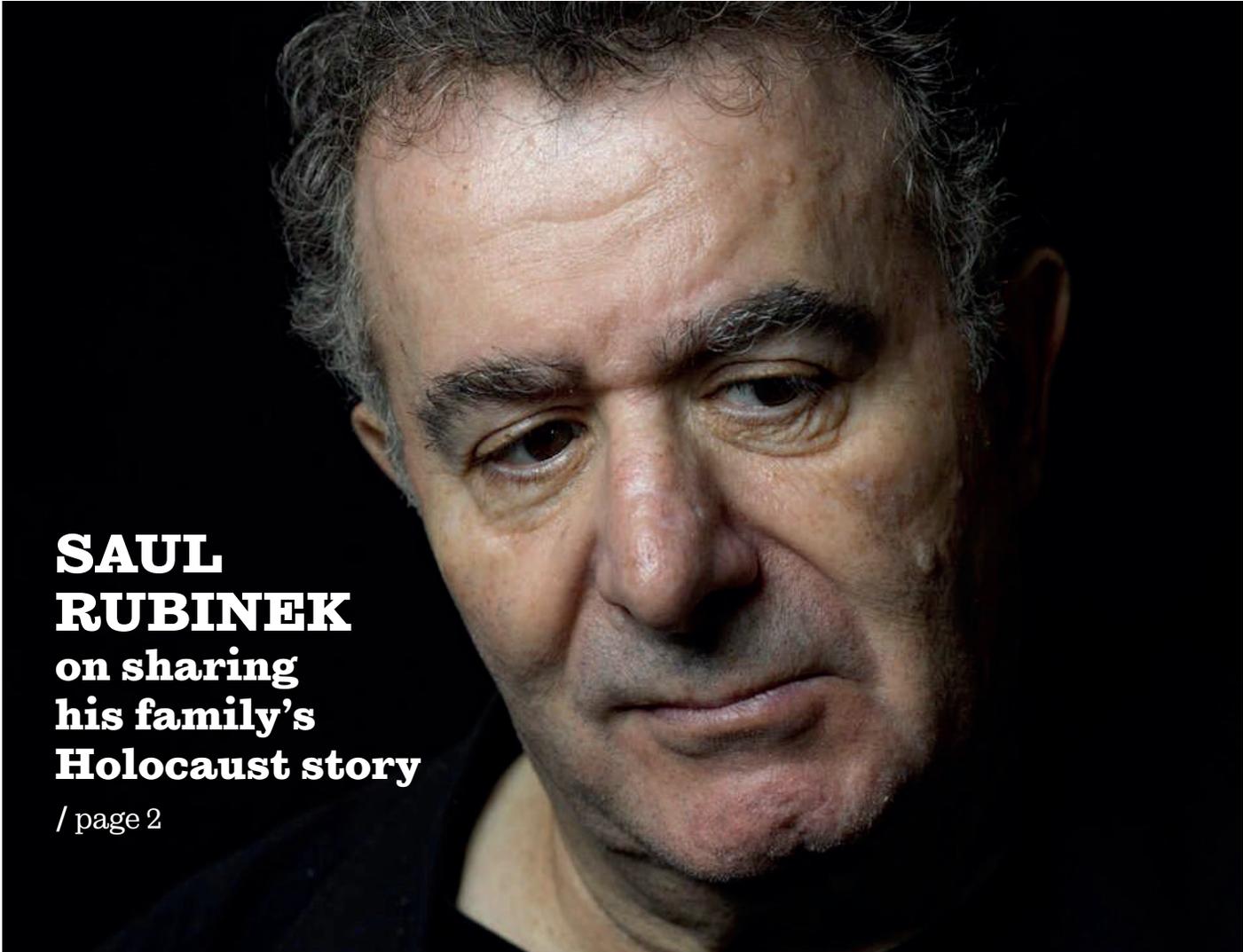


The Canadian Jewish News



SAUL RUBINEK on sharing his family's Holocaust story

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Israel compensates Canadians for a boat that was seized while trying to break a Gaza blockade

/ Ron Csillag

A Canadian pro-Palestinian group is claiming victory after Israel settled a compensation claim for seizing a civilian boat that attempted to break the Gaza blockade a decade ago.

It took 10 years but Israel has paid a settlement of \$185,647 (CDN) for seizing the boat Tahrir on Nov. 4, 2011, along with its cargo of medical aid destined for Gaza.

The vessel was part of a campaign by the group Canadian Boat to Gaza to break Israel's blockade of the territory and bring medical supplies and other humanitarian aid to its two million inhabitants. It also reportedly intended to transport exports from Gaza.

Along with the Irish-flagged ship Saoirse, the Tahrir was boarded by Israeli naval commandos in international waters off the Gaza coast, and seized.

Israel's recent payout "was not a result of a court proceeding, but rather a monetary settlement offered by Israel due to the fact that the vessel's condition made it difficult to be returned to the owners," an Israeli source told The CJN. The settlement included a waiver of legal claims by the owners and was completed "some months ago."

Israel seized the ships after they refused to heed calls to change course, prompting then military Chief of Staff Benny Gantz to order their interception.

"Following their unwillingness to co-operate, and after ignoring calls to divert to the port of Ashdod, the decision was made to board the vessels and lead them there," the Israeli military said in a statement on Nov. 5, 2011.

The Canadian vessel was carrying six activists—at least three of whom were Canadian citizens—a captain, and five journalists, as well as cargo valued at \$30,000 in medical and other humanitarian aid. Those aboard were detained in Ashdod and charged with entering Israel illegally. An immigration judge later ordered them deported.

In June 2012, Toronto lawyer Hadayt Nazami wrote to Israeli officials saying the Tahrir was "illegally seized" in international waters and asking that the ship and cargo be returned to its owner.

David Heap, a spokesperson for Canadian Boat to Gaza, told The CJN the cargo never made it to its intended recipients. He said his group understood that the Tahrir itself was impounded in Haifa and "apparently allowed to deteriorate until it was no longer seaworthy. Thus the cash settlement," Heap said.

Canadian Boat to Gaza said the settlement from Israel amounted to about half the vessel's total costs.

Heap said the settlement has been disbursed to the organization through its Israeli legal representatives, and will be used "to keep challenging the illegal blockade of Gaza."

A portion of the settlement has been used to fund one of 27 new ambulances that arrived in Gaza on Nov. 8, Heap said.

The Tahrir, (Arabic for "Liberation") was part of the "Freedom Flotilla" movement of cargo and passenger ships that attempted to breach the Gaza blockade.

The Tahrir's registered owner was Sandra Ruch, a self-described "kohenet," or Hebrew priestess, who lives in Toronto and officiates at interfaith and LGBTQ+ weddings.

Ruch called the compensation "a victory for us and for the entire Freedom Flotilla movement, as well as for all organizations and individuals who contributed time and money to ending the blockade of Gaza."

In 2016, Israel's Supreme Court ordered the release of the Swedish-owned ship Estelle, which had been seized in 2012 attempting to deliver aid to Gaza. Jim Manley, a former NDP MP and father of former Green MP Paul Manley, was aboard. He was arrested and released five days later.

In 2010, 10 activists aboard the Turkish ship Mavi Marmarawere killed when Israeli commandos stormed the vessel about 130 kilometers off the Gaza coast.

Israel and Egypt imposed a land, sea and air blockade of Gaza in 2007, saying it was needed to stop weapons reaching the Hamas-controlled territory. ■

It's all in the telling: Saul Rubinek on opening Ottawa Holocaust Education Month

/ Ron Csillag

Canadian actor, filmmaker, producer and writer Saul Rubinek opened Holocaust Education Month in Ottawa on Nov. 9 by performing excerpts from his new play, *All in the Telling*.

There is much to tell and much to weigh about the telling—and the hearing.

"It's a meaningful title to me because it tells you that it's not just the act of telling, it's who's telling it and who's listening to the telling," Rubinek said in an interview with The CJN from his home in Los Angeles.

His 50-year career has been rich with hundreds of roles on stage, screen, radio and television, most recently in successful TV series such as *Hunters*, *Schitt's Creek*, and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*.

For many of a certain age, Rubinek's most personal and poignant works were the 1987 documentary film *So Many Miracles*, coinciding with a book of the same title.

In them, he traced his Holocaust survivor parents' tearful reunion with the Polish Catholic farmers who had hidden the couple and saved their lives during the Second World War.

But the film and book appeared before Rubinek's children were born. So, around six years ago, he set about writing a play to mine how exploring his parents' story—its telling and re-telling—has affected his family's life.

Introducing his daughter Hannah, now 30, and his son Sam, 26, to their grandparents' past became "a major part of my life," Rubinek recalled. "When to introduce children to the subject. How to introduce children to the subject, became a major part of my life.

"I was really interested, dramatically, in (what way) to present how three generations of my family were affected by delving into my parents' experiences, my own experiences (and) my children's experiences. I hoped (that) if well told, it would become a universal story."

All in the Telling took four years, on and off, to write, Rubinek recalled, with some "severe" writer's block right in the middle, and it's not finished. Currently running at about two hours, the author describes it as "complicated," but it stresses veracity.

"I don't change any names," he said. "My parents names, my name, my daughter's name, my wife Elinor's name...I haven't hidden anything. It's all very personal and also quite funny, (which) you might find surprising. There's some very dark material in there."

The play includes clips from *So Many Miracles*. The "characters" are Rubinek, his parents, his wife, and others. He'll have about 30 minutes in the Nov. 9 program to present excerpts.

Rubinek was born in the Föhrenwald displaced persons camp outside Munich, Germany in 1948 to Frania and Israel Rubinek. His father had been a Yiddish theater actor in Poland before the war, and in the DP camp, he formed a Yiddish repertory company where he was a director and actor.

Rubinek's parents were hidden for over two years during the Nazi occupation of Poland by the Bania family—Zofia, Ludwig and their son Maniek—farmers recognized as Righteous Among the Nations at Yad Vashem. The Rubineks moved to Canada in 1949, lived in Montreal for a time, and settled in Ottawa in 1956 when Saul was eight.

Rubinek believes he learned of his parents' experiences "too early." He demurred when asked to elaborate. "With all due respect," he replied, "it took me a play to try to come to terms with that question."

Like many children of survivors, he grew up with parents who had nightmares. "I used to think that every kid's parents, not just Jewish kids, had nightmares. It wasn't until I had a first sleepover that I found out that was just at my house."

But he suspects that "if you're a person of colour or if you're a First Nations person, there's nothing much you can do about when you're going to find out about systemic or structural racism in the society you're in. You're born into it in a particular way."

That leads him to recall an exchange he had in the late 1980s on a Toronto radio show in which he told the host, who wanted to focus on Rubinek's book and film about his parents: "I don't want to exclusivize the Holocaust experience," Rubinek said he told the host. "It is already a unique experience. It was a particular genocide with its own particular roots and its own mechanisms and its own reasons. But there probably hasn't been a day on the planet where there hasn't been some kind of genocide. And I'm interested in joining hands with other people who have dealt with trauma.

"My story is really about how I had to deal with my parents, and I think other people will relate to my story."

What followed were callers to the show who were children of survivors of the genocide in Cambodia, of South African apartheid, those who survived bombings, and First Nations and people of colour "whose parents had gone through trauma, who related to me as a child dealing with their parents' trauma. Because that's what I was really talking about."

And that "gives you a really good idea of what my play is about."

Rubinek and his wife waited until their children were 13 to tell them about the Holocaust. It "made sense," he said, because that's when young people "can begin to contextualize cause and effect. Why introduce the subject of this dark side of humanity so early?"

He would be happy if his play premiered in Ottawa—effectively, his hometown—but he'd be "especially interested" if it was staged in Poland, where newly enacted laws punish public speech that attributes responsibility for the Holocaust to Poland or "the Polish nation." He noted that an increasingly nationalistic Hungary is also whitewashing its wartime record.

"It's such an odd thing, how people want to rewrite history, isn't it?" Rubinek ponders.

He said two events arising from recounting his parents' stories stand out in his memory. One was going to his daughter's class to screen *So Many Miracles*. One 14-year-old girl wondered, "if everyone told stories like this, wouldn't genocide be impossible?"

It was "a very moving question, an innocent question (that) spoke of a profound truth," Rubinek recalled.

Another was on his return from filming in the Polish city of Lodz. At the time, Rubinek played in a regular poker game with fellow actors, two of whom were First Nations. What was the trip like, they asked.

"I said, 'the gravestones were used to make the sidewalks in the town.' And to show you how tone deaf I was, (one of them) looked up and said, 'yeah, tell me about it.'"

"I'll never forget that moment as I connected to their history. I hadn't thought of it."

Ever the actor, Rubinek said he believes everyone has four basic characters in their background when it comes to this subject: perpetrators, victims, heroes, and bystanders.

"Those personalities, maybe more often than sometimes, are within one person, within ourselves. How else do you understand monstrous behavior? It's easy to call people monsters or heroes, victims, perpetrators. These are labels that don't really tell us much.

"I think that the only way to really understand horrific acts perpetrated by human beings; horrific suffering; extraordinary acts of bravery; or the fact that people can stand by and do nothing, is if we see those characters within ourselves."

That's where art comes in.

"I think that's why people write novels or movies (so they can) reach across a space and join hands and express a common humanity."

The launch of Holocaust Education Month in Ottawa coincided with the annual commemoration of Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass, in which Jews in Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia were subjected to state-sponsored terror on the night of Nov. 9-10, 1938. ■

Ron Csillag has been reporting for The CJN since 1984.

Even as he turns 100, RCAF veteran Mickey Heller goes back to memories of the Second World War

/ Aron Heller

For most of his life, my grandfather, Mickey Heller, tried to put the memories of the Second World War behind him. After two years in Europe as a navigator in the Royal Canadian Air Force, he returned home to Toronto in 1944, married his sweetheart, started a family and a business and seemingly never looked back.

That formative experience and everything that went along with it was a conversation he never really wanted to have. Only in his 90s did he finally, and quite reluctantly, cooperate with my decade-long quest to unearth his shadowy past. It was a delicate dance that alternated between his occasional dropping of cryptic clues and enchanting anecdotes and withdrawing back to his ambivalence. The journey culminated in a pair of articles about him and his wartime friends that I wrote in 2019 for *The New York Times Magazine* and *Tablet Magazine*. As far as I was concerned, that had finally put the matter to rest.

So, it was telling that, without prompting, my Zaidy decided to devote his 100th birthday celebrations last week to the theme of commemorating the wartime service of Jewish Canadian veterans like himself.

Now largely confined to a wheelchair, he trekked out of his assisted living facility on a chilly autumn morning to take his visiting children and grandchildren from Israel to visit a memorial he contributed to outside the Prosserman Jewish Community Centre on Bathurst Street. The granite slab was flanked by Canadian and Israeli flags that were dedicated by my grandparents, Mickey and Eunice Heller, on behalf of the Canadian half of their family who served in the first and second world wars and the Israeli half, like me, who served in the Israeli Defense Forces over the years.

Looking at the hundreds of engraved names of the Canadian Jewish soldiers, those who made it back and those who didn't, Zaidy glowed with pride. Pointing at the various names, he regaled us with stories about his old high school friends from Harbor Collegiate who died in action and noted the successes of those who went on to live nearly as long as he has. The names rolled off his tongue: his brother Joe, his brother-in-law Morris, his good friends Wilfrid Canter and Somer James.

Energized, he rolled into the JCC asking to speak to a manager so he could share memories, the kind he has refrained from for years.

"I'm the only one still here who knew all those guys out there," he told the stunned receptionist.

She said she would look for the appropriate person. "Well, you better do it quick because I don't know how long I'm going to

last," he quipped. "This may be my last time here."

I wouldn't bet on it. In the days surrounding his Nov. 3 birthday, Zaidy was more vibrant, witty and downright funny than he has been in a decade. Over the past five years, he's recovered from various health scares, including contracting COVID. Perhaps more significantly, he's found a new zest for life even after losing his beloved wife of 72 years.

Most surprisingly, he's not only willing to finally engage in stories about his war service but even initiates them. He shared many of them with me and my visiting siblings, telling us about his voyage overseas in the stern of the Queen Elizabeth and showing us mementos from that journey. The top headline from the Nov. 1, 1942 edition of *The Elizabethan News* was "Rommel's tank attacks held by Eighth Army" and "Strong Japanese fleet unit bombed."

At the birthday party itself, where he was surrounded by his four children, nine grandchildren and other family members and longtime friends, Zaidy held court alongside a framed letter he received from Lawrence MacAulay, Canada's Minister of Veterans Affairs, who congratulated him on his 100th birthday.

"All Canadians benefit from the tremendous sacrifices and contributions made by Veterans like you, and for that we remain truly grateful," MacAulay wrote. "It is my honour to commend you for your dedicated service during the Second World War. The bravery and determination of those who served Canada helped ensure a safer, more peaceful world."

Always a man of few words, Zaidy kept his own comments brief, devoting them almost exclusively to the visit we paid the war memorial. His voice cracking, he asked his guests to make the pilgrimage to honour "all the Jewish boys who sacrificed their lives."

"If you get a chance, it's real history," he added.

In one of his more candid moments of our five-day visit, Zaidy pulled out his wallet to reveal the two pictures he always carried with him. The first was his favourite of his wife and children. The second was of himself and three other Canadian Jewish wartime buddies, posing in uniform at Trafalgar Square in October 1943, exactly 78 years earlier—yet another reminder of how momentous that period remained for Zaidy even through his years of prolonged silence.

Mickey Heller and Ralph Goldman, far left, London, 1943.

Amazingly, a man Zaidy is seen hugging in the picture, Ralph Goldman, was still alive and, in a fitting coda, he made it to Zaidy's party, where the two centenarians warmly embraced once again.

It was quite a thrill to meet another piece of living history, even more so one with such a firm handshake and the same flowing lock of hair as in his old black-and-white photo. He was a flight mechanic, a "grease monkey" he said, and told me about once emerging from his base near London to see a "light show" of bombs exploding from above. He also said he used to go swimming in the English Channel even though it was heavily mined. He figured it would take more than his mere frame to set one off. But he acknowledged that that was the closest he got to the action, nothing like the boys in Bomber Command with Zaidy.

Details aside, it was just very touching to meet someone who knew Zaidy way back then and to see how they had maintained this special connection so long after.

Watching the two men together was a stirring reminder of how, for better or for worse, the Second World War will always define their “greatest generation.” About 17,000 Jewish Canadians served in that war. Mickey and Ralph, both 100, are truly among the last of their kind. ■

Aron Heller is a Canadian/American/Israeli writer and broadcaster and a former longtime AP correspondent and journalism professor. You can follow him on Twitter, and read a selection of his work at aronheller.com.

The short life and bravery of Telegraphist Sydney Shinewald recalled on Remembrance Day

/ Benjamin Shinewald

We don't know much about the short life and tragic death of Sydney Shinewald, but more than 75 years after his wartime murder, it is time to tell his story.

Sydney was born in Winnipeg in 1925, the only child of my great-uncle Charles and his first wife, Jennie. He attended the Jewish Workmen's Circle School, joined the YMHA and worked after school at the Hudson's Bay Company.

Sydney was a typical working-class North Ender until 1942, when he made a fateful decision: he enlisted. He was only 17 and lied about his age.

The Battle of the Atlantic was raging and Sydney fatefully joined the Royal Canadian Navy. After training in Winnipeg, Toronto, and Saint-Hyacinthe, Que., he set sail aboard HMCS Guysborough to fight for Canada.

Sydney's ship saw some action including on D-Day, when it swept the English Channel for mines, protecting Canadian and other Allied soldiers while they stormed the beaches at Normandy. The Guysborough then crossed the Atlantic again, sailing west this time, for Halifax where it was refitted. This gave Sydney the chance to return briefly to Winnipeg, where he spent his 20th birthday on Jan. 4, 1945.

By then, the war was nearly over, but not quite won. And so, in early March 1945, Sydney and 91 other Canadians set sail to fight once again, this time from Lunenburg, N.S.

As far as we know, the voyage east was unexceptional and the ship easily reached the French coast. But then, at 6:50 p.m. on March 17, 1945, a German U-boat torpedoed the Guysborough in the Bay of Biscay, killing two of the crew. The Guysborough was disabled but the damage was not severe. The crew assembled on the deck and began waiting for an Allied ship to come to their rescue. They were given cigarettes to pass the time and calm their nerves.

That's when the second torpedo struck, and it was a coup de

grace. This was a war crime since the Guysborough, by then, posed a threat to no one.

The ship sank rapidly and the men rushed for the Carley floats—giant inner tubes designed for 12 survivors to cling to the inside, with their lower bodies dangling in the frigid water. In the chaos, 42 men rushed for a single Carley float, so it too nearly sunk.

But it was too late for most anyway. Many sailors ended up grasping to its edges or to each other, “like seaweed.” If he was still alive by then, Sydney was almost certainly among them.

Darkness fell, the abandoned Guysborough listed and the freezing North Atlantic was rough. A survivor later recounted,

“Up and down with each swell, up and down with icy water seeping from mid-gut up to my neck, each time sucking a bit of warmth away...”

I remember the total blackness of the night. I remember the eerie silence, only the gentle slushing of the sea around us, no one uttering a sound. I remember the hopeless feeling of isolation and the awareness that I would probably die soon. That I would never marry. Never have children...

With dawn there were fewer of us around the float, and as the hours passed, exposure claimed more. They just drifted away, dead or no longer able to hang on. The more men the sea claimed, the closer those left got to the float.”

After 19 horrifying hours in the cold, rough ocean, help finally arrived, but it was far too late for most. Only six sailors remained alive, clinging to the once overloaded float. Fifty-one uniformed Canadians perished, among them Sydney, bringing the total Canadian dead to 53. It was a massacre.

Three weeks later, the Royal Navy sunk that same German U-boat. Its entire 53-man crew went down – one German for one Canadian.

And just seven weeks after that, the Second World War ended. But Sydney and 52 others would never come home.

Telegraphist Sydney James Shinewald is remembered on a plaque in Winnipeg's *Chessed Shel Emes* burial society building as well as on two modest veterans monuments in Winnipeg's Jewish cemeteries.

In the farthest north corner of Manitoba, Lake Shinewald similarly honours his sacrifice. Sydney's name is listed on the cross-topped Halifax Memorial, which commemorates the 3,267 Canadian and pre-Confederation Newfoundlander combatants who died at sea and who have no graves.

Sydney was not merely killed in action. A victim of a war crime, his cause of death was murder. Sydney was, therefore, one of the only Jews murdered by the Nazis who can, in no way, be considered a victim of the Holocaust. Instead, he was a Jew murdered by the Nazis because he was Canadian.

This Remembrance Day, nearly 77 years after his death, I will be thinking of my cousin Sydney—an almost unknown soldier who never had a funeral – one of more than 100,000 Canadians who never returned home, and a brave young man to whom we could never express our deepest gratitude. ■

Benjamin Shinewald lives in Toronto.

Jews and Mennonites, in Winnipeg and the old country: It's complicated

/ John Longhurst

Members of Winnipeg's Jewish community are welcoming the publication of new research by the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) into its entanglement with National Socialism before and after the Second World War. The MCC is the international humanitarian aid arm of the Canadian and American Mennonite churches.

"I'm pleased and impressed with MCC's honesty, purposefulness and willingness to come to grips with its past," said Daniel Stone about the research published in *Intersections*, the quarterly newsletter of the Winnipeg-based international humanitarian organization.

Stone, a retired University of Winnipeg history professor, was also impressed by the high calibre of the research.

"They have very high standards," he said of the researchers, "and are willing to say what happened."

Belle Jarniewski, executive director of the Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, feels the same way.

"I really applaud MCC for the research," she said, adding "it is important for it to reckon with its past."

Among the 12 essays in the newsletter is "MCC and Nazism, 1929-1955," by Ben Goossen, a historian at Harvard University.

In it, Goossen noted that MCC "at best, kept silent" about its involvement with Nazis during that period, and "at worst, was involved in coverup and denial."

During that time period, "MCC leadership made conscious decisions at many points to work with Nazis where they didn't have to, and downplayed collaboration with Nazis by some Mennonite refugees," he said.

Later, it developed a narrative about the rescue of about 12,000 Mennonite refugees from the former Soviet Union that "claimed Jewish suffering, that Mennonites had suffered like the Jews," he said.

This prevented MCC from taking an honest look at its past, he went on to say, adding that prevented it from "wrestling in any meaningful way" with the Holocaust.

By evaluating the decisions of previous generations of MCC leaders, the organization can develop tools to navigate ethically challenging situations today, he said.

"Responding to evidence of institutional antisemitism within MCC's history will benefit the organization's engagement with Jews, specifically, and it will more generally strengthen MCC's work in a variety of interfaith contexts," he added.

In her essay, "Defining the deserving: MCC and Mennonite refugees from the Soviet Union after World War II," Aileen Friesen, who teaches Mennonite studies at the University of Winnipeg, noted that defining which refugees were deserving back then was "based on MCC's own moral framework."

Although "seemingly without intention to cover acts of atrocity committed during the Nazi period, MCC gave licence for Soviet Mennonites to minimize or erase the different ways they had collaborated with and benefited from the Nazis," said Friesen.

By taking a hard look at MCC's wartime past, the agency can "fully address" things that were once hidden and brushed over, she said, adding "We don't have to be afraid of our past... covering it up is more detrimental."

Friesen acknowledged for some, Mennonites and Jews alike, "these are painful memories from a painful time."

But, she said, it can be an opportunity to discover what that experience means for today, and to develop good relations between the Mennonite and Jewish communities.

* * *

Two years before MCC's public acknowledgement of its involvement with National Socialism, about 175 Mennonites and Jews gathered at Winnipeg's Asper Jewish Community Campus in November 2019 to hear a presentation titled "Jews, Mennonites and the Holocaust."

Sponsored by the Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, the event was about the terrible things that had happened 77 years earlier in the Ukrainian city of Chortitza, a place where Mennonites and Jews had lived peacefully for decades.

Then the Nazis came, and everything changed.

In 1941, before the German invasion, Chortitza was home to about 2,000 Mennonites and some 400 Jews, from a total population of about 14,000. A year or so later, all the Jews had been killed by the Nazis.

Did the Mennonites know what happened to their neighbours? And did some help with the killings? Those were the questions addressed that evening by Aileen Friesen and Hans Werner, a retired professor of Mennonite history, also from the University of Winnipeg.

Friesen began by talking about the massacre of Jews in the region in 1942 in the city of Zaporizhia, across the river from Chortitza.

About the same time as 3,000 Jews were being murdered, Mennonites—who were treated well by the Nazis because they were seen as ethnic Germans—were celebrating their newfound liberation from communist oppression at Easter church services.

"The image is stark," said Friesen, describing how Mennonites benefitted under German occupation while Jews were subjected to "unspeakable violence."

While most Mennonites didn't participate in the genocide against the Jews, some did collaborate, serving as mayors, police or other officials. And some were members of local security forces that rounded up and murdered Jews.

For decades, Mennonite scholars "have struggled with the issue of collaboration," Friesen said. But recent discovery of records from the former Soviet Union provide "concrete evidence" of Mennonite participation in the Holocaust.

Since much of the new material comes from Soviet interrogation records from after the war, it has to be "treated with caution," she acknowledged.

But together with other historical records and recollections, it is "clear" some Mennonites aided the Nazis in killing Jews.

In his presentation in 2019, Werner dealt with the way the Mennonites have remembered their wartime experience in Ukraine.

Referencing memoirs written by Mennonites after the war, he noted that the Holocaust usually only makes cameo appearances. Most of them focus on Mennonite life before the 1917 Russian Revolution, the subsequent loss and displacement under the Soviets, and their own suffering during and after the Second World War.

These memories are coloured by how the German invasion of Russia was “a relief from Soviet oppression,” he said, adding they also fit neatly into the post-war “Cold War logic,” when the Soviet Union was seen as the enemy.

Some memoir writers who mentioned the Holocaust promoted a sense of “equivalence between the killing of the Jews and Mennonite suffering [under the Soviets],” he said, or blamed the Nazis for their deaths.

* * *

Fast forward a year to November 2020, when the American Jewish online magazine *Tablet* published *The Real History of the Mennonites and the Holocaust* by Ben Goossen.

Goossen, who grew up Mennonite, detailed some of the ways MCC became entangled with Nazis while helping thousands of Mennonite refugees from the former Soviet Union escape from Europe after the Second World War.

This included employing a refugee and former Nazi supporter, Heinrich Hamm.

In the article, Goossen said if consideration was given only to MCC’s postwar reports about its refugee resettlement work, “we might assume that the denomination’s premier aid organization was acting in good faith—that [MCC’s] leaders were unaware of the Nazi collaboration of refugees like Hamm.”

This reading, he said, “cannot be supported” by research.

“A great gulf looms between the image of Mennonites as a peaceful Christian denomination engaged in humanitarianism and peace building around the world, including in the Middle East, and what historians have begun to reveal about the entanglement of a substantial minority of Mennonites with National Socialism during the 1930s and ‘40s,” he wrote.

“It has included influential leaders within the Mennonite denomination, including within its best-known humanitarian aid organization, MCC.”

* * *

A couple of months later, in January 2021, came the book *European Mennonites and the Holocaust* (University of Toronto Press), a collection of scholarly presentations made at a 2018 conference titled “Mennonites and the Holocaust” at Bethel College, a Mennonite school in Newton, Kansas.

At the book’s online launch, presenters spoke about how Mennonites in the Netherlands, Germany, occupied Poland, and Ukraine were witnesses to, and participated in, the destruction of European Jews.

In his remarks at the launch, editor Mark Jantzen of Bethel College noted that Europe’s 185,000 Mennonites during the Second World War were “neighbours to Jews, eyewitnesses to deportations, and in some cases, to mass murder.”

They were also beneficiaries, enablers and perpetrators of the Holocaust, he said, adding that some were rescuers “less frequently.”

The public memory of that experience, he said, has typically been to see Mennonites as victims and “moral heroes...on the right side of history.” That story is “terribly incomplete.”

* * *

Reflecting on the published research, Alain Epp Weaver of MCC, who edited the special issue of *Intersections* on the topic, said the organization is “very grateful to the historians for helping us understand how MCC was entangled with National Socialism.”

Through their work some “sobering facts have emerged and been heard,” he said, adding the organization is committed to being “open and transparent” about this episode in its history.

This includes how Mennonites at that time were “bound up” in the broader Christian experience of antisemitism.

MCC’s goal now, he said, is to assess what it can learn from that episode in its history, at the same time emphasizing it “firmly opposes antisemitism alongside all forms of racism.”

The organization is committed “to continued examination of its history and to discerning how to respond to this history in ways that are faithful to its grounding in the gospel of reconciliation.”

* * *

As that November evening at Winnipeg’s Asper Centre in 2019 was concluding, Dan Klass, a member of the local Jewish community whose parents came from the Chortitza region to Winnipeg in 1913, noted the similarities between that community almost 80 years ago and his home now.

As it was back in the early part of the last century, Winnipeg today is a mix of Mennonites and Jews, he said, noting relations between the two communities are good—despite their terrible history.

“We should celebrate and cherish this, and make sure Winnipeg is a place where it never happens again,” he said. ■

John Longhurst is the religion reporter at the *Winnipeg Free Press*.

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Joanne Levy wrote a new Canadian young-adult novel set in a Jewish funeral home

/ Susan Minuk

Grief may not seem like an obvious topic for someone who writes for tweens. And yet, grief sparked the latest story from Joanne Levy.

Sorry For Your Loss, published in October by Orca Books, is set in a family-owned-and-operated funeral home not unlike the United Hebrew Memorial Chapel—which Levy’s father Dan manages in Hamilton, Ont.

The book is dedicated to him, but inspiration for the young-adult novel actually arrived after her mother Marcia Levy passed away, eight years ago.

“It was when I was allowed to see behind the scenes of the funeral home that I felt comforted in knowing how she would be cared for,” says the author. “Most people don’t have access to this—especially kids.

“We often hide what happens to our bodies when they die, and where they go. And I recognized kids are curious and want to know. And they deserve to know.”

For example, the important work of a chevra kadisha (Jewish burial society) is a mystery to many who haven’t been involved in organizing a funeral.

“I wanted to share these traditions in a way that wasn’t scary.”

So, even though *Sorry For Your Loss* was written with 9- to 12-year-olds in mind, anyone can read it for insights into how to normalize talking about death with children.

The plot concerns a Jewish pre-teen named Evie Walman, who grows up next door to the family business. She loves dusting caskets, polishing pews, and vacuuming the chapel. On funeral days, Evie dresses up to offer condolences while handing out tissues to mourners.

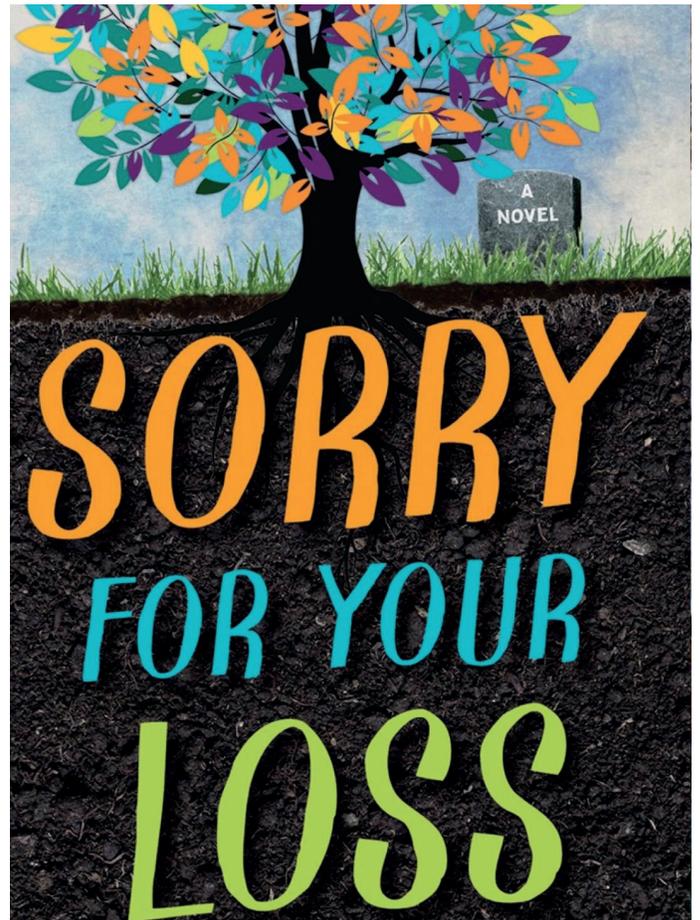
“She wants to help so much,” says Levy of her main character. “But she sort of trips over her own feet all the time.”

Evie thinks she knows everything about loss—until she meets a boy named Oren, who’s lost his own parents in a horrific car crash.

Oren initially refuses to speak and Evie is determined to find a way to help him deal with things.

As their friendship blossoms, the duo confronts bullying, they learn about the art of quilling, explore the depths of grief, and ultimately embrace acceptance and healing.

But it’s also a peek into what happens behind closed doors at



any funeral home, a business that the author’s family entered later in life.

“My great-aunt was a member of the group of volunteers that prepares bodies for burial, and she recruited my dad. The manager of my hometown Jewish funeral chapel retired, and my father took over that role.

“I didn’t grow up in the business the way Evie does in the book—but I’ve always been fascinated by the industry.”

Sorry for Your Loss is Levy’s sixth book for young people. *Small Medium at Large*, her debut novel first published in 2012, focused on specifically Jewish characters but gained wider acclaim.

Her upcoming effort, *The Book of Elsie*, is about a girl trying to save her synagogue amidst the festivities of Purim.

Levy believes her writing style emphasizes the expression of empathy, while wanting young readers to know “we’re all the same inside, no matter where we pray or where we eat.

“I write for all kids,” she adds. “But I want Jewish kids to be respected in books.” ■

Susan Minuk is an arts and leisure contributor to The C.J.N.

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