

# The Canadian Jewish News

## NAOMI ROSENFELD sees a Jewish future in Atlantic Canada

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**ELLIN  
BESSNER**  
is telling our  
stories daily

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# B.C. is considering a name change for the mountain named for French war criminal Philippe Pétain

/ Jeremy Appel

**B**ritish Columbia is mulling whether to drop the name of Vichy France's leader from the names of a mountain, creek and glacier that straddle the border with Alberta.

Last year, the B.C. Geographical Society received a request from a "concerned citizen" to rescind the names of Mount Pétain, Pétain Creek and Pétain Glacier, which compose the Pétain Basin, according to the B.C. Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development (BCGN), which oversees the Geographical Society.

In September 2019, the Government of Alberta dropped the names from its side of the border. They were also removed from a federal database.

The landmarks are named after Henri Philippe Pétain, who was at one time regarded as a war hero for his role as a victorious French general in the First World War, leading the French to victory at the Battle of Verdun in 1916.

But during the Second World War, Pétain became leader of the Nazi puppet regime in Vichy France, deporting 76,000 Jews to death camps, just 2,500 of whom survived. After the war, he was convicted of treason and imprisoned for the rest of his life, which ended in 1951.

The mountain was named after Pétain in 1918.

Nico Slobinsky, a senior director with the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs, says he finds it baffling that anyone would oppose rescinding the name of a convicted Nazi collaborator.

"Pétain belongs to the books of history, no other recognition should be bestowed on him," Slobinsky said in an email.

The Geographical Society needs to go through a lengthy consultation process prior to rescinding the names of geographical locations, which is expected to wrap up at the end of 2021. A separate process is required to rename the sites.

"Place names reflect the cultural history and heritage values of the province, and Indigenous place names, especially in the original languages of the land, tell the story of the deep history of where we live," the B.C. ministry noted in an email.

However, site names are also "fundamental to communication on the land and have safety and navigation implications," so it's important to reach a broad consensus before rescinding names, the ministry added.

If the names are dropped, "references to each of these features will likely be in relation to nearby named features or by GPS coordinates, as needed," until there's a new name selected.

As part of the consultation process, the B.C. government sought approval for rescinding the name from the Regional District of East Kootenay, where the sites are located.

At an Oct. 8 board meeting, the RDEK board of directors voted 11 to 4 in favour of rescinding the names of the three sites.

One of the directors who voted no, Mike Sosnowski, told The CJC that the push to rescind the names of the landmarks is an example of "cancel culture" and "destroying history."

"I know [Pétain] must have been a bad guy in the end, but whatever, we learn from history," said Sosnowski.

"The atrocities that happened to the Jewish people, and the atrocities that happen to people all of the time all over the world, are terrible ... You take the name away from the mountain, in 10 years, they won't know he was a bad guy."

Another nay vote, Sparwood Mayor and former MP David Wilks, told CBC Radio that Pétain made "grave errors [but] some would say that he was looking out for the best interests of France."

In his own Nov. 4 interview with CBC, Jewish Federation of Greater Vancouver CEO Ezra Shanken said Wilks's "shocking" remarks underscore the need for further Holocaust education.

"There's clearly a population he's speaking for that doesn't understand that there's no justification for war crimes," Shanken said.

"France itself said that his behaviour was beyond the pale, that it does wipe away all of the things he did before... There's no grey area here."

The rescinding of Pétain's name is a "no-brainer" that exists separately from the broader "debate around removal of monuments," he added.

In Quebec, there is a rural township and a lake named after Pétain. ■

Jeremy Appel is a Calgary-based freelance journalist.

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## The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel aims to revitalize wetlands

/ Ron Csillag

**O**ne normally might not associate hot, dry Israel with marshy wetlands, but that is precisely where two Israeli environmentalists want the country to go.

"Start-up Nature"—a play on Israel's status as a high-tech start-up nation—is the latest campaign by the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI), two of whose representatives were in Canada recently to launch the project and drum up funds.

The idea is to take old and fallow commercial fish farms throughout Israel and repurpose them as wetland sanctuaries, explained Dan Alon, SPNI's deputy CEO and director of conservation and environmental protection.

He called it an "amazing new project to create new wetland habitats (in) Israel."

And it's just in time, he added in an interview with The CJN, as an estimated 95 percent of crucial wetlands in Israel have disappeared over the last century, much of that owing to climate change, but also to human development.

The fish farms to be repurposed have been empty of water for a decade, and besides, there's shrinking demand for domestic fish, Alon noted.

Alon was joined in Toronto by Jay Shofet, the organization's director of partnerships and development, under the auspices of the Canadian Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel, founded in 2011.

Their aim is to create five or six new wetland sanctuaries for wildlife in Israel. The first two already exist on land leased from Kibbutz Kfar Ruppin in the Jordan Valley, and Kibbutz Maagan Michael on the Mediterranean coast.

Together, the current sites cover about 173 acres of land where millions of birds, endangered otters (there are fewer than 100 left in Israel), and other local flora and fauna will be protected.

The term the two environmentalists use is "rewilding," or re-tuning the regions to how nature intended.

It's an expensive undertaking. The Israeli government has kicked in \$4 million to date for developing and restoring the sites, but the SPNI must fundraise for maintenance costs. That amounts to \$5 million for the upkeep of each site, in perpetuity.

"Our project now is to make sure that the new wetlands can be sustained for the future," Alon said. Included in the plans are visitor centres and accessible trails for encounters with some 300 species of birds.

Both Alon and Shofet noted that Israel is one of the world's foremost destinations for birding. Protecting birds is vital, they stressed, because Israel is at the junction of a major migratory route, called a "flyway," that funnels hundreds of millions of birds from across Europe, Asia and Africa, twice every year.

A lack of wetlands in Israel means the birds would have nowhere to land, rest, and forage on their migration routes. This would affect habitats and ecosystems on three continents, explained Shofet.

Some of the avian species already migrating to the two restored wetlands in Israel are storks, pelicans, egrets, warblers, and swallows.

The wetlands project is also aiming to boost ecotourism to Israel, currently estimated at 150,000 annual visitors, and, according to the SPNI, money generated would replace the income that had been produced by the fish farms.

A little-known fact, Alon pointed out, is that fully 25 percent of Israel is under environmental protection. Both activists said the environment and conservation have gained stature as prominent issues in Israel.

"Israel is undergoing a sea change in its feelings toward the environment," said Shofet. That's been growing since the 1950s, when the SPNI established wetlands in the Hula Valley, nearly a decade before the publication of Rachel Carson's seminal book *Silent Spring*, which set American environmental consciousness alight.

The entire Middle East is getting hotter and drier, Shofet said, and Israel is experiencing less rain but more flooding.

On the other hand, climate marches are drawing thousands of people into the streets. And Israel sent one of the largest delegations per capita to the COP26 conference on climate change in

Glasgow earlier this month, where Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Energy Minister Karine Elharrar announced that the country will join the growing number of nations pledging to be carbon neutral by 2050.

Canadians, said Alon, help hospitals, schools and universities in Israel. "It's time to help the environment in Israel," he said. "It's a message people need to hear." ■

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## Toronto District School Board will explore 'multiple meanings' of slogans following pro-Palestinian rally by students

/ Ron Csillag

Educators with the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) say they will work to ensure that students and staff understand the "multiple meanings" of expressions about the Israel-Palestine conflict.

A letter sent home on Nov. 15 to parents of students at Marc Garneau Collegiate Institute, in Flemingdon Park, acknowledges that a few days earlier, students there led a lunch-hour rally at which signs and chants of "Free Palestine" and "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" were used prominently.

Jewish groups have protested that those slogans call for the destruction of Israel and are hateful.

"Those expressions mean different things to different people because of different lived experiences," states the letter to parents, signed by an executive superintendent and a superintendent of education.

"Some members of the Jewish community have experienced these phrases as antisemitic and hateful. Some Palestinians use the phrases as a statement of their rights as people."

It was the "understanding" of participants that the protest, held Nov. 12 outside the school was "about freedoms and rights of Palestinians."

The board said it "will work with staff and students to ensure they understand these multiple meanings and ensure hate is not part of the discussion."

Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Centre alleged that school staff amplified the pro-Palestinian messages on social media.

In a letter to TDSB director of education Colleen Russell-Rawlins and other board officials, FSWC said the phrases in question call for the destruction of Israel "and the expulsion and murder of the Jewish people."

The Jewish advocacy group called on Russell-Rawlins to provide “a plan of action to reassure families in our city that the TDSB is committed to upholding the rights of Jews in the TDSB system (staff, students and parents) not to be subjected to hateful propaganda while at school.”

FSWC has requested a meeting with the board to discuss bringing education programs on antisemitism to teachers and students at Marc Garneau and other schools in Toronto.

“It’s time the TDSB step up and take responsibility for allowing such a toxic environment to fester through its inaction on previous incidents of antisemitism, creating an atmosphere in which lashing out against the Jewish community is acceptable and Jewish staff and students are left feeling attacked and voiceless,” said Jaime Kirzner-Roberts, director of policy at FSWC.

In its statement, the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA) outlined the meanings of the phrases used at the student rally.

For example, “*From the River to the Sea, Palestine Will Be Free*” is “a common call-to-arms for pro-Palestinian activists,” CIJA pointed out. “It calls for the establishment of a State of Palestine from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, erasing the State of Israel and its people. It is also a rallying cry for terrorist groups and their sympathizers, from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine to Hamas, which called for Israel’s destruction in its original governing charter in 1988.”

The board “needs to take urgent, concrete action to address systemic antisemitism,” said Noah Shack, CIJA’s vice president, GTA. The incident at Marc Garneau is the most recent in “a series” of antisemitic incidents that have not been fully addressed by the board, Shack said.

For example, in September, activist and author Desmond Cole’s remarks at online learning sessions for educators were supposed to be about anti-Black racism but went off-script to robust support for the Palestinian cause. The board apologized for “harm” caused.

Earlier this year, Javier Davila, a TDSB Student Equity Program Advisor, was put on home assignment for distributing pro-Palestinian resources to teachers, then reinstated to his job without further discipline.

In the letter to parents, the board said its position “has and always will be to support our students in being able to tell their stories and understand conflicting experiences of oppression.”

Students and the administration will continue to discuss what happened at the protest at Marc Garneau, “and how to incorporate the concerns raised in ongoing learning,” stated the letter. “Collectively, we must rise to the challenge of creating a deeper understanding of each other in classrooms and workplaces and focus on our shared humanity.” ■

Ron Csillag has been reporting for The CJN since 1984.

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## Michael Jacobs is a 15-year-old Toronto chess ‘kid streamer’ taking on challengers online

/ Talia Kliot

When Michael Jacobs, now 15, was six years old, his father turned off the internet. Jacobs still wanted to play on the computer, but the only two games that were available without Wi-Fi were chess and solitaire.

“I never really understood how to play solitaire,” he said. “So, I taught myself how to play chess.”

Initially, the Toronto high school student focussed on learning which piece does what, but after his family noticed how much time he spent playing, his dad sat him down and taught him how to strategize.

He’s come a long way since then. About two months ago, he signed on with chess.com, the largest online chess website, becoming the second “kid streamer” promoted by the website.

The games are broadcast on the Chess TV homepage, sometimes garnering over 20,000 viewers.

While Jacobs was playing chess before the pandemic, both online and with the Aurora Chess Club, he began to spend even more time with the game once COVID hit. “Everything got locked down, so I had nothing else to do,” he said.

Jacobs also started to watch other chess streamers on Twitch, a live video streaming service. The streamers record their screen when they play, narrate their moves, and entertain their viewers with personal anecdotes.

It was when Jacobs was watching another kid, around his age and skill level, that he decided that he might want to try streaming as well: “It seemed like he was having lots of fun.”

He opened a Twitch account with the username @suprhot-doggs, which he chose because of the “old definition” that a hot dog is someone who shows off. Despite this and his impressive talent for the game, Jacobs is humble about his successes.

When he first started out, Jacobs was nervous about streaming to a crowd. “I never really liked talking in front of people,” he said. Before he garnered a following, he was just streaming to himself, and used that time to build up his confidence. Now, almost two years later, he has 5,000 followers, and his favourite part of streaming is engaging with his audience.

After about six months of streaming, Jacobs decided to apply to chess.com, but was rejected many times. Still, he continued trying until finally signing with them in September, which has increased his viewership.

He streams four to five times a week for about two hours, battling other players at a similar skill level. Jacobs plays blitz chess, which is timed.

"It's a different game almost every single time you play," he said. "And I also like that it's strategic and not luck... although there's a little bit luck involved in it."

Jacobs makes anywhere from \$300 to over \$1,000 a month streaming chess, which is certainly another perk for doing what he loves.

"How Twitch works is that the people in your community give you money," he said. "So, if the people watching me don't want to give me a cent, I won't make anything."

He also gets a cut when someone buys a premium membership to chess.com under his name.

In addition to his commitment to chess streaming, Jacobs is also busy being a Grade 9 student at TanenbaumCHAT and playing hockey.

As for the future, Jacobs plans to compete in in-person tournaments and become a chess master.

Until then, he has some advice to share about what he's learned from his experience rising through the ranks and becoming a successful chess streamer.

"I want people to know that if they try something new, they should not give up right away," he stressed. "Because, in the beginning, I was streaming to myself for a few months. Like, no one was watching, actually not one person. And I didn't give up [and here's] where I got to." ■

**Talia Kliot is a student of Journalism and Creative Writing at Concordia University.**

## AJC's departing executive director on the future of Jewish life in Atlantic Canada

/ Ellin Bessner

**A**fter five years as the face of a Jewish community, Naomi Rosenfeld is stepping down from her job as executive director of the Atlantic Jewish Council.

Rosenfeld, 29, and her husband, are expecting their first child in November, and want to be near their extended family in their hometown of Toronto.

"I've seen what an asset it is when people live close to their parents and their kids' grandparents, and how much they're able to help one another," Rosenfeld explained in an interview with The CJN Daily podcast. "And I think that that had a huge persuasive factor on me making this choice, that I wanted to raise my child closer to the child's grandparents and uncles and aunts and nieces and nephews."

Rosenfeld is aware of how it might look to others being yet another young Jewish family to leave the East Coast behind.

"I certainly don't want to imply for a second that this is not

an amazing place to live, an amazing place to raise a family, an amazing Jewish community," she said. "I think people did understand, but that's not to say if it wasn't for that one fact, I would be raising my family here."

### Camp Kadimah brought her to the region

Rosenfeld was just 24 when she was hired to run the Atlantic Jewish Council (AJC) in 2016, after the retirement of longtime executive director Jon Goldberg. She's the grandchild of Holocaust survivors, and came to the job with enthusiastic family ties to the region, despite growing up in Toronto.

Her mother was a camper at Camp Kadimah, the Jewish community-owned summer camp at Barrs Corner, Nova Scotia. The family sent Rosenfeld and her siblings there.

After receiving her Queen's University degree, Rosenfeld spent two years working as the Hillel director for Atlantic Canada based in Halifax, before going back to school at Brandeis University in Boston to do graduate work at the Hornstein Jewish Professional Leadership Program.

When she started as executive director in Halifax, Rosenfeld faced several key challenges to bring Jewish culture and programming to a dispersed Jewish population of approximately 4,000 people across four provinces—with more than one time zone.

"The issues that were presented... were fairly common issues that a lot of smaller Jewish communities were having," Rosenfeld recalled. "We were seeing a loss in numbers, especially a lot of the younger people who were raised here were not ending up here and not having families here."

### Credits the PJ Library program

The second problem was a large unaffiliated community of Jews who didn't take out synagogue memberships, didn't send their kids to Jewish summer camp, and didn't send them to supplemental Hebrew school.

Flash forward to today, and the demographics have changed—particularly in Halifax, where between 2,000 and 3,000 Jewish people make their homes. Over 100 new families from Israel, mainly of Russian Jewish descent, have moved to the region as part of an immigration sponsorship program coordinated with the Nova Scotia government. While that program started and ended before Rosenfeld's time, she's still seeing the impact.

"Over the summer, anecdotally I know of ten to 20 families who've immigrated to Halifax and so that's been really interesting," she said. "I think we'll continue to see immigration play a role in the changing demographics and the growth of our community." (Rosenfeld jokes that she's now the only one in the Halifax head office who doesn't speak fluent Hebrew.)

Engaging Jewish newcomers with young children to affiliate with the community has been one of Rosenfeld's most important files. She credits the PJ Library program as one of the most successful weapons in this campaign. Jewish children up to the age of 14 are eligible to receive free Jewish-themed books each month, in the mail. While 40 were enrolled at the start, now 400 Jewish children in Atlantic Canada receive free books each month.

"We just began a Shalom Baby program, where now, every time someone has a baby they get an adorable little gift basket that includes PJ library books and a Kadimah onesie and all these fun little gifts for new families to really welcome them into the community in that way."

## Fighting antisemitism is different in Atlantic Canada

Although responding to local incidents of antisemitism has been one of her regular concerns since Rosenfeld took over at the AJC, the issue has risen to the forefront since May. The worldwide spike in anti-Israel and anti-Zionism rhetoric both online and physically across Canada hit home for her community after the hostilities broke out for two weeks between Israel and Hamas.

Rosenfeld was regularly called on to respond about incidents that happened in the region: vandals shot a BB gun through the windows of the Tiferes Israel Synagogue in Moncton, while Jewish businesses in the region were being targeted online when their owners posted pro-Israel statements on social media. Schools were also affected.

While she thinks much of the problem is due to a lack of awareness in the general Atlantic population about Jews, Judaism and the place of Israel in the lives of Canadian Jews, she foresees the problem continuing after she leaves.

Part of the job for her successor will be to work towards boosting public education about Jews, and promoting alliances with other groups in society. For example, Rosenfeld recently gave an hour-long presentation about antisemitism to new recruits for the Halifax Regional Police.

"A lot of them said to me afterwards, 'We never learned anything like this.'"

## COVID forced the community to embrace technology

After COVID hit Canada in the spring of 2020, residents were ordered into what was later called "The Atlantic Bubble," where borders were closed to outsiders to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

For the Jewish community in the region, that meant finding new ways to connect now that synagogues were closed and regular cultural and religious programming was cancelled. The AJC pivoted to offer online Zoom webinars such as a talk by the newly arrived Royal Canadian Air Force chaplain, Capt. Rabbi Arnold Noteh Glogauer, who was posted to CFB Shearwater near Halifax last Passover.

Atlantic Jews were also able to join in online national events such as Yom HaShoah commemorations and celebrations for the Jewish New Year. The AJC also sent out hanukkiyas and boxes of candles to people unable to leave their homes to buy them.

"Our film festival last year, we offered it completely virtually, and this year, we're offering it as a hybrid session, and I don't know that we'll ever go back to offering only in person, because we get to engage so many more people across our large geography," Rosenfeld said.

The eighth annual Atlantic Jewish Film Festival opened Nov. 18 and will run online as well as in-person screenings at both a Cinéplex theatre and the Pier 21 Museum of Immigration in Halifax.

## Finding kosher food can be a struggle

As she prepares to wind up her tenure at the Atlantic Jewish Council on Spring Garden Road in Halifax, Rosenfeld shares how the community has reacted to the news of her departure. She heard from members of the LGBTQ Jewish community, and couples in interfaith marriages, and other groups who'd been unaffiliated.

"A lot of people wrote to me and they said 'You helped form this community that I felt comfortable being a part of,'" she said. "We're such a small community. We can't afford to make a single family, to make a single person feel unwelcome. And I'm not saying I was perfect at that, not by a long shot, but that was always my goal."

One other unsolved challenge remains and that is to make kosher food more available in the region. While the East Coast Bakery in Halifax now produces kosher challah and bagels, there's no kosher caterer or restaurant.

But the "dozens and dozens" of personal invitations gave Rosenfeld many of her fond memories of the past five years.

"Ultimately, if you want a Jewish meal, you have to put in the work and then invite your friends and neighbours over," she said. "And that's what this Jewish community is all about. So I'm going to miss that a lot." ■

Ellin Bessner is the host of *The CJNI Daily*.

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# What Jewish Canada sounds like: Recent podcasting highlights from The CJN Daily

/ Ellin Bessner

## At 13 he got an Apple Watch. At 14, he built a prayer app for it (Oct. 13)

The latest Apple Watch allows you to monitor your blood oxygen levels, send emails, wear it while swimming—and, thanks to a high school student in Toronto, you can also use it to help recite your daily Jewish prayers.

The new free app, called WatchSiddur, shows you which prayers to read each day and at what times, so you don't have to carry around a physical book all day.

It was created by Eitan Steinfeld, a 14-year-old student at TanenbaumCHAT, in Thornhill, Ont., who taught himself how to code during the pandemic. Inspired by the Apple Watch his grandmother gave him for his bar mitzvah, Steinfeld set out to create the world's first free daily siddur app for the platform.

## Wacky Mac vanished from Canadian grocery shelves and Jews are freaking out (Oct. 18)

This fall, Canadian stores in Jewish neighbourhoods have been ravaged by a bizarre calamity: they're all out of Wacky Mac. From Kosher Quality in Montreal to Savours in Toronto to the Sobeys on Taylor in Winnipeg, Wacky Mac—a kosher staple for families craving macaroni and cheese—has completely disappeared from store shelves.

The shortage has led Jewish Canadians to social media, where eager shoppers are hunting down the country's few remaining boxes, while others sit clueless as to where all the funny-shaped pastas have vanished.

We heard from one Canadian woman who's been trying to get to the bottom of the Wacky Mac shortage, as well as a few kosher grocers who went to extraordinary lengths to get their hands on as much of the cheddar treat as possible.

## The world's first female rabbi finally gets her moment 350 years after her death (Oct. 19)

At the recent Canadian Jewish Literary Awards, Montrealer Sigal Samuel won an award for her new children's book, *Osnat and Her Dove: The True Story of the World's First Female Rabbi*. It tells the real-life story of Osnat Barzani, a Kurdish-Jewish scholar who lived about 400 years ago in Mosul—and had an unconventional upbringing.

Barzani's father ran a yeshiva, but didn't have sons to share his knowledge with. Instead of forcing his daughter to do chores and get married young, he taught her Torah, the Talmud, midrash, Kabbalah and Hebrew, leading Barzani to eventually become the head of her father's yeshiva.

Sigal Samuel could empathize with Barzani's story: her Orthodox father also taught her Jewish studies, although despite her training, she didn't become a rabbi. The author and journalist's

first novel *The Mystics of Mile End* also won a Canadian Jewish Literary Award in 2016.

## Halachic Halloween: Why are there so few scary Jewish movies? (Oct. 28)

If horror films ever have religious themes, they're almost always Christian ones: good and evil, exorcisms, crosses and vampires, satanic cults. But as Halloween approaches, a Jewish horror-aficionado power couple is arguing that should change.

Canadian horror writer Ariel Fisher and her husband, Jonathan Barkan, believe Jews have been reluctant to mine their real-life horrific experiences for artistic expression in the horror genre. In reality, Jews have suffered centuries of trauma that could well fuel its own subgenre.

Fisher, who was born in Thornhill and now lives with Barkan in Ann Arbor, Michigan, joined the podcast to explore why Jewish horror stories have been so rare—and how they think it could change.

## Meet the amateur Jewish baker winning over hearts and bellies on CBC TV. (Nov. 2)

Steven Levitt isn't the first Jew to compete in CBC TV's reality competition, *The Great Canadian Baking Show*. But he is the only one this season. And so far, he's proven to be a pretty smart cookie, surviving the show's first five weeks. That he won a couple of competitions along the way is just the icing on the cake.

Not that he's been able to brag about it—until now. He and his rivals were whisked off to a secret location this past summer for eight weeks of filming, where judges separated the wheat from the chaff and voted off the least-deserving muffin makers.

But now that the show is airing, the tattooed, motorcycle-riding Jewish dad was free to break bread with *The CJN Daily*. How did he transform his pie-in-the-sky dream of pro baking into sweet reality? He gave us straight answers—no sugar coating. ■

Listen to these episodes and more at [thecjn.ca/daily](http://thecjn.ca/daily). Got a story idea for Ellin Bessner? Write to her at [ebessner@thecjn.ca](mailto:ebessner@thecjn.ca)



# How a Jewish writer is born

/ Hal Niedzviecki

I've been reading a biography of Mel Brooks, a.k.a. Melvin Kaminsky, born 1926 in the family's tiny tenement apartment in New York City's Lower East Side. I'm fascinated by that era of Jewish life, a monumental, tragedy-ridden, rags-to-riches epoch that starts with the migration of Jews eastward out of Spain and Portugal and, in my mind, culminates with the foundation of the State of Israel.

I often find myself making mental timelines of various famous Jewish figures from those days, comparing them to the hazy history of my own family. I think about the small statured, athletically disinclined Mel Brooks roaming the crowded streets, learning to clown, to survive off of a rueful, crude, wit. At that time, my own people were where, exactly? Living, like Brooks, in relative poverty, in cramped quarters, scrimping; but on the other side of the ocean, scraping out a meagre, though rich existence, in the kind of actual shtetl his Galatian clan fled several decades before.

My grandparents, born in a 19th-century of horse and carriage buggies, collective cooking ovens, pogroms, freezing cold cheders overseen by rod-bearing rabbis. Their world was as small as Brooks' was huge. They were tailors and labourers, Yiddish peasants who dreamt not of showbiz, let alone the Messiah, but mostly of a bit of extra meat in the cholent. Brooks describes himself as happy back then, sharing an oversized bed with his brothers, all of them pitching in to help his mother, left broke by her husband's desertion of the family. I imagine that my grandparents were happy too, surrounded by noisy relatives—my Bubbe Luba had something in the range of eight siblings—steeped in their traditions, too busy living and laughing and surviving to worry about what storm clouds might be massing on the horizon.

So full was my bubbe's house, that when she brought home a boy from her class who had become homeless and asked her parents to take him in, her father simply shrugged his assent. What difference would it make, to have nine or 10 or 11 children? I picture Brooks's indefatigable mother Kitty Kaminsky performing that same gesture when her husband up and disappeared. So be it, she had her hands full anyway, especially with her youngest, only two years old and already an expert at mugging for the proverbial camera.

The tragic-comic arc of Jewish life never fails to move me. My grandmother and the orphaned boy who would become my grandfather lived as siblings in the relative safety of their tiny Polish enclave. They couldn't have known what was to come. Nor could young Kaminsky have imagined that his street-smart clowning, his jokes hiding a longing to make it big and prove his deadbeat father wrong, would spawn some of the biggest movies of the day.



Increasingly, as a writer, that's my preoccupation: People caught up in it, unaware, driven by hidden forces of foreboding and need. Who better to represent this fascination than the people of the book? At the same time, I've taken the long route. I am about to launch my fourth novel, but it's the first that I consider to be a Jewish book. (Why so long? I have some ideas about this, but for now I'll spare you the psychoanalysis.)

It's a Jewish book, even though its main character—a feckless 20-something waiter who stumbles into a movie set and gets confused for the movie's star—is not Jewish. Nor is his best friend, or his girlfriend, or his impending love interest, or his co-star in the movie. In fact, as with my previous novels, *The Lost Expert* didn't start out as a book meant to have any Jewish themes or characters whatsoever. But, reminiscent of the way the best Mel Brooks movies—with no Jewish characters or plots at all—are now considered classics of Jewish comedy and film, the Jewsiness kept showing up in this movie.

The novel didn't work until I finally gave in to it. When I did, I discovered that the director of the movie was a lapsed Jew with great reserves of residual guilt. He would be making one last movie—a Jewish movie—though sold to the studios as a cerebral action picture featuring one of the biggest Hollywood action stars in the world taking a role way out of his comfort zone. And then an even bigger surprise: the movie within the novel grew and grew until it became an increasingly fascistic parallel 1930s America. It was the America of the young Mel Brooks, but it wasn't the one that embraced Jewish culture as no nation ever had before. It was other America, the one flirting with fascism and xenophobia and attracted to the burgeoning possibilities of Nazism. In this America, the Jews keep to themselves, and a shadowy figure seeks the presidency, promising to seal off the ghetto permanently and restore American greatness.

And so, forged out of the fire of my own guilt, anxiety and Jewish appreciation of simple twists of fateful humour, I finally, if inadvertently, wrote a Jewish novel. On book launch night I'm imagining my grandparents and Mr. Mel Brooks (now almost 100) as giant faces floating over the proceedings. Mostly stone-faced, at the end of the night they look at each other and shrug. ■

Hal Niedzviecki is the Toronto author of *The Lost Expert*.

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