

# The Canadian Jewish News

## OPHIRA CALOF on challenging Canadian producers to #CripTheScript

/ page 6



### CANDLE LIGHTING TIMES

HALIFAX	5:29
ST. JOHN'S	5:11
MONTREAL	5:08
OTTAWA	5:17
PETERBOROUGH	5:29
TORONTO	5:34
HAMILTON	5:36
WINNIPEG	5:35
VANCOUVER	5:20
WHITEHORSE	5:40

Amnesty International and the University of Toronto vs. Israel **page 2**

Conservative MP wants Holocaust denial to become criminal **page 3**

Justin Trudeau says the Tories support standing with swastikas **page 4**

An unusual aftermath to reports of Toronto school antisemitism **page 5**

Writer asks who killed his great-great-grandmother in Winnipeg **page 8**

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# Canada is dismissing Amnesty International's report that Israel is an 'apartheid state'

/ Steve Arnold

Canada has rejected Amnesty International's claim in a recent highly publicized report that Israel is an apartheid state.

James Wanki, spokesperson for Global Affairs Canada, dismissed the report's claim in a brief statement Feb. 10.

"Canada is a steadfast ally of Israel and a friend of the Palestinian people," he wrote. "Canada rejects the view that Israel's actions constitute apartheid."

"We continue to support the goal of a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East, including the creation of a Palestinian state living side by side in peace and security with Israel," he added.

The human rights watchdog lit a firestorm of objection in the Jewish world on Feb. 1 when it released a 278-page document calling out what it claimed is a history of oppression of Palestinians.

"Amnesty's research confirms that the government of Israel has created and maintains laws, policies, and practices that deliberately oppress Palestinians. This includes racist seizures of property, and policies that make it impossible for many Palestinians to build homes. Additional violations include unlawful killing and serious injury, torture, forcible transfer, persecution, and the denial of many other basic rights and freedoms," the document read.

Those allegations have been emphatically rejected by Canadian Jewish advocacy agencies, including B'nai Brith, the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs and Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center Canada.

"Canada has done the right thing by rejecting Amnesty's absurd report, joining the United States, United Kingdom, Germany and other democratic allies in doing so," B'nai Brith Canada CEO Michael Mostyn said. "B'nai Brith Canada, united with the entire Canadian Jewish community, will continue the fight against these antisemitic efforts to render millions of Israeli Jews stateless and deny them their right to self-determination."

Marvin Rotrand, national director of the agency's League for Human Rights, added "Canada has made clear how biased and baseless the Amnesty International report attacking Israel is. The report confirms its refusal to recognize the right of the Jewish people to self-determination in their historic homeland . . . This report is a call for the destruction of Israel. The report needs to be consigned to the dustbin of history. It does nothing more than give voice to the position of banned terrorist organizations."

Other Jewish advocacy groups have taken a similar position.

"With the exception of the usual outliers on the fringes, the Jewish community is unanimous in its rejection of this report"

CIJA president and CEO Shimon Koffler Fogel told an online meeting about the document Feb. 10.

During that hour-long session, Israeli-Arab Yoseph Haddad, of Together – Vouch for Each Other, an organization dedicated to sparking change in Israel's Arab community, rejected the apartheid allegation.

"I'm not going to say Israel is a perfect country," Haddad, who was an officer in the IDF and heads his own marketing company in Israel, said. "Don't think I'm saying there aren't problems, but we are only going to fix those problems by working together."

Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center Canada also welcomed the government's clear statement.

"We commend the Canadian government for its categorical rejection of Amnesty International's Israeli 'apartheid' smear, joining other countries such as the US, the UK and Germany in standing up against this one-sided report that demonizes and delegitimizes the Jewish state," said CEO Michael Levitt.

"As we witness burgeoning relations between Israel and Arab nations, we must continue to focus our efforts on building lasting peace in the Middle East, not sowing the seeds of further division."

Meanwhile, NDP MP and foreign affairs critic Heather McPherson signalled her support for the Amnesty report in the House of Commons earlier this week, calling the document's allegations "extremely serious" and urging the government of Canada to take "concrete steps" against Israel.

McPherson called for an end to Canadian arms sales to Israel and a ban on the sale of products "from the illegal settlements until the end of the illegal occupation." ■

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## University of Toronto's downtown campus student union endorsed a boycott of Israel with a close vote

/ Steve Arnold

The student union at the University of Toronto's downtown St. George campus endorsed a call to boycott Israel at a special meeting Feb. 16. The measure passed with a slim majority of 56 votes.

The resolution calls on the University of Toronto Student Union (UTSU) to "wholly divest funds (and) further on forbid investment to firms complicit in the occupation of Palestinian Territory."

The motion's clumsy wording left some Jewish advocates confused about its ultimate intent, but they still rejected it as another antisemitic vote disguised as anti-Zionism.

"I am disappointed that once again, the UTSU has decided to

stoke the flames of antisemitism, rather than working to improve the student experience,” said Hillel student leader Evan Kanter in a news release following the decision. “It saddens me that prospective students considering UofT will have to wonder ‘Am I welcome here as a Jew? Will I have a student union who cares to represent me, though I’m Jewish?’”

Hillel Ontario spokesperson Jay Solomon added “We are deeply concerned that student unions at the University of Toronto continue to single out Israel and demonize Jewish self-determination. The university has committed to taking tangible steps to curb antisemitism on campus—and the time for action is now.”

Naena Drazman, East Coast assistant campus coordinator of StandWithUs Canada and the president of Students Supporting Israel at the University of Toronto added: “Discriminatory motions of this nature are unacceptable. Boycotting the Jewish state does nothing to foster peace between Israelis and Palestinians and ultimately denies Jews rights to self-determination.”

Jaime Kirzner-Roberts, policy director of Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center Canada, called for strong and clear action by university administration.

“There must be decisive action and a commitment from the University of Toronto administration to address the antisemitism that’s being perpetrated on its campuses, as time and time again, we see student unions and groups contributing to growing division and hate toward Jewish faculty and students who support Israel,” she said in an email. “Last night’s vote is testament to the disappointing reality that antisemitism is alive and well at UofT, which needs the full attention of President (Meric) Gertler and the administration.”

In a news release before the vote, B’nai Brith Canada CEO Michael Mostyn said the resolution is another reflection of a “broadly antisemitic environment” at the university.

“It is no surprise that further resolutions targeting the world’s only Jewish state are being proposed by student unions. The university administration’s inaction on this issue makes a mockery of its ‘entrustment’ ceremony earlier this week of the deeply flawed Antisemitism Working Group report.”

That report, tabled late last year, included eight recommendations calling for increased education around antisemitism, giving the university’s equity office responsibility for those efforts, ensuring kosher food is readily available on campus, prohibiting student organizations from linking support for Israel to access to services and appointing a university advisor on antisemitism. It also recommended against adopting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism.

The decision not to endorse the IHRA working definition only complicates the effort to combat antisemitism, StandWithUs Canada said after the vote.

“Today’s events highlight the inadequacy of the university’s choice not to adopt the IHRA definition of antisemitism. It’s hard to fight antisemitism if we have to keep convincing people how it’s defined,” the group said.

Graduate student Kayla Shainhouse, who brought the motion to public attention through a Facebook post, said in a posting after the vote she was “saddened and shocked” by the decision.

Wednesday’s vote is the latest in a series of events at UofT that have riled Jewish organizations.

In November, the student union at the Scarborough campus endorsed a resolution to stop using kosher food providers who

“support Israel apartheid.” The group later walked back that call.

In 2019 an official of the Graduate Students Union said it likely would not support a Hillel effort to make more kosher food available on campus “since it is pro-Israel.” The GSU later apologized for the comment.

Incidents like that, Shainhouse said on Facebook, show “anti-Zionism as a vicious manifestation of antisemitism. Hiding behind the Israel-Palestine conflict does not negate that you are harming Jewish students on campus and removing their basic need of food in the name of a conflict which the depths of it are far beyond the knowledge Instagram has given you.”

A university spokesperson said in an email that the student union is an autonomous organization which operates independently from the university and “has no role in the selection of catering providers at the university.”

Students Union president Alexa Ballis did not respond to emailed and telephoned requests for comment. ■

**Steve Arnold was a longtime business reporter from the *Hamilton Spectator* who now contributes regularly to The C.J.N.**

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## **A bill that would make Holocaust denial a crime was introduced in Parliament by Conservative MP Kevin Waugh**

/ Jeremy Appel

**A** bill making its way through Parliament with cross-partisan support seeks to criminalize Holocaust denial by adding a specific subsection on antisemitism to existing prohibitions against inciting hatred.

The proposed legislation, which was introduced in the House of Commons on Feb. 9, would add the “communication of statements, other than in private conversation, that wilfully promote antisemitism by condoning, denying or downplaying the Holocaust” to section 319 of the Criminal Code, which prohibits inciting hatred “against an identifiable group.”

Saskatoon-Grasswood Conservative MP Kevin Waugh, who brought the private members bill forward, told The C.J.N. that he was motivated by the fact that Holocaust survivors are dying and there is an increasing ignorance of the Shoah.

He said his bill’s narrow focus on Holocaust denial is intended to ensure its easy passage through the House.

“I don’t want anything else mixed into this bill, because the bigger the bills you get, the less chance it has [of] passing,” said Waugh.

He says he's not attempting to address any deficiencies in Canada's existing anti-hate laws, but wants to bring the Holocaust to the forefront through legislation, as well as education.

"We're dealing with white supremacists all over the world—not just in this country. If we can tone that rhetoric down and have a lawful bill that controls some of the hatred in this country, then [we're] better for it," Waugh said.

Mount Royal Liberal MP Anthony Housefather has indicated he will work with Waugh to ensure the bill is supported by all parties, pointing out that Holocaust denial is a criminal offence in 16 European countries, including Germany, as well as Israel.

"I think there will need to be amendments to the bill in terms of limitations on scope and carve outs and we can work together at Parliamentary Committee to do this," Housefather told The CJN in an email.

"We need to make sure that it is legislation that is a reasonable limit on freedom of expression and permitted under Section 1 of the Charter."

Martin Sampson of the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA) said a specific prohibition of Holocaust denial is something CIJA has long advocated.

"Many people have the mistaken impression that the Jewish community is concerned about Holocaust denial because it is offensive or insensitive. Though it is both, this isn't why Jews devote energy to combatting this pernicious form of antisemitism. The community knows, through lived experience, that hatred of Jews can and too often does lead to the murder of Jews," Sampson said in an email.

Given how extensively documented the Holocaust is by its victims and perpetrators, Sampson said that denying or downplaying it by nature serves to "demonize or marginalize the Jewish community."

"Even if one had no consideration for the lived experience of the Jewish people, these malicious forms of antisemitism should be a concern because rising Jew-hatred is a reliable indicator of the erosion of the values that underpin the society people of goodwill aspire to create," he said.

CIJA also supports a private members' bill from New Westminster-Burnaby NDP MP Peter Julian to ban the use of hate symbols, which had its first reading in the House on Feb. 3.

Former Canadian Jewish Congress president Bernie Farber, who now chairs the Canadian Anti-Hate Network, said under the current legislative framework, Holocaust denial could sometimes, but not always, fall under section 319.

"People can be stupid and say stupid things, and that doesn't make it a criminal offence," said Farber. "It's what comes after that, that criminalizes it."

Simply saying the Holocaust didn't happen isn't illegal, but saying that it was fabricated by Jewish people for financial benefit would be categorized as inciting hatred against Jews.

But Farber, while sympathetic to the intent of Waugh's bill, said making Holocaust denial a crime in itself "will be a difficult road to go down."

"I'm not entirely convinced that it will meet the constitutional-ity test that our anti-hate laws already meet," he said.

Farber identified mandatory Holocaust education in schools and specially-trained anti-hate units in police forces to apply the law properly as more constructive ways to combat the antisemitism inherent in Holocaust denial than outright criminalization.

"Just because we have a law, doesn't mean it's effective. We

need more than law," he said. ■

Jeremy Appel is a Calgary-based freelance news contributor to The CJN.

## Doorstep Postings: Justin Trudeau waves the red flag at Melissa Lantsman

/ Josh Lieblein

You might have been under the impression that it was the job of a Prime Minister to keep a level head in a crisis. This being Canada, you might also have expected a degree of collegiality, lip service to working across the aisles, and all the rest of that fluffy stuff.

You may have persisted in that impression despite the countless times since he was elected where the PM did something that was arguably meant to inflame his opponents. The constant showboating in foreign media. The flippancy with which he dismissed critics from within his own caucus. The downplaying of scandals. The slightly-more-than-lip-service paid to feminism, to transparency, to reconciliation with First Nations. There was always an apology, a speech full of breathy words, a fig leaf provided so we could all tell ourselves that he didn't really mean it.

Trudeau may yet walk back his implication that Jewish MP Melissa Lantsman and her Conservative Party of Canada stand with people who wave swastikas. But, as I write this, it's been close to a day. He's been asked multiple times to do so, and nothing's forthcoming.

And with every moment that passes without this ritual being completed, the possibility grows that the mask is finally off. It is looking more and more plausible that the trucker protest has *finally* given the PM a pretext to say Screw civility, plant his flag in the ground and refuse to back down. You're either with the Liberals or you're with the terrorists—er, I mean, the Nazis—even if you do happen to be Jewish. Time to pick a side.

Despite the efforts of some to insist that Liberals won't stand for this absolutism, I really don't think they understand the state of play here. Already, the PM's supporters are gleefully pointing out that yes, there was a swastika, and yes, the CPC did stand with a protest where the flag was waved. Others are digging up Lantsman's old tweets. They're asking why she didn't condemn the swastika flag-waving and the standing-with. Still others are puzzled about the CPC's sudden foray into identity politics.

For their part, the CPC believe they have led Trudeau into another brilliant trap. They'll dine out on this one for weeks, like they did on blackface, on SNC-Lavalin, on Trudeau's treatment of Jody Wilson-Raybould. The fundraising emails are being gleefully drafted as we speak. Lantsman herself got a media hit on Fox News and the exchange has been loudly featured in the *Daily Mail*. We shall see how all of this plays to a Canadian audience.

Meanwhile, I imagine that if you're currently feeling unsafe

because of the protests, none of this theatre comforts you in the slightest. Because we'd rather own each other on social media and in the House of Commons, the Ottawa police service has crumbled into a fracas of resignations and accusations. Our leaders snap to attention when ordered to clear border crossings by the Americans. And, oh yeah—there's all the other crises piled atop one another from the past few years.

But now, you may be able to participate in a new and exciting culture war, with all the joyful release that brings. At long last, the swastika is now just another political football that people throw around! Hooray!

Still, if you're a fan of the old way of doing things, where we pretended that this wasn't just some big game of king of the hill, and that Canada was somehow immune from this sort of partisan grubbiness, and where things actually got done every once in a while, then you may have some grieving to do in the near future. ■

**Josh Lieblein is a political campaigner turned pharmacist who lives in Kitchener, Ont.**

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## How a Toronto family's attempt to probe possible antisemitism in a school spiralled into media attention they didn't ask for

/ **Ellin Bessner**

**“I**t's risky putting yourself out there.” When Shirra Berliner and her husband Yaniv decided to transfer their son from the Jewish day school system to a Toronto public school, they could not have imagined that the move would thrust their family into a very public incident involving Nazi salutes and swastikas.

The Toronto District School Board announced on Feb. 8 that it was investigating two reports of antisemitism involving the Charles H. Best Middle School on Wilmington Avenue. According to reports, the Berliners' son had been the target.

Officials said the culprits would be having consequences and that outside experts were being called in to help the students learn about the Holocaust and antisemitism.

The Berliners remain deeply uncomfortable with how their concerns had been handled—by the school itself, and the wider board. The couple and their son spoke to *The CJN Daily* about their experiences, and how solving the issue in the public eye was anything but their intention. (The family asked The CJN not to use the teenager's name.)

**I'm sorry to have to meet you under these circumstances, but I appreciate you taking us back to how the antisemitism incidents happened. Can you describe what you know?**

**Shirra:** So a couple of weeks ago, we're in the car, and our son just said, “Yeah, something really weird happened the other day at school. I don't know.” And he said that he kind of didn't know how to feel about it. He said some kids got his attention and he turned around and there were two kids in their seats giving the Heil Hitler salute and saying, “Oh, we're just asking the teacher a question.” And so I said, “How did it make you feel?” And he said, “At that time, I was just fuming inside. And I wanted to get up and hit them, but I didn't want to disrespect the class or cause a scene. So I just kind of got back to my work and ignored it.” We were thinking, “Do we want to report it? Do we want to talk to the teachers?” Their school has a bit of an issue with calling people snitches. That's kind of this culture of if you go to a teacher, then you're called a snitch.

So we decided that we can't just do nothing. And so he said that he would talk to them himself and say, “Don't ever do that again. I don't like it. I got really mad,” or at least confront them. And so he did, to one of the students who he's actually friends with.

And then maybe like a couple of weeks later, he was working on his own in class and it was after the trucker protest in Ottawa. Some kids are working as a group and then they got his attention. **Teenager:** It was after Holocaust Remembrance Day. We learned about the trucker protest as a class.

**Shirra:** And so he turned around to look and a student was holding up like this object [swastika] that they had fabricated out of these linking cubes. And it's like a geometry tool that they use in class. And the student was holding it up.

And he just went into shock. And he said, “Yeah, I kind of froze, really.” And he didn't tell us it happened. He's like, “Oh, I don't want to tell you. I don't want to make a big deal because I know people will get suspended for this. And I don't want to go through that.” And we said, “Well, we have to tell. This is affecting your ability to learn right now.”

**Yaniv:** We're not clear if this is hateful. All we have is some concerning incidents. When they made the swastika, it was a substitute teacher, so it was kind of a circus in the class. And credit needs to be given. One of the boys saw this and broke up the swastika. So at this point, we're left with some hateful symbolism at the very least, and he's upset by it, but some of it are his friends and some of it are his acquaintances. So we felt like we had to do something about it. But we weren't sure if it was tomfoolery or if it was hate.

**Shirra:** I felt like it still needed to be discussed as a class. I felt like there was a gap in their thinking. They were fooling around, making interesting shapes, and they definitely made the swastika on purpose. But we just thought it needed to have some connection between the role of images and the visceral response. I really feel like the connection wasn't made of how a swastika was going to affect a Jewish person.

**Has the school, and your child, had any Holocaust training as a class or anti-racism training? They're in Grade 8 now, right?**

**Shirra:** They've had a lot. They've had Holocaust education the week before.

**So it's come out: the TDSB, and Jewish organizations, have gone public about it. There was a media conference. How has this spiralled and how do you feel about this?**

**Shirra:** Well, after we wrote the letter to the teacher, she escalated to the principal right away. And I was expecting a call. [Their son] stayed home that day just because he needed to take a breath. And he didn't know whether he was dealing with antisemitism or, like, stupidity. We didn't know. So we said, "You know what? Stay home. Because if you go to school and it gets escalated, you're going to be called a snitch." And we don't want him to deal with that.

**Basically, you weren't happy with how it was dealt with within the school because you weren't able to tell your whole story before it went berserk?**

**Shirra:** The principal called my phone and said she'd like to have our son come in as part of the investigation, on Monday morning. And I said, "Okay, I'll join him." And she said, I couldn't because of COVID. And I said, "Okay. I'll Zoom in." And she responded that she prefers to do investigations without parents. And I said, "Well, he's pretty upset about this, and so I'm not comfortable with that..." Then suggestions were made to involve the teacher, but I didn't want them to miss even more classroom time. So I said, "I think I have to go to the superintendent." And she said, "Go right ahead." I was fuming. And that was it. That was the last time we heard.

*[Ed note: According to the TDSB, it is not uncommon for principals to meet with students without their parents to conduct investigations.]*

**Yaniv:** So then through mutual friends, we heard that the boy that held up the swastika is ravaged by grief about what he did, that it doesn't represent his family at all, that he has an aunt who is Jewish and cousins who are Jewish. And that he meant nothing by this, except for tomfoolery. So we were upset that this boy now has gone through this investigation. They called his house and they spoke to his dad, and they said, "We're investigating your son for a hate crime." So certainly there was no hate crime here. This was stupid, but it wasn't done with hate. And that was our initial intention to figure out what's going on here. Is it hate or is it just, like, immaturity or carelessness? And clearly it looks like it's carelessness for the most part. We know a couple of the kids involved in this, and they feel very bad about this.

**I hear you pulled your son out of school for a while?**

**Shirra:** We thought that with our son leaving school, it would cause less drama, but then it ended up causing more drama. It was like this other kid was being targeted saying, "Someone's leaving school because of you." And so then we said, you know what? Leaving was probably causing more drama. So then we pulled back and asked our son if he could be brave and just go back and deal with it. I think we can be part of the solution to bringing the community back together.

**Yaniv:** Had we just called his dad, we could have just handled it way better. And that would have been the end. So we thought going through the TDSB's formal complaint process would be objective. This was not our intention. We feel bad for this kid. Actually, we feel bad for this kid and for the whole community to be labelled like this.

**The two Heil Hitler salutes? How do you feel about that? Is that different?**

**Teenager:** They did that on more than one occasion. And in December, in the schoolyard, when I was at recess when that kid's brother sent him the article saying, quote, "Israel doesn't exist."

**So what does this say to other families who have had similar in-**

**idents with kids about whether to make a complaint or to settle it?**

**Shirra:** I don't know. I think if the investigation had involved us more, I think that would have been better. I get the impression that the TDSB was on eggshells, they were afraid of a lawsuit.

**What comes next now? What do you want to have happen?**

**Teenager:** Well, I'm going back to school tomorrow. I probably just want everything to blow over. The kid that did it apologized. He feels super guilty. That's the most they can do.

**Yaniv:** Yeah, that's great. This was not this kid's intention, right? It's been blown out of proportion. This was not the response that we wanted.

**But the question of the Heil Hitler that's still pending?**

**Teenager:** I think we're just going to leave that because... too much negative attention. I don't know. ■

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## Ophira Calof is a Jewish performer making space for disabled creatives in Canadian show business

/ **Ellin Bessner**

When she was in Grade 11, Ophira Calof was nominated for that city's version of the Tony Awards, as best lead actress in a high school musical. She didn't win for starring as an unconventional Princess Winnifred in the play *Once Upon a Mattress*, but the nod was a big deal at the time.

Now, at age 28, she remembers it as one of the early highlights of a career that has seen the Jewish disability advocate from Ottawa earn a role on the CBC comedy series *TallBoyz*, along with performances at Second City, Buddies in Bad Times, and the Toronto Fringe Festival.

"It was very exciting. It was my teenage 'heartbreak, must persevere,'" Calof said of the 2010 ceremony at the National Arts Centre.

These days, she's working to make the Canadian entertainment industry more inclusive of artists and writers with disabilities through the hashtag #CripTheScript, a term Calof says is no longer considered offensive by the disabled community.

"The idea is sort of taking that word and saying like, 'Yeah, no, disability isn't a bad thing.' We do do things a little bit differently. People's bodies and minds work in different ways, and sometimes that way is very much not in line with the way that most of society works. And that's okay."

### **Snow White and Peter Dinklage controversy**

The issue of disability in the entertainment industry came to the

forefront recently when Peter Dinklage, who starred as Tyrion Lannister in *Game of Thrones*, slammed the Walt Disney Company over a coming live-action film of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

While the producers wanted to hire actors who were Little Persons, critical voices led by Dinklage felt the characters were going to be portrayed with negative stereotypes.

In turn, potential applicants for the roles felt they would no longer be able to get their big break in a way Dinklage once did.

“Ideally, if there were just a lot more roles out there that weren’t built off of stereotypes, then there wouldn’t be this tension, right? People would be able to have thriving careers and feel like the community was well represented,” Calof said.

There have been breakthroughs recently, in American shows such as *Special* on Netflix—starring Ryan O’Connell, who has cerebral palsy—and on Broadway, where actor Ali Striker, who was paralyzed in a car accident and uses a wheelchair, won a Tony. But it remains rare to find actual actors who are disabled on stage and screen and rarer still for Canada. (The late Canadian actor Munya Yassir played a character in a wheelchair on *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, and lived with neurofibromatosis in real life.)

While advertising agencies and others in show business have consciously ramped up the opportunities for people who are visible minorities, Calof says the disabled community has yet to be invited to the table.

“I act and I write and sometimes I come in as a story consultant to people creating stories that have to do with disability,” she explained. “And for some reason, there is very much this idea that disability is different and that disabled people aren’t necessarily equipped to act at the scale that non-disabled people are.”

### **Barriers to accessing the industry**

Calof wears a neck brace and, since 2015, has used a wheelchair to get around in Toronto, where she also works as a curator and programmer for film projects, including with the Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre.

What really frustrates Calof is when able-bodied actors get cast in the roles of disabled characters, such as *Forrest Gump*, *The Good Doctor*, and *The Big Bang Theory*. Those characters were persons who lived with autism.

“More recently, the community has come forward and said, like, ‘Hey, we are also interested in telling stories and acting and also putting a narrative forward that’s maybe a bit more authentic to what the actual experience of being disabled is, as opposed to someone else’s assumption or idea. But there’s a lot of pushback, a lot of tension,” Calof said.

What does it look like to navigate—literally—through the barriers to apply for an audition?

“I sent an email to the casting agency double-checking if the room that I’m supposed to go to is accessible. And I find out that there’s no elevator. So in that specific case, I can’t even get into the room to audition, never mind the idea of what the experience would be like if I was cast, or what the experience on set would be.”

### **Jewish Disability, Awareness, Acceptance and Inclusion Month**

On Monday, Feb. 7, Calof was the keynote speaker at her home-

town’s Kehillat Beth Israel congregation, as part of Jewish Disability, Awareness, Acceptance and Inclusion Month (JDAAIM). The month-long initiative is into its 14th year. It is organized by Jewish federations around North America to spotlight the tens of thousands of people in the community who live with disability.

She welcomed the opportunity to share her journey, but has mixed feelings about the concept.

“It’s great to have a specific space in time where there’s a spotlight and these conversations happen, and it’s hopeful. But also, I’m disabled 365 days of the year.”

While older generations of Jewish families may have considered having a disabled child as a *shanda*, the Yiddish word for something to be ashamed of, Calof instead sometimes spells the word disabled with a capital “D” on their website.

“So ultimately, not to say that my experience with disability is all butterflies, roses and rainbows, there’s a lot of frustration, but I am ultimately proud to be part of the disability community, and so sometimes I capitalize the D to kind of remind myself of that.”

### **Jewish misconceptions**

It wasn’t always so, especially while Calof was trying to participate in the Jewish community’s religious and cultural ceremonies in the early days of her condition. At times, she used a walker or a cane. But not always.

“Before I had a wheelchair and would go about in the community, I would feel so embarrassed if I was at shul and the Ark opened and everyone was standing and I couldn’t stand, but nobody knew why I couldn’t stand,” Calof recalled. “And I sort of feel that sense that I was being disrespectful, and... we don’t necessarily always know what’s going on.”

Calof would like the Jewish community to be mindful of how differently they approach the issue of a person’s illness, compared to how long-term chronic conditions are viewed.

“Someone is hospitalized, or something happens, and the casseroles start piling up on the front door, and the community really comes out and supports, and we have *Mi SheBerachs*,” she said, with a reference to the Hebrew prayer for the sick.

It was less clear how people with permanent physical problems could find a place to both receive help but also play an active role in the Jewish community.

“There wasn’t necessarily a mechanism within the community to hold space for that.”

### **What’s next?**

The next few months will be very busy for Calof. She’s putting the program together for the ReelAbilities Film Festival in Toronto, currently scheduled as a virtual event in May, through the Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre.

The CBC has also hired her to weed through the applications for a brand new access fund for creative screenwriters and documentary filmmakers who are disabled. Calof has been tasked to help pick the winning candidates.

“There are so many stories to tell, so many incredibly talented storytellers who just need to be given the space to tell the stories on their own terms.” ■

**Ellin Bessner is chief correspondent of *The C/JN Daily*.**

# The effort to solve a century-old Winnipeg murder mystery is a personal one for American author Wayne Hoffman

/ John Longhurst

In July 1937, while crossing the Atlantic Ocean on the Cunard-White Star liner *Alaunia*, Maurice Constant, a former student at the University of Toronto, wrote a letter to Helen Dunsay, a woman he had met while working at a Hashomer Hatzair Zionist youth camp in upstate New York, with an elaborate plan.

It's a mystery nearly 110 years in the making: Who murdered Winnipegger Sarah Feinstein? Finding an answer to that question occupied over a decade of Wayne Hoffman's life.

Hoffman, the executive editor of *Tablet* and a resident of New York City, is the great-great-grandson of Feinstein, who was murdered in 1913. The killer was never found.

The story Hoffman's mother told of the killing, and that she passed down to the family, was that Feinstein was shot by a sniper while sitting on her front porch. But was that the case? Hoffman decided to find out.

"I never believed it," he said. "It didn't make any sense."

For years, he kept his skepticism from his mother. But when she was diagnosed with dementia in 2010, he decided it was time to record the stories of her life because she was the keeper of family memories, including her grandmother's murder.

When Hoffman said he was skeptical about her sniper story—that it was "malarkey," as he put it—his mother asked: "If that's not what happened, then what happened?"

As a journalist, Hoffman thought it might take a few weeks to find out. "I thought it wouldn't take long to set right," he said.

But a few weeks turned into a decade of research before it became the book *The End of Her: Racing Against Alzheimer's to Solve a Murder*.

Along the way Hoffman made two visits to Winnipeg, in 2013 and 2017, and found 20 long-lost relatives in Canada and other countries. "I discovered a family history I never knew."

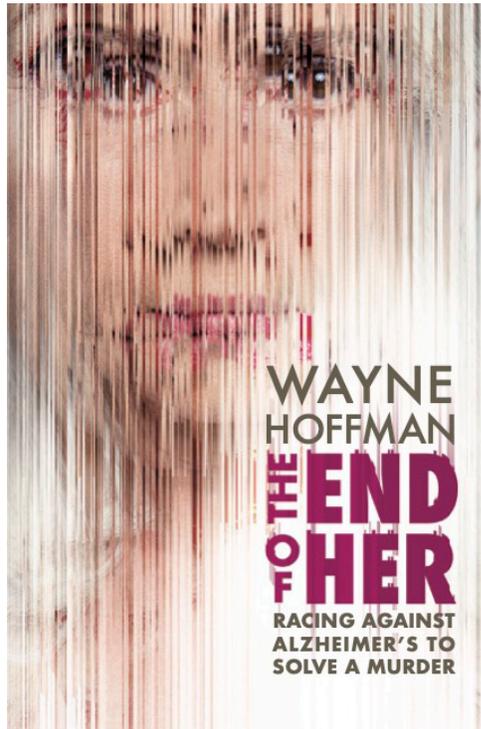
On his first trip to Winnipeg, Hoffman came to see the places in the city's north end where his family had lived. The second time, he came to visit relatives and hear their stories.

"At the time, I didn't know it would be a book," he said. "But things kept growing."

Prior to those visits, he had never visited Winnipeg before, or thought about it at all.

"I went from never thinking about the city at all to thinking about it all the time for a decade."

As for the mystery itself, Hoffman is "99.9 percent sure" who did it—but you have to buy the book to find out.



Beyond the murder itself, the book is also about Jewish life in Winnipeg at the turn of the last century. "It's also a history of Jews in Winnipeg, and what it was like to be an immigrant in North America back then," he said.

This includes the way newspapers and police regarded Jews. "Stereotypes about Jews were rampant," he said, including how Jews were seen as "overly excitable, highly superstitious, and who shared rumours filled with nonsense."

It's within this context that the murder of his great-great-grandmother plays out in the book.

"My family story ties in with the story of Jewish life in Winnipeg back then," he said, adding it shows how life as an immigrant was "much grittier" than the typical story of upward mobility and success of newcomers.

Unfortunately, by the time Hoffman completed his research, his mother's dementia had developed to the point she could no longer communicate or understand what he was saying.

"I hoped to do it quickly for her, to answer the question," he said. "I had no idea how long it would take." ■

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