

The Canadian Jewish News



THE BAT MITZVAH TURNS 100

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MIRIAM LIEFF
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NAOMI HOCHMAN
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A speech by Irwin Cotler on Holocaust Remembrance Day provoked charges of anti-Palestinian racism and antisemitism at the University of Toronto's Temerty Faculty of Medicine

/ Lila Sarick

A speech by Irwin Cotler to the University of Toronto's Temerty Faculty of Medicine on Holocaust Remembrance Day has spurred angry recriminations and two open letters to the acting dean of the medical school.

Cotler, Canada's Special Envoy on Preserving Holocaust Remembrance and Combatting Antisemitism, was invited by the medical school's Office of Diversity and Inclusion to discuss "Contemporary Antisemitism" on Jan. 26.

A letter to Acting Dean Patricia Houston, signed by 45 faculty members, charged that the event "reinforced anti-Palestinian racism in a way that is consistent with a broader pattern of silencing and erasure of Palestinian voices."

The event also undermined the university's Anti-Semitism Working Group, which recently released a report recommending, among other things, that UofT not adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism, the letter stated. All of the report's recommendations were accepted by the university.

Students and faculty who speak up in support of "Palestinian life and liberation" face harassment and "calls into the office" to discuss their personal social media presence, the letter writers state and they ask the medical school to confront the rise of anti-Palestinian racism on campus.

Meanwhile, a letter signed by over 300 Jewish faculty members disputes these charges, arguing the letter-writers have engaged in "falsehoods, twisted logic and antisemitic rhetoric."

Dr. Frank Sommers, co-founder of Doctors Against Racism and Anti-Semitism (DARA), who spearheaded the letter to the dean said in an interview with The CJN that "none of what professor Irwin (Cotler) said consists of anti-Palestinian racism, so they're twisting the truth."

"Their attack was not only on Professor Cotler. It was an attack on Jewish faculty members and the Jewish community," Sommers wrote in a cover letter to the dean.

Cotler's discussion of the IHRA definition of antisemitism was within university policy which has not banned teaching about or discussion of the definition, even though UofT has not adopt-

ed it, the letter from the Jewish faculty members states.

Portraying Cotler's defence of Jews as "anti-Palestinian racism" perpetuates "an antisemitic tradition of accusing Jews who defend themselves as erasing the voices and suppressing the lives of others," the letter continues.

"Their letter is an example of the very antisemitism that Mr. Cotler dismantled in his presentation."

Sommers says he has yet to receive a response from the dean's office to the letter, which was submitted March 7, but he anticipates he will.

"The dean and the faculty of medicine will not ignore over 300 Jewish faculty members, many of whom are quite senior," he said. "We anticipate there will be a backlash from them (the critics of Cotler's speech) as well."

He hopes the letter and the experience of the 300 signatories will spur the faculty of medicine to redouble its efforts to educate students about antisemitism.

"I believe the faculty will become more aware there is a widespread dissatisfaction with the state of affairs with respect to fighting antisemitism in the university and in the faculty of medicine," Sommers said.

Antisemitic behaviours have been increasing on campus and in teaching hospitals, but have been largely ignored or white-washed, he said.

"In my 50 years of association with the faculty of medicine and the University of Toronto I have not seen this level of anti-Jewish hatred that has manifested in the recent past." ■

Lila Sarick is news editor of The CJN.

Montreal rabbis travel to the Ukrainian border to bear witness to immense human tragedy and tremendous generosity

/ Janice Arnold

Two Montreal rabbis who spent 48 hours in Poland near the Ukrainian border said they are shaken by the human suffering they had seen, but also heartened by the massive outpouring of generosity being shown by the Polish people to the hundreds of thousands of desperate people pouring into their country.

Speaking by video call from the Warsaw airport before their flight home, Rabbis Reuben Poupko of Congregation Beth Israel Beth Aaron and Mark Fishman of Congregation Beth Tikvah said the work of Israeli and Jewish aid organizations helping Ukrainian refugees, regardless of who they are, should give all Jews immense pride and spur them to do their part.

The sight of visibly Israeli and Jewish humanitarian efforts, dis-

pensed to all in need, in lands where Jews experienced a long history of persecution and murder moved them to their very core, said the rabbis, who were in Poland from March 7 to 9.

Rabbi Poupko spoke of the former rabbinical seminary in Lublin that has been turned into a refugee centre by the State of Israel with the participation of Magen David Adom and Hatzolah. From there, constantly replenished drugs and medical supplies are being distributed.

“Every morning, despite the risk, a truck is loaded up and driven across the border into Ukraine to deliver them,” he said. “The heroism and compassion displayed is remarkable; every Jew should be proud.”

Rabbi Fishman was struck by the fact that a tent flying the Israeli flag is the first place where refugees, mostly women and children, are greeted. Many arrive on foot, bringing only what they can carry in backpacks, “their eyes full of fear and hopelessness.”

Rabbi Poupko became emotional recalling that only 80 years ago this region, the scene of “the worst chapter in Jewish history, has been transformed to one where our people are now in a position to be givers... We learned from the past and turned that into kindness and goodness.”

Rabbi Poupko’s mother was born in Ukraine, where his grandfather was a rabbi. The family fled in the 1920s after relatives were killed in a pogrom.

Rabbi Fishman added, “It is an incredible irony that the Jewish people who have suffered so much persecution in Ukraine and Poland are at the forefront of assistance.”

Rabbi Adam Scheier of Congregation Shaar Hashomayim was also on this brief mission and brought his teenaged daughter. They are staying on a few more days. Having ancestors who were themselves refugees from what is now Ukraine and who were driven out by antisemitism has made this personal too.

“To see history repeating itself, to see people so vulnerable, scared and in need of assistance from others, that’s certainly what has drawn me to this place,” he has said.

The three rabbis decided on their own initiative to travel to Poland. They hurriedly collected winter clothing, food and toys from their congregants and the wider community, which they distributed along with cash while there.

Their first stop was a refugee centre in Warsaw before making the five-hour journey to the border.

The rabbis are humble about what they could accomplish. “This will not make even a dent,” said Rabbi Fishman, but Judaism teaches that even to make a slight difference to a single human being is regarded as saving the entire world.

The point was to bear witness to this tragic historical moment and to bring back the message that everyone should do what they can, no matter how modest, including donating to the Jewish federations’ emergency fund for Ukraine, which will benefit the approximately 200,000 Jews living there.

Jews should also contribute to general relief, urged Rabbi Poupko, who says the Ukrainians of today are far different from those of the past.

The Canadian government, and the West as a whole, must make even greater efforts especially to receive refugees, something they expressed in a meeting with Canada’s ambassador to Poland, Leslie Scanlon.

Rabbi Poupko has been outspoken in his denunciation of

Russia’s invasion and particularly of President Vladimir Putin whom he calls a “murderer.” The Russian invasion is not only a brutal assault on the Ukrainian people, but “a wake-up call to the world.”

“The Poles can’t handle this alone, the entire Western world has to step up.”

Montreal’s Federation CJA has raised close to \$500,000 from more than a thousand donors toward the worldwide goal of US \$20 million for the relief of Jews in Ukraine and neighbouring countries, CEO Yair Szlak reported on March 8.

He said preparations are also being made for the resettlement of any Ukrainian Jewish refugees who wish to come to Montreal. At this point, it is unknown how many that might be.

Other efforts in Montreal are on a smaller scale. Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, for example, is selling hamantashen with all proceeds going to a Ukrainian relief fund set up by the World Union for Progressive Judaism, and is also auctioning a painting by Ukrainian-Jewish artist Alex Levin donated by Paul Yelle. Proceeds from the auction will go to Levin’s designated charity, Open Your Heart to Ukraine. ■

Montreal’s Jewish Public Library went ahead with a screening of a film financed by Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich

/ Janice Arnold

Montreal’s Jewish Public Library (JPL) screened a film that was financially backed by Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich who is now sanctioned by Canada, despite some critics saying the event should be cancelled.

JPL executive director Michael Crelinsten confirmed that the online screening of *Song Searcher: The Times and Toils of Moyshe Beregovsky* was to take place as planned on March 15, in association with KlezKanada, the Montreal Holocaust Museum (MHM), Montreal Workers’ Circle and Toronto Workmen’s Circle.

“We have had extensive discussions, given the current context, and have come to the conclusion, as described in (an earlier) statement, to proceed with the screening. The statement is posted on various online sites and will be read prior to the screening itself,” Crelinsten told The CJN on March 11.

On March 9, the day before Canada announced it was immediately imposing sanctions on Abramovich, the Russian Jewish billionaire said to be a longtime confidante of President Vladimir Putin, the JPL and KlezKanada issued a statement defending its decision to present *Song Searcher*, a recent documentary by Elena Yakovich. The film’s website states up front that it is produced

by VIKO TV “in association with Roman Abramovich.” VIKO TV is the company of executive producer Victorina Petrossiants.

The joint statement reads in part: “In recent days it has come to our attention that the film’s primary financial sponsor is Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich. His name appears prominently at the start and end of the film, and is featured on some of the film’s promotional materials.

“According to many, Abramovich is one of Vladimir Putin’s closest associates, named by imprisoned Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny as ‘one of the key enablers and beneficiaries of Russian kleptocracy.’

“At the same time, Abramovich has used his enormous wealth to support a variety of worthwhile endeavours with some of the world’s most renowned Jewish institutions and in support of a range of Jewish cultural projects; this film is one small example of that activity.

“While we recognize that much good has come from Abramovich’s philanthropic efforts, in good conscience, we feel we must acknowledge that the source of his largesse is fundamentally compromised. Especially in light of the current Russian invasion of Ukraine, in no uncertain terms we wish to distance ourselves from Abramovich and condemn his activities that enable and support Putin’s regime.”

The organizations decided that *Song Searcher*, whose screening was scheduled before the Russian invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, is an “all too timely story of Jewish cultural survival in Ukraine under Stalinism and before, during and after the Second World War.”

Moyshe Beregovsky (1892-1961) was an ethnomusicologist, who from the 1920s until his exile by the Stalinist regime in 1950, travelled throughout Ukraine to record traditional Jewish music, rescuing a cultural heritage from annihilation.

Crelinsten concedes the JPL faced a difficult dilemma. “I am reminded of the observation that often, in the face of certain problems, there are no easy answers, only intelligent choices. Hopefully, we have found our way, reasonably, through this one.”

On March 11, KlezKanada stated it is “standing in sadness and solidarity with all those affected by Russian’s invasion of Ukraine and with all those who protest the war and violence. Ukraine is the heartland of many cultures, a place where many languages and traditions have blossomed, mixed and struggled in close contact. Indeed, Yiddish language, culture, song and music have a complex and centuries-long presence in these lands.”

The MHM condemned the invasion early on, saying that Russia’s claims of “denazification” and “falsely accusing Ukrainian authorities of committing genocide is an insult to history.”

Abramovich is among five individuals whose economic activities in Canada were halted in response to Russian aggression. Ottawa’s action followed shortly on the United Kingdom’s sanctioning of Abramovich on March 10. The owner of England’s Chelsea Football Club, Abramovich holds a significant stake in the Canadian steel company Evraz.

Abramovich’s reputation has also been tarnished in Israel, where he holds citizenship and is a major philanthropist. Hours after the UK announcement, Yad Vashem said it was suspending ties with Abramovich, who the previous month pledged an “eight-figure” donation to its Holocaust remembrance work.

Canada’s antisemitism special envoy Irwin Cotler, founder of the Raoul Wallenberg Human Rights Centre, has charged that

Russia is committing war crimes and Putin should be brought before the International Criminal Court.

Meanwhile, Federation CJA, of which the JPL and MHM are agencies, reported on March 11 that \$650,000 had been raised for its Ukraine emergency relief fund, part of a North American \$20-million campaign by Jewish federations.

Locally, the federation is enhancing psycho-social support to those with connections to Ukraine. Its social service agency Ometz’s caseload includes 23 families who immigrated from Ukraine and 10 from Russia, and 61 whose birth country is Ukraine and 80 Russia. Most have been here less than five years.

The majority-Jewish City of Côte St. Luc started selling blue-and-yellow ribbons to benefit the federation and Canadian Red Cross relief efforts. It’s also collecting clothing, sleeping bags and first-aid supplies to be forwarded to St. Michael’s Ukrainian Catholic Church in Montreal. ■

Janice Arnold has been reporting for The CJN from Montreal since 1976.

From hamantashen to art shows, Canadians find creative ways to help Ukraine

/ Alex Rose

Michael Rubinfeld, who was born in Winnipeg but now lives in Krakow, Poland, where he runs a Jewish art gallery, got an urgent message from a colleague in Canada on Feb. 24, the day that Russia invaded Ukraine. The colleague knew a Ukrainian paramedic who was trying to flee the country and asked if Rubinfeld would be able to assist her once she got to Poland,

It took three days for the paramedic, her mother, and her cat to escape Ukraine; once they did, they moved into Rubinfeld’s flat in Krakow. However, that was only the beginning of the story. The paramedic’s husband had remained in Ukraine to fight, so she immediately leapt into action as soon as she arrived in Krakow.

“She started collecting supplies for the resistance to help people fighting in Ukraine. And she asked if she could use our home as a home base to collect and sort the supplies, and then transfer them from my home into Ukraine,” Rubinfeld said. “She was able to put together a series of volunteers. And so, basically, we have people showing up with boxes, and a couple of days later somebody comes and picks them up, puts them into some sort of vehicle and brings them into Ukraine.”

Rubinfeld is also supporting the Ukrainian cause in other ways. He runs a Jewish art and activism NGO called FestivALT that has a gallery space in the former Krakow ghetto. They are preparing to host an exhibition of work from Ukrainian art-

ists and use it as an opportunity to raise money in support of Ukraine.

“To be running a Jewish organization in the ghetto, two doors down from a former Jewish fighters group, and here we are working to support fighters in Ukraine... I think there’s an interesting irony in the narrative,” Rubinfeld said. “The irony of being a Jewish person running a Jewish organization in a country where my people were victims of genocide, now doing what we can to support people in a country right next door to us who are experiencing what is arguably also genocide.”

Rubinfeld said in spite of how terrible the situation in Ukraine is, he is at least somewhat glad to be in a position where he can make a difference.

It’s more difficult for Canadians living here to help the Ukrainian effort in a personal way, but some people have found creative and generous solutions.

Ben Mogil of Toronto and his family rented an Airbnb in Ukraine as a way to quickly transfer funds to families in need. They found owners who had only one or two properties and had ratings from before the war started, in order to avoid large companies and fraudulent accounts.

“We chose two different cities (Kyiv and Odessa) and showed our children on a map where these cities were located so that they were involved in the project. We sent a note, letting the owners know we weren’t planning on staying the booked nights but wanted to support them and let them know we were thinking of them. One of them immediately wrote back thanking us,” Mogil wrote over email. “They wrote back that they were safe and to safeguard our families too.”

Rachel Lissner, who lives in downtown Toronto, also wanted to find a way to help. Over the last few years, she has run a number of successful community fundraisers. In 2020, when the pandemic first started, she raised thousands of dollars for a local women’s organization by ordering bagels from Montreal.

Last year, for the first Purim in the pandemic, she led a hamantashen-baking operation that raised over \$1,500 for local Black women’s organizations.

This year, when she heard the news coming from Ukraine, running another hamantashen fundraiser for Purim was “a no-brainer,” she said. She will be donating the proceeds to two organizations: the Ukraine Humanitarian Appeal and an initiative to support Ukrainian media.

The first time Lissner did a hamantashen fundraiser, she had neighbours helping out who had never even heard of Purim before. But, she says, that’s part of the magic of the holiday.

“You don’t need to be Jewish to like hamantashen, and you don’t need to be Jewish to feel a calling to support people who are fighting or fleeing a war. I really love that this is a Jewish tradition that has turned into a neighbourhood effort,” she said.

“Especially thinking about the story of Purim, it means a lot to be able to support people in a diaspora who are providing aid to their loved ones facing persecution in their homeland.” ■

Alex Rose is a Toronto-based reporter for The CJN.

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Obituary: The CJN’s reporter Steve Arnold is remembered as a ‘kind, knowledgeable, friendly and respectful’ journalist

/ Ron Csillag

Steve Arnold, a workhorse freelance reporter for The Canadian Jewish News—both in its former print incarnation and current digital state—died on Feb. 27 after succumbing to brain damage from a fall a week earlier. He was 67.

Based in St. Catharines, Ont., Arnold began writing for The CJN in 2018, covering the growing Jewish population in and around Hamilton. When the weekly newspaper folded in 2020, he moved seamlessly to the *Canadian Jewish Record*, which published online from May 2020 until The CJN’s return in January 2021.

The Record was volunteer-driven, and Arnold never turned down work even though it was unpaid. Between the two publications, he wrote more than 160 stories.

“He was the love of my life and the most generous, gentle, loving man a wife could ever ask for,” his wife Pam Ceci wrote in a Facebook post announcing Arnold’s death. “He was always ready to help anyone. He treated me like a princess.”

He was remembered as the opposite of the stereotypically prickly and irascible reporter. A bearish man, he was gentle and even soft-spoken but never shied from asking tough questions.

Arnold’s “deep interest in and devotion to Jewish life across Canada—in all its facets—shone through in his work for The CJN,” said Yoni Goldstein, the CEO and editor-in-chief. “His journalistic contributions in the last year alone were a significant part of the effort to revive The CJN. Steve will be greatly missed by the entire CJN family. Thankfully, we have his words to remember him fondly by.”

Among the stories Arnold covered for the *Canadian Jewish Record* and The CJN was the drawn-out saga of the University of Toronto law school’s offer, later withdrawn, of a teaching job to scholar Valentina Azarova, whose pro-Palestinian leanings raised red flags for Jewish advocacy groups. Arnold dubbed the protracted affair, which included allegations of interference in the hiring process by a Jewish judge, “the story that would not die”—until it did when Azarova finally rejected the university’s reconsidered offer.

He also covered outbreaks of COVID at Shalom Village, Hamilton’s Jewish retirement home, and controversies surrounding neo-Nazi and white supremacist members of the Canadian Armed Forces.

Among Arnold’s strengths were writing about local matters that had historical significance. One was the naming of a street in Ajax, Ont. after a Nazi-era naval captain, and, in a similar vein, the ongoing debate over Swastika Lane in Puslinch, Ont.

Stephen Arnold was born in Hamilton, Ont. on March 31, 1954,

the eldest of six children. “It was in his mind to be a reporter right from high school,” his wife recalled. He wrote for several small newspapers in the region, but “his aim was to get to the *Hamilton Spectator*,” which he finally joined in 1988.

He was a general assignment reporter and later a business writer. Among his beats was the local steel company, Stelco, one of Hamilton’s largest employers.

Arnold will be remembered by colleagues at the Spec “as kind, knowledgeable, friendly and respectful,” the paper’s managing editor, Howard Elliott, told The CJN.

He had great knowledge and understanding of the city’s vital steel sector, Elliott added. “I recall as managing editor often seeking his advice and interpretation concerning the industry. If you wanted a well-rounded, honest opinion, Steve was a go-to source.”

Arnold was also chair of the union local and helped negotiate several collective agreements. Said Elliott: “That is, by nature, an adversarial process, but regardless of the heat of the moment, Steve worked hard to remain calm and respectful, and that influence rubbed off on everyone around the bargaining table.

“That same even-keeled nature was a hallmark of Steve’s newsroom work,” Elliott went on.

“Editors recall him as being approachable, always willing to help and pitch in whether with getting work done or supporting colleagues. To young reporters, he became a mentor figure, and many benefited from his generous spirit.

“In my nearly 40 years in the business, I rarely ran across someone with so many positive qualities. Journalism needs more people like Steve, and his loss is felt profoundly,” Elliott said.

Arnold began undergraduate work at McMaster University in 1978 and returned as a mature student to earn a BA in history and political science in 2000. He then completed a master’s degree in public policy analysis at the University of Guelph in 2003.

Arnold took a buyout from the *Spectator* in 2016 and moved to St. Catharines, where, the following year, he married his second wife, a Catholic.

“He was supportive of me and I was supportive of him,” said Pam Ceci. “He came to mass with me and I went to synagogue with him every week.” The synagogue was Hamilton’s Temple Anshe Shalom, where Arnold had served on the board of directors for a time and attended Torah study every Saturday morning.

Arnold is survived by his wife, Pam Ceci; stepchildren Bradley McCumber and Brianne Wheaton; three grandchildren; and siblings Sandra, Terri, Michael, and Cindy. His brother, Allan, predeceased him. ■

Ron Csillag has written obituaries and more for The CJN since 1984.

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Meet a few Canadian women celebrating the 100th anniversary of the bat mitzvah

/ Ellin Bessner

When she’s called to the Torah as part of her bat mitzvah, not only will Naomi Hochman of Winnipeg become the first girl in her family to have the traditional coming-of-age ceremony, she’ll also be marking the 100th anniversary of North America’s first one ever.

March 18, 1922, was when the daughter of Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan read from a printed copy of the Torah in the New York City synagogue run by her father, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism. The event marked a turning point for women’s participation in religious life.

But it took until 1949 for the first girl in Canada to follow suit.

And much like Judith Kaplan’s initial honour, Miriam Lief’s milestone was due to the forward thinking of her father—because she didn’t even know what a bat mitzvah was.

Her father, the late Mr. Justice Abraham Lief, was president of the Agudath Israel Synagogue in Ottawa. When the Conservative congregation dedicated its new west-end premises, Miriam was on the cusp of age 14.

And on Feb. 25, 1949, she led Friday night services and delivered a sermon.

“I was quite well-educated. I wasn’t in any way afraid of what I was going to do,” says Lief, who’s now 86. “My father wanted me to do it for his synagogue, which was very important to him, and I did it.”

But while she was at the top of her class in Jewish afternoon school, Lief was still uneasy about what her friends would think as she took her place on the bimah to usher in the Sabbath.

“When all the kids were sitting in the back row looking at me in my long white dress, I was totally embarrassed. I thought they were looking at me like I was some queer person doing this,” she says.

“But after the reception, they told me how amazing they thought that the whole thing was. And then I felt a lot better!”

Lief’s younger sister, Lois, would’ve been the second girl to have a bat mitzvah in the city, in 1950, but her father decided to let someone else go first—so as not to discourage other girls and their families.

As a result, Lois Lief, now 84, had to wait until she was nearly 14. (She remembers that the second girl was Dorothy Wexler, now Dorothy Tonchin.)

“I think my father felt that if it was going to be Miriam and then me, it might be the two Lief sisters and over and out. And he really wanted to establish this as a feature of Agudath Israel,” says Lois, a longtime resident of Montreal.

Her ceremony was also held on a Friday night, in April 1951 at the shul, which has since amalgamated into Kehillat Beth Israel. Saturday morning events were out of the question for girls in the synagogue at the time.

By the early 1950s, a few more Canadian girls were able to break the barrier to wider participation in services. Elaine Shapiro (Glassman) had a Saturday morning service in Toronto at Goel Tzedec—a Conservative congregation that was later amalgamated into Beth Tzedec.

Judy Feld Carr, the Canadian human rights activist, recalls her own

decidedly groundbreaking bat mitzvah in Sudbury on Jan. 12, 1952.

She read from the Torah, recited the blessings, and chanted the haftarah. Plus, she led the entire service at the Shaar Hashomayim Congregation, as the Orthodox synagogue became Conservative on that day.

Rabbi William Rosenthal, a Shoah survivor, apparently needed to be persuaded about the idea—as did some members of the congregation. But the bat mitzvah girl's father, Jack Leve, was very persuasive.

And, around the same time, Donnie (Becker) Frank was led to believe that she was the first Canadian girl to have one on a Saturday morning.

Her father was Rabbi Lavy Becker, the founder of Dorshei Emet, the Reconstructionist congregation in Montreal. Frank's bat mitzvah was held at the town hall in the suburb of the Town of Mount Royal.

Rabbi Becker taught her the haftarah, although Frank's brother read the blessings before and after, which she took as a sign that her father only wanted to go so far without rocking the boat.

"He wasn't rocking the boat so much that we all fell out of it," she says.

Frank still finds it ironic that her service was held in a part of the city where Jewish people couldn't own property.

"And here we were having what we thought was Canada's first bat mitzvah."

Shirley Segev of Toronto never had a bat mitzvah, because she still can't bring herself to go through with it. But not for reasons you might think.

The daughter of Holocaust survivors, Segev was born after the war and raised in Romania, where her father was jailed for years by the Communist regime—accused of being a "Zionist enemy of the people".

While her father was in prison, her mother spent long stretches of time away from home, lobbying government officials for his release. Segev had to look after her two younger siblings, run the household and keep the family going. The day she turned 12, she received a letter addressed to her from Israel.

Although she was sure it contained the long-awaited news that her family was granted permission to immigrate to Israel, the letter was from an aunt. She congratulated her niece on becoming bat mitzvah, and promised a gift of a wristwatch, which the girl could collect when and if the family made it out of Romania.

Segev burst into tears.

In an excerpt from an unpublished memoir, Segev describes her despair on receiving that letter that day in 1960.

"I stared at it in disbelief. A watch! Did she know that this very morning I had to schlep my crying seven-year-old sister to school? That after school I had to go to order wood for heating the home in preparation for winter, [and get] enough potatoes, cabbages and other provisions for the cellar to last till spring? That on my way home I found my nine year old brother again playing in the streets, in danger of being overrun by a car? How at night, I kept dreaming of my mother and father, out there in distress?"

Later that year, her father was freed, and the family left for Israel.

After moving to Toronto in 1974, Segev joined Congregation Darchei Noam, a Reconstructionist congregation, where she learned to read from the Torah and chant haftarahs. She also taught others, and was a lay leader for services. She even held the position of synagogue president. More than once, she was asked to join an adult bat mitzvah group.

"I imagined it many, many times," Segev admits. But she al-

ways said no.

"I was afraid that up there, while doing the blessing, or chanting, I would start to cry without being able to stop, remembering how lost I felt that day. And that's why I was, and still am, afraid to have a bat mitzvah."

Naomi Hochman is about to turn 13. Her bat mitzvah is scheduled for March 19, 2022. But the journey to get there wasn't smooth sailing.

Her family was supposed to go to Israel for the ceremony last year, but that trip had to be cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Her in-person lessons with Rabbi Anibal Mass were also replaced with studying via Zoom.

And while Manitoba's mask mandate is newly lifted, with capacity limits having been loosened for large gatherings, the Hochmans couldn't predict where things would be at when they sent invitations to attend.

But with Congregation Shaare Zedec still being careful, party guests may still be required to follow COVID-safe guidelines.

"Our invitations said 'Dancing, hopefully!' for the evening party," Naomi's mother Marisa Hochman says, with a laugh.

For the Grade 8 student at Winnipeg's Gray Academy, getting to have a bat mitzvah was something she took for granted. Most of the girls in her class are having one. Both her brothers had bar mitzvahs and that raised her anticipation.

When interviewed for The CJA Daily podcast, Naomi was still working on her speech, but she intends to talk about both the weekly Torah portion, Tzav, and the significance of the accompanying haftarah.

But the significance of falling on the centennial of the bat mitzvah itself will also be a big part of her thoughts.

"It really shows how much we've grown as a society."

Miriam Lief's bat mitzvah in 1949 wasn't the last time she would lead services or put her Jewish education to use. She and her sister Lois have led full Jewish lives. They still attend services regularly, and volunteer to read from the Torah or chant haftarahs at their respective synagogues in Canada and Florida. Last year, Lois did a haftarah in honour of their father's *yahrzeit*, via Zoom.

The sisters credit his guidance with paving the way for generations of Canadian women to follow in their footsteps—just as their father didn't hesitate to take them to watch the Ottawa Rough Riders.

But, unlike football games, he knew that women should be easily included in all facets of a synagogue.

Miriam gave Naomi a small bit of advice ahead of her big day: "Speak slowly!"

"Most kids sound like they're just trying to get their words over and done with."

But her dad assures the Lieffs that there's nothing to worry about.

"Naomi is a fantastic debater," says Dave Hochman. "So she's got her cadence down. We know she's going to knock it out of the park."

The Lief sisters will find out for themselves, even if they're still riding out the last few days of winter in Florida.

Naomi and her family were so thrilled to meet them for the podcast, Lois and Miriam were invited as virtual attendees, to help celebrate the bat mitzvah's special place in our ongoing history. ■

Ellin Bessner is chief correspondent of *The CJA Daily*. Miriam Lief is her aunt—which also means Lois Lief is her mother.



Léa Roback, an ardent Montreal unionist and feminist, inspired Ariela Freedman's new novel

/ Janice Arnold

Ariela Freedman feels a little sheepish that she was in her 40s before she heard of Léa Roback, the indefatigable fighter for the rights of workers and women in Quebec in the 1930s and '40s.

She's atoning for that oversight by making Roback the heroine of her new historical novel *Léa* (Linda Leith Publishing).

Growing up in a suburban, middle-class Jewish family, Freedman regrets she came so late to Roback and, what's more, the revolutionary social and political activism of many Jews in Montreal during that period.

"The Jewish Montreal I knew was kind of conservative, business-minded. The political causes they were involved in were Soviet Jewry and Israel," said Freedman, a professor of literature at Concordia University.

Roback (1903-2000) was instrumental in unionizing women in the garment industry, leading a massive strike in 1937. She also fought for women's suffrage, which was only achieved in Quebec in 1940.

A committed Communist until the late 1950s, she continued to battle for social justice of all kinds and peace, marching in the streets until her 90s.

Historical fiction is a departure for Freedman whose two previous novels, while not autobiographical, dealt with times and places with which she was familiar and were in the first person. *Arabic for Beginners* won the Jewish Public Library's J.I. Segal fiction prize in 2018 and *A Joy to be Hidden* was short-listed in 2020.

"It was a huge leap to write about a real person...a little intimidating because a lot is still not known about her," she said.

Freedman was introduced to Roback during a walking tour of the old Jewish district around St. Laurent Boulevard, before the pandemic. It led her to delve into the life of this woman

who defied the conventions of her time and community.

While Roback may be largely forgotten in the anglophone and Jewish worlds, she is memorialized as a fearless champion among francophone Québécoises.

"I was so fascinated when I learned about her; I was surprised I did not know such an inspirational woman," said Freedman. "I felt she was the heroine I needed and that a lot of people need right now I think."

Because Roback's life was so long and full, Freedman decided to end her narrative in 1945. Her nearly 300-page book offers a portrait of what made Roback who she was: how her convictions were formed and, more speculatively, her disenchantments.

Born in Montreal to Polish immigrant parents, her large family moved to the village of Beauport near Quebec City when she was a toddler. There she became fluent in French, while speaking Yiddish at home.

They returned to Montreal when she was a teenager and Roback began working in a dyeworks where she gained insight into the poor conditions of workers. She then embarked on an adventurous peripatetic life, travelling to New York and Europe, studying at the University of Grenoble and settling in Berlin. She spent time in the Soviet Union.

In Germany she witnessed rising fascism and joined the Communist party in 1929 after a May Day protest was violently put down by police. Roback returned to Montreal in 1932, joined the illegal Communist Party of Canada (CPC), and opened the first Marxist bookstore in the city, which served as a clandestine meeting place.

While the CPC was no longer unlawful in Canada after 1937, it remained effectively so in Quebec under the repressive Padlock Law.

Freedman found a wealth of material that Roback, who never married, entrusted to the Jewish Public Library archives, even a lock of her hair. She kept meticulous notebooks, but it seems was too busy to get around to writing a memoir.

All was open to researchers except the letters between her and Fred Rose, the first and only Communist elected to Parliament in 1943 in the largely Jewish riding of Cartier. Roback was a campaign organizer for Rose, who was later arrested on espionage charges.

Freedman is struck by how Roback bridged the linguistic and cultural gap between Jews and francophones that so marked the period, gaining the respect of French-speaking Catholic workers often from rural areas.

Léa opens with the scene of 5,000 striking young women in the streets, Roback in the lead, is shouting and singing as confused baton-wielding police look on.

Freedman attempted to get inside the restless mind of Roback who, despite her gradual disillusionment after the Stalin atrocities, never lost her idealism.

The cover of *Léa* is the mural paying tribute to Roback that was on a wall on St. Laurent until recently. After repeated vandalism—perhaps because of the Yiddish words on it—the city recently removed it.

Freedman said Roback's imperative to "do something" was a personal beacon during the darkest days of the pandemic. "I made chili for a homeless shelter, delivered for a food bank, started going to protests and marches." ■