

The Canadian Jewish News

ELLIS JACOB

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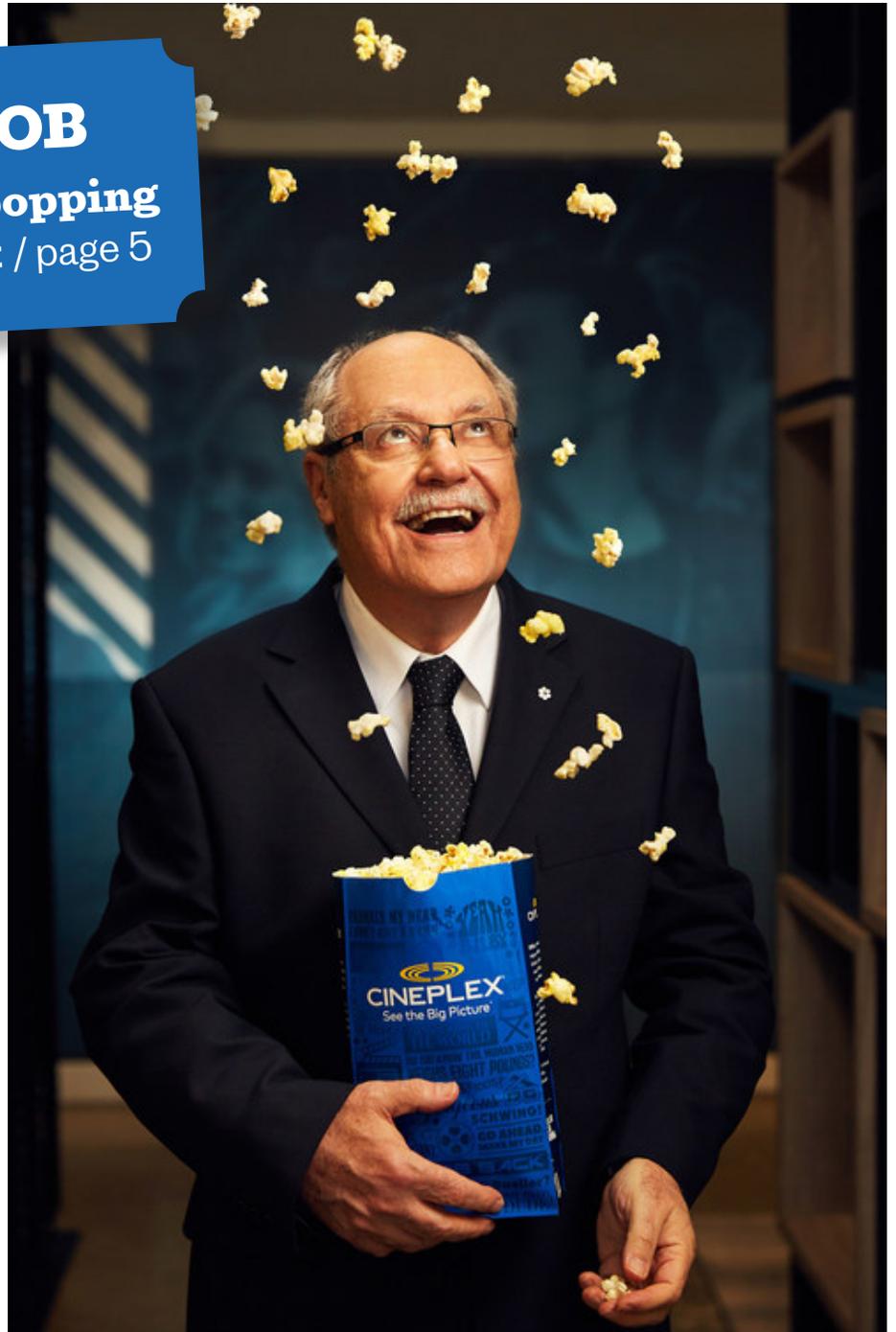
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CHARLOTTETOWN	8:43
MONTREAL	8:22
OTTAWA	8:30
TORONTO	8:39
WINNIPEG	9:14
CALGARY	9:27
VANCOUVER	8:55
DAWSON CITY	11:54

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Obituary: Max Eisen, 93, was an award-winning author who dedicated his life to Holocaust education

/ Lila Sarick

Max Eisen—a Holocaust survivor who wrote an award-winning memoir, who travelled across Canada speaking about his experiences in Auschwitz and was a witness at the trial of two former SS guards—died in Toronto on July 7. He was 93.

Eisen's memoir, *By Chance Alone: A Remarkable True Story of Courage and Survival at Auschwitz*, was shortlisted for the RBC Taylor Prize in 2017. The book won the 2019 edition of CBC's Canada Reads.

Eisen was born in Czechoslovakia to a large and well-off Orthodox family. When he was a teenager, they were deported to Auschwitz. He survived horrific conditions in several camps and a death march from Mathausen, Melk and Ebensee. He was liberated by the 761st Black Panther Battalion of the United States in May 1945. Only two cousins from his extended family of more than 60 people survived.

He came to Canada in 1949 as a displaced person and eventually started a successful manufacturing business. But he was best known for the passion he exuded while speaking to students, and in later years to law enforcement personnel, about his experiences in the Holocaust.

Eisen returned to Poland with the March of the Living 18 times, starting with the first one in 1996, until they were suspended due to COVID in 2020, said Eli Rubenstein, who was national director of March of the Living Canada for many years and wrote the afterword to Eisen's book.

"He had exceptional stamina and passion and eloquence. He had the ability to tell the story in a way that people could listen.... When he would tell a story, it was like you were right there with him, right there sitting next to him," Rubenstein recalled. "He was a just a natural-born teacher and educator and storyteller."

Eisen personally reached tens of thousands of people through his presentations and hundreds of thousands more through his book, Rubenstein said.

"Every time he spoke, it brought back the painful memories, and yet he considered it his life mission to educate and teach so it never happens again. He was an incredibly courageous person."

Eisen also often expressed gratitude for the people who had helped him survive. He cited the Polish doctor Tadeusz Orzeszko, who was working in the Auschwitz clinic and performed surgery, saving him from certain death after he was beaten by a guard. The doctor, who was a member of the Polish resistance, then allowed Eisen to be his assistant.

Five decades after the war, Eisen was also reunited with the soldier who liberated the camp and was able to express his thanks to Sgt. Johnnie Stevens of the Black Panthers Battalion. Eisen often said that had the soldiers arrived just a day or two later, he would not have survived, Rubenstein recalled.

For Eisen, talking about the Holocaust wasn't only a testimony about antisemitism and hate. He also impressed on his listeners how thankful he was to live in Canada and how easily democracy could be undermined, Rubenstein said.

He would often talk about how the Nazis invaded his family's home on Passover 1944, while they were singing about freedom.

"He would say, 'Cherish your democracy, because it can be gone just like that...' One moment he was a free human being, and the next moment he lost every human right."

The staff at the Neuberger Holocaust Education Centre, where Eisen was a regular speaker, were deeply saddened by the news that Eisen had died, executive director Dara Solomon said in an interview.

"He had such a warmth. He would pop into our offices and give you a hug and a kiss and sit and talk for a bit. He had such positive energy," Solomon said.

"He was so good with students from all different backgrounds and they just connected with him. His story was powerful, and the way he shared it, he was so articulate."

Although, Eisen had recently been unwell, the news of his death came as a shock, Solomon said. "When you were with him, you didn't feel you were with an elderly person—you felt you were with somebody so vivacious and young. We think of him in that way, that he would be here forever."

In 2015, Eisen and other survivors testified at the trial of former SS guard Oskar Groening, who was convicted of thousands of charges of being an accessory to murder. A year later, he testified again at the trial of Reinhold Hanning, who was also convicted.

Ric Esther Beinstock, who produced the film *The Accountant of Auschwitz* about the Groening trial, compared Eisen to Elie Wiesel in his ability to successfully bring his story of survival to the public.

"We felt lucky and honoured to have (Eisen) share his story and take part in our film. More importantly, he attended many screenings and answered audience questions in the Q&As following the film. His story had a profound impact on audiences of diverse backgrounds. He was a remarkable human being and the entire filmmaking team of *The Accountant of Auschwitz* mourns the loss of his important voice."

Eisen also participated in two legacy projects with the USC Shoah Foundation, including the extensive film needed for a hologram-type testimony and a documentary shot in Auschwitz with his son Ed.

In December 2021, Eisen was appointed to the Order of Canada for his commitment to Holocaust education.

He also received honorary doctorates from Trent University, Western University, the University of Saskatchewan and the Law Society of Ontario.

Tributes to Eisen came from across Jewish Canada upon hearing of his death.

"Max was a deeply thoughtful man who reflected on his unlikely survival against all odds during the Holocaust, using his

difficult experience to teach younger generations about the dangers of hate and intolerance,” the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center said in a statement.

“He taught people of all ages about the power of words, explaining the Holocaust did not begin with violence and murder, but with Nazi lies and myths. He felt strongly about the importance of sharing his message with young people, and he kept every letter written to him by students, which further motivated him to keep sharing his excruciating personal story. Those letters, again, showed how words matter.”

Adam Minsky, CEO of UJA Federation of Greater Toronto, said in a statement, “His leadership in preserving the memory of the Shoah and bringing its lessons to life for the current generation was unparalleled. For so many within our community and throughout Canadian society, meeting Max and hearing his experiences would have a personal impact that lasts a lifetime.

“The positive effect he had on the world around him was simply incalculable and will be felt for many years to come. He did it all with wisdom, kindness, warmth and love for community and humanity alike.”

“Universally recognized as a kind, loving person with enormous generosity of spirit, Max will be deeply missed by all of us at CIJA (the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs),” said Barbara Bank, chair of CIJA in Toronto, and Noah Shack, vice-president of CIJA in Toronto, in a statement.

“Because of Max, the memory of the Shoah will live on through the next generation of Canadians he was able to touch by sharing his personal experience as a child survivor of the Holocaust.”

Max Eisen is survived by his wife, Ivy, his sons Ed and Larry, two grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. ■

Lila Sarick is news editor of The CJN.

The trial of this accused Jew-hater in Montreal has turned into a debate over the link between Nazism and the Holocaust

/ Janice Arnold

The trial of a Montreal man accused of inciting hatred against Jews on a far-right website turned into an exchange between the prosecution and the defense over whether Nazi ideology was at the root of the decision to exterminate Jews.

Quebec Court Justice Manlio Del Negro reproached both lawyers during the July 8 hearing: Crown prosecutor Patrick Lafrenière for not proving his case that the Holocaust was an in-

disputable consequence of Nazism and defense lawyer Hélène Poussard for “going too far” when she suggested Jews were exterminated because the Nazi regime found it too expensive to keep them interned or to deport them and not because Nazism per se called for it.

After a four-month pause, the trial of Gabriel Sohier Chaput resumed with Lafrenière making closing arguments that the accused is guilty of the one count of willfully promoting hate against an identifiable group with which he is charged.

Chaput, who watched the proceedings by videoconference, faces a maximum sentence of two years in prison if convicted.

The sole evidence entered against him is a January 2017 article Chaput has admitted writing under the alias Zeiger in the U.S.-based online publication *The Daily Stormer* in which he urged “non-stop Nazism everywhere” and violent action against “enemies.”

The headline, referring to an incident in Vancouver, was “Canada: Nazis Trigger Jews by Putting Up Posters on Ch-k Church,” using a racist slur for Asians.

Chaput, 35, a former IT consultant, earlier testified that he had written up to a thousand pieces for *The Daily Stormer* over 2016 and 2017.

The trial was recessed in March after Poussard made her final argument lasting four hours that the article was “satirical”; it may be in bad taste and her client may hate Jews, but he did not willfully promote hate as defined by law, she said.

Chaput was revealed to be Zeiger in a series of articles published in the *Montreal Gazette* in May 2018, which relied heavily on information from a Montreal antifascist group that identified Chaput as one of the most active neo-Nazis in North America and who had attended the deadly white-supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Va., in 2017.

A warrant for Chaput’s arrest was issued in November 2018 following a complaint filed by B’nai Brith Canada, but his whereabouts were unknown for some time. He made his first court appearance in August 2020.

Lafrenière stressed that it is clear that *The Daily Stormer* was a forum for racist neo-Nazi propaganda, with three million subscribers at the time, and that Chaput knew the article in question would spread hatred of Jews given its trivialization of the Nazi era.

“For a reasonable person, there is nothing in the format or the words that leads one to think that it’s a joke. It is the promotion of Nazism,” said Lafrenière, noting that the article is accompanied by Nazi imagery and a cartoon of a smiling guard activating a gas chamber.

Chaput wrote: “2017 is the year of action. We must be certain no SJW (social justice warrior) or Jews can stay safely untriggered. Nazis everywhere until the streets are flooded with the tears of our enemies.”

Lafrenière said, “That goes much further than offensive and hurtful remarks.”

He said Chaput’s claim that readers would realize the article was not meant to be taken literally is not credible. “It is impossible that as articulate, informed and intelligent guy as the accused did not think that his words, if they fall into the hands of racist people, are not going to add to the detestation of Jews. He is being willfully blind.”

In any event, Lafrenière said satire is not a legal defense against a criminal hate charge.

Del Negro interjected that “being racist is not a crime...The comments of the accused for the most part are racist, misplaced, rude and inappropriate. That’s sure and certain, but does that constitute a crime?”

He admonished Lafrenière for not bringing in an expert witness, like an historian, to demonstrate a direct line can be drawn between Nazism and the Holocaust.

Lafrenière said it is an established fact that Jews were persecuted under Nazism and that six million were killed.

In her retort, Poussard argued against automatically conflating the term Nazism with the extermination of Jews, and that it is debatable that the killers acted as they did because they were Nazis.

She said she learned in school that the Nazis did not originally plan to exterminate Jews, but that someone close to Hitler proposed it because it would “save money” compared to keeping them in the camps, that it was “cheaper to gas these people,” at which point Del Negro told her to stop because what she was saying was not “reasonable” and that she had “gone too far.”

Del Negro asked that at the next session of the trial a determination be made as to whether Nazism’s role in the Holocaust is a matter of judicial notice, that is, a fact so well established that it cannot be reasonably doubted.

The parties will next meet on Aug. 29, at which time a date will be set for the trial to continue. ■

Montreal temple brings attention to Indigenous people through outdoor photo display

/ Janice Arnold

Passersby may do a double take at the sight of three large photographic portraits displayed on Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom on Sherbrooke Street in Westmount.

These striking black-and-white pictures, each four feet high, which went up on June 26, are meant to provoke curiosity and, it is hoped, soul-searching. The banner in English and French offers a clue to ponder: Individual Faces, Communal Experience: Local Indigenous Displacement and Resilience.

The photos’ subjects, differing in age and gender, are Indigenous individuals living in Montreal or in Kahnawake, the Mohawk reserve on the South Shore.

The temple has joined the Indigenous Forced Displacement Project (IFDP) initiated by Nakuset, director of the Native Women’s Shelter of Montreal and outspoken advocate for Indigenous people in the city.

It’s part of *Inside Out*, a global “people’s art” project that allows marginalized communities to make a visual political or social statement. Over 2,400 groups in 138 countries have participated since 2011, but this is the first in Quebec.

The goal when IFDP was launched in February was to put up

50 photos around Montreal. That has been reached with those at the temple and others installed at Concordia University’s FOFA Gallery this weekend.

The message of IFDP is that, despite historic and ongoing injustice, Indigenous people are thriving—and they are living in your midst.

Nakuset is blunt: “First you took our land, then our culture, then you forced assimilation on us. If you walked in our moccasins you’d be traumatized too.

“But we are still here. The people in these portraits are the people who have survived despite everything that you have done to us.”

The temple formed a Truth and Reconciliation working group last fall to encourage members, above all, to learn, then build relationships with their Indigenous neighbours, giving practical support and acting as allies as appropriate, said the group’s chair Sarah Sookman.

There have been speakers and a lending library was established, food is prepared for shelters and other assistance programs, and temple members took part in this spring’s Spirit Walk on Mount Royal.

This activism was given impetus by Senior Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, who believes Jews, like all Canadians, must recognize this dark side of our history and do something to rectify past and present-day wrongs.

Prejudice, assimilation, exile and genocide should resonate with the Jewish community and evince empathy, says Rabbi Grushcow, who admits to her own relatively recent ignorance of the extent of harm to Indigenous nations.

“It’s telling that two members of Truth and Reconciliation group are Holocaust survivors.”

Rabbi Grushcow devoted her Kol Nidre sermon to the issue.

“We are not the country we pretend to be. Like many non-Indigenous Canadians, I am only now beginning to understand that even though there are things we are rightly proud of, there are things of which we should be ashamed,” Rabbi Grushcow said.

Taking blame for something they had no direct part in is painful and complicated for Jews, Rabbi Grushcow allows, but they must not absolve themselves.

“We did not build this house, but we do inhabit it, and we share responsibility for its repair,” she concluded.

The temple’s desired relationship with Indigenous peoples is summarized in a land acknowledgement, completed in March after months of collaboration with Kevin Deer, a Kahnawake elder and faithkeeper, said Sookman.

The temple did not want to simply copy other organizations, but rather draft a sincere statement bridging the two communities, she said. Deer vetted the final version, which runs close to 300 words, and was present at its inauguration.

The preamble speaks of common values expressed in the Iroquois Confederacy’s ancient Great Law of Peace and Judaism’s age-old commitment to *shalom*.

“Our Jewish ancestors came to this land as immigrants and refugees, long after (the earliest) treaties were broken by Europeans. Yet we inherit a legacy in which the rights of the land’s original inhabitants have been denied...We acknowledge our presence on this unceded land of the Kenien’kehá:ka Nation, and our responsibility to the work of truth and reconciliation. As the contemporary custodians of this site, we commit ourselves to the treaty values of friendship, peace and respect from

generation to generation,” it reads.

The temple’s co-operation with Nakuset is not random. Born into a Cree nation in Saskatchewan, she was adopted by a Montreal Jewish family during what is known as the Sixties Scoop when many thousands of Indigenous children were removed from their families by government policy and placed in usually white homes, often across the country.

Nakuset has been frank about the damage of this displacement, notably in the CBC documentary *Becoming Nakuset*. Her trauma was such that she does not utter her adoptive name, which she changed to a single word meaning “sun.”

Although Nakuset is long estranged from her adoptive family, she has warm relations with its extended members, including first cousin Jordanna Vamos, a temple member who made the match for the IFDP.

Nakuset, who went to Hebrew school and synagogue (not at Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom), did not reject Judaism. “I am still very proud to be Jewish. It is half of who I am,” she said, and so seeing the *Inside Out* portraits on the temple’s august exterior has special meaning for her.

Vamos said, “As an adult now, a parent and social worker, I see that (the Sixties Scoop) was a recipe for disaster. Our family couldn’t be prouder of what Nakuset has done with her life.”

The pictures —whose subjects are not named —were affixed with environmentally-friendly wheat paste, basically flour and water. They will remain in place until they weather away. All *Inside Out* photos are then permanently archived on the organization’s website. ■

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

Ellis Jacob is back to screening blockbusters at the helm of Cineplex—and he expects to see you soon

/ Ellin Bessner

Teenage boys have been showing up in suits and carrying bananas to theatres across Canada. And it’s the kind of thing that Ellis Jacob was waiting to welcome back.

What they’re getting dressed up to see is *Minions: The Rise of Gru*. The social media stunt is part of what the Cineplex CEO is happy to see after his over 170 locations were intermittently closed during the past two pandemic years. In his view, there’s no experience like watching a new release on a big screen.

The reopening couldn’t have come soon enough. It took until April 18 for all locations across Canada to operate without restrictions, some 25 months after all Cineplex doors initially

slammed shut.

His message to moviegoers is that you can’t get these experiences sitting on your couch. In fact, during the months that Jacob and his customers couldn’t access any of the auditoriums—or do many social activities whatsoever—he didn’t sign up for services like Netflix. Binge-watching isn’t his speed.

“I just have so much going on,” he explained to *The CJNI Daily*. “I can’t sit here to watch seven episodes of something.”

Nor does he have a giant movie screen in his Toronto condo, despite the urging of wife Sharyn. He’d rather walk over to the Varsity cinemas, which include VIP rooms accessible to everyone.

“That’s why we own theatres across the country,” said Jacob with a smile. “So we can go to it.”

How he got to the top

Ellis Jacob has been at the helm of Cineplex for nearly 20 years. The trained accountant’s professional journey began in his native Kolkata, India, watching Bollywood films. He moved to Canada in 1969 where he earned university degrees from McGill and later York.

After working for the Ford Motor Company and Motorola, he first joined what was then Cineplex Odeon Corp. in 1987, as the chief financial officer. Within a decade, after helping to bring a beleaguered company back from the brink, Jacob was the company’s chief operating officer.

It didn’t take long to find himself in demand to manage a rollercoaster of mergers and acquisitions throughout the North American industry, which involved names like Galaxy and Lowes. After his return to Cineplex, the company acquired Famous Players—and Jacob was now in charge of multiple movie exhibition legacies founded by fellow Canadian Jews.

But it was during the pandemic that Jacob found himself contending with an unprecedented challenge, a period when 170 locations went dark. Cineplex losses totalled \$872 million during 2020 and 2021, and thousands of employees were let go. And even when venues in some provinces were sporadically reopened, safety rules kept the lucrative concession stands closed.

Senior executives took pay cuts and gave up bonuses. Cineplex worked out deals with landlords on the rent. The company received at least \$50 million in government COVID subsidies. And expansion plans were put on hold for auxiliary offerings like Topgolf, a driving range and sports bar.

The picture is brighter now, as Jacob reports a return to nearly 80 percent of their volume by late spring. He’s optimistic summer receipts will prove even stronger. And he expects that Cineplex will receive a \$1 billion payment from British company Cineworld after a 2020 buyout fell through, based on a Canadian court ruling last December. (Cineworld has appealed.)

Jacob’s industry peers think he’s done something right, because in April 2022 they presented him with the Marquee Award at the National Association of Theatre Owners (NATO) convention in Las Vegas—another sign of a business bouncing back. He can add the award to the Order of Canada he received in 2010, and the Order of Ontario honour of 2021.

As a philanthropist, Jacob is responsible for gifting a 175-seat movie theatre for residents of the Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care, where his mother Tryphosa lived until her death in 2010. (He also offers venues to the Toronto Jewish Film Festival.)

Moviegoing enters a new economy

What can't be ignored is that April's return to full-fledged moviegoing coincided with inflation coming to Canada at levels unseen in 20 years. And the result is more people having second thoughts about how to spend discretionary dollars.

But in his May 2022 interview with *The CJN Daily*, the Cineplex CEO said he wasn't in a rush to raise prices.

"Look, our focus is bringing people back into the theatres," said Jacob. "I don't want to make it to a point where the pricing is something that attracts them away from coming to the movies. But we have to be careful because costs and wages are going up. The supply chain is a challenge."

Cue public outrage in June, when the company announced a service charge of \$1.50 on ticket sales through its website and app. Cineplex explained the money was to pay for improvements to its digital infrastructure.

But it's also a signal that they're buoyed by seeing customers queuing up at the box office again.

The convention held by NATO—not to be confused by the military North American Treaty Organization—came at a symbolic time: Netflix announced it had lost nearly a quarter-million subscribers so far in 2022, with up to 2 million more cancellations expected.

Jacob has long been pushing back on the impact of streaming services, to the point of Cineplex forbidding Netflix and Amazon Prime premieres at the Toronto International Film Festival. The controversy stemmed from studios shifting away from theatrical exclusivity, as there used to be a window of up to three months before you could watch the movies at home.

Now he thinks it's the right time for exhibitors to force weakened streamers to play ball.

"Getting them to get onside with the program, like we have for major studios," he said in reference to Hollywood's heritage players reverting to pre-pandemic traditions. "And I feel they've now realized they've got to use movie theatres to build their brand."

Tom Cruise's timely return

While his personal all-time favourite film is *The Shawshank Redemption*, released in 1994, Jacob was raving about the wildly successful *Top Gun: Maverick*, which he first got to see at CinemaCon. It's gone on to become the highest-grossing release of the year.

"My wife was with me and she said, 'I don't think I want to watch this movie. I'll stay for 20 minutes.' Two hours later, she was still there."

With his own 69th birthday on the horizon—yet with no plans to retire—Jacob has his eyes on strengthening Cineplex's forays beyond movies. Canada now has 10 locations of The Rec Room ("Like a Dave & Busters on steroids") and three Playdium gaming venues.

But he doesn't reveal how the CineClub subscription program is faring, nearly a year after it launched with a \$9.99 monthly membership that includes one regular-priced ticket plus a discount on concessions.

Despite inflation, it's the pricier tickets that sell the fastest at Cineplex these days, for a demographic that wants their seats to move, or to have water sprayed on them, or watch films in an auditorium with screens on three sides.

And the reluctance by patrons to put on high-tech 3-D glasses for hygienic reasons at the peak of the pandemic is a thing of the past.

"In the old days you saw a movie in 2-D. Now you can see them in 3-D, 4DX, D-Box, Ultra AVX, VIP, IMAX, ScreenX—there's so many choices for the guests," he said.

"You can't replicate that at home." ■

Ellin Bessner is chief correspondent of *The CJN Daily*.

Trouble begins when a swastika is found on a school wall in one of Gordon Korman's latest books for younger readers

/ Hannah Srour-Zackon

Forty-four years after one of his Grade 7 writing projects—for an English class assignment at German Mills Public School in Thornhill, Ont.—was published by Scholastic Canada as *This Can't Be Happening at Macdonald Hall*, Montreal-born Gordon Korman has maintained a storied career. June 2022 saw the publication of *The Fort*, the 100th book under his name.

And his works have received numerous accolades along the way: *Linked*, published by Scholastic in July 2021, earned Korman a Sydney Taylor Book Honour and a National Jewish Book Award.

Set at a middle school in the fictional Colorado town of Chokecherry, the story is told from multiple perspectives: that of resident popular kid Link, newly-arrived student (and the school's only Jewish kid) Dana, art club president Michael, an obnoxious YouTube personality named Real Talk, and others.

The novel's main conflict begins when a swastika is found adorning a wall at the school, forcing this small town to face the unpleasantness in its past. Meanwhile, as an organized effort to fight the hatred, a group of kids inspired by the Paper Clips Project work to create a giant paper chain with six million links.

A resident of the Great Neck area of Long Island—where he settled after first moving south of the border to attend New York University film school—the 58-year-old Gordon Korman sat down with *The CJN's* book columnist Hannah Srour-Zackon to discuss *Linked*, and decades of writing for middle-grade readers.

What inspired you to write this novel?

Not many of my books have a Jewish theme, and not many of them are all that serious, but I was just fascinated by the Paper Clips Project in Tennessee.

It's the least likely middle school in the world to have done that project. It's in the middle of an extremely rural area—to my knowledge the nearest Jewish person was very far away—and one with a horrible human rights record. These kids were looking at the historical puzzle of the Holocaust and getting hung up on the number six million. We all know that six million is a lot, but have any of us actually seen six million of something all in one place? It's a simple and tangential approach to the Holocaust, but there's a brilliance to it too.

How did you land on a paper chain project for the book?

It may not be as big with kids today, but I feel like I spent my entire elementary and middle school life making paper chains. One of the first things that those kids in Tennessee discovered was that though you can go to Staples and buy a box of a hundred paper clips at a time, it's really, really hard to get to six million. With something like paper chains, here is this really mundane activity that every kid in school does at some point where the only way to do it is one link at a time, but then every now and then, you remember what every one of those links corresponds to. It's a great way to jump back and forth between remembrance and just the regular day-to-day of being a kid.

You alluded to the fact that the area in Tennessee had a KKK past. What inspired you to bring that into Chokecherry in the novel?

This is kind of random, but I'd seen the Spike Lee movie *BlacKkKlansman*. When I think of the KKK I think of it being a long time ago and it's really not: that movie took place in the '70s and it was very much still a thing.

That was when it sunk in that this could be a part of the more recent past of this town in the book. I also didn't want the swastika issue to be specifically an antisemitic event. I wanted to broaden the threat of those acts of vandalism to be generally racist and white supremacist: something that everybody should feel threatened by.

In a way there's not a lot of debate between 'swastikas are bad' versus 'swastikas are great, we need more.' It's more between people who feel this needs to be fought against and resisted, and people who think, 'Whoever does them probably doesn't mean it. Let's just ignore the problem.'

What you bring up is interesting because the book does deal with the possible different intentions some people, especially kids, might have when drawing a swastika.

One of the things that came up when my editor and I were first talking about this idea is a kid I remember in my school who was a pretty good artist. He became fascinated by swastikas and would incorporate it into his designs. I don't think he was a horrible person, I'm pretty sure he just knew that it got a rise out of people, and that he shouldn't do it.

The funny thing is when I mentioned it to my editor who is also Jewish, he said he knew a kid like that in school too. They were so convinced that this guy meant them no ill that they actually had an intervention. You can sort of flirt with the awful at a time in your life where you don't really comprehend the full depth of the awful.

This book is timely in a way since there have been many reported instances of antisemitic graffiti in schools, and the conversation

around how we are dealing with this in schools is being revived. This happened to be a coincidence, but my son was on a soccer team with Jonathan Greenblatt (the head of the ADL)'s son. When I first sat down to plot out *Linked* I got together with him and asked, "If you were contacted by a school that was having this happen what would you do? What resources would you make available?"

He helped me out and put me in the right direction as to what schools would do to respond. The first thing I was amazed at is that schools today have these kinds of issues every day, every week, every month. Even this fall I have a couple of school visits where the schools originally contacted me not because they're fans of my other books, but because they were specifically attracted to *Linked* because they have dealt with incidents like that in their school in the last year or two.

***Linked* deals with some pretty serious topics such as antisemitism and the Holocaust. The book also deals with the impact and influence of social media on middle school-age kids. What was your process for addressing these serious issues for a middle-grade audience?**

As soon as I thought of the story, I knew that the best way to do it was going to be from multiple perspectives to keep it from being too serious. I'd be able to have some narrators who were funnier and some who were more serious.

As for the social media aspect, I think a lot of that comes from the fact that I have three kids. My kids would always share the YouTubers they followed (and TikTok-ers in the case of my younger son). So observing them gave me a bit of perspective.

Writing about Real Talk, from the very start I loved the idea that he was a celebrity to these kids and not that well-known among adults. He was a blessing and a curse as someone who was exploiting this school and the division in this community, but at the same time their paper chain project never could have succeeded if it wasn't for the attention that he brought.

In the novel, the character of Link discovers that he's Jewish. I'm curious what led you to take him on that specific journey.

The Second World War and the Holocaust are close enough that you could literally be 12 or 13 years old and be connected by only two generations to that time. In my mind I was thinking about Madeleine Albright. She was the person in my mind who was an older adult when she learned she was Jewish. It struck me that this could work for Link as well and—obviously keeping the spoilers out of it—having Link make a discovery like this, it really made him look at almost everything in a different way.

What messages do you hope that your readers will take away from this book?

I'm not really a message kind of guy. In the end, what I feel like *Linked* really owes readers is a good story. If you as a reader need the message "swastikas are bad, racism is bad, antisemitism is bad," I don't think reading one book is going to change very much. One of the things that I think is so great about all storytelling, and reading in particular, is that it makes you see and think about the world from so many different perspectives that you might not have thought of before. ■

Hannah Srour-Zackon writes about Jewish books for The CJN.

The Jewish Nomad: Checking in with the nomadic writer Nathan Englander, currently of Toronto (sometimes)

/ Ilana Zackon

Nathan Englander was raised in a conservative Orthodox family in Long Island. Little did he suspect that one day he would become a bestselling author and New York University writer-in-residence, who travels around the globe for his work.

Which makes him the kind of person people are surprised to find settling down in Toronto.

After getting over the initial shock of finding *yahrzeit* candles and Osem soup nuts at his local grocery store—given how in Brooklyn he'd have to take the subway to the East Village for these things—Nathan has enjoyed living amongst us Canucks for the past three dramatic years. (He even learned how to ice skate for the first time!)

He ended up north of the border because his professor wife, Rachel Silver, got a job in the education department of York University.

Even though we're both in the same city, we spoke over Zoom. But he's not staying for long.

Nathan explained that he'll soon be flying to Paris for a teaching stint at the French campus of NYU. Then, after stopping back home for a quick visit, he's off to San Diego for the premiere of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank*, the stage adaptation of a short story first published 10 years ago.

Still, we covered plenty of ground, so whether or not you're familiar with the writing of Nathan Englander here's some tidbits worth knowing about his life and career.

Let's start with a bit of history...

For the Relief of Unbearable Urges was Nathan's first short story collection—published in 1999 by a major publishing house, Knopf.

It led to a level of attention that found Nora Ephron offering to take him to lunch.

The late writing legend insisted “The Twenty-Seventh Man,” a short story about a group of Jewish writers sent to prison for their alleged propaganda in Soviet Russia, was meant to be a piece of theatre. She offered to produce it herself and teach him how to write for the stage.

It was nearly a decade later, once he completed his second book, *The Ministry of Special Cases*, that Nathan took Nora up on her offer and added the title of “playwright” to his arsenal.

Plus, he found a kindred spirit in director Barry Edelstein, the artistic director at the Old Globe Theatre in San Diego, who

has directed all of his plays to date—up to and including the next one.

Let's learn about the play...

What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank is based on the title story of his second collection of short stories.

Commissioned by the Lincoln Centre Theatre, it's a contemporary comedy about two Jewish high school best friends who reunite as adults and discover that their lives have considerably diverged when it comes to religion, family and culture.

With a cast of five—which has yet to be announced—the play was set to premiere in the summer of 2020 and was, of course, postponed along with almost everything else on the planet.

During that period, Barry Edelstein—who acts as both director and dramaturge on the piece—had more time to develop the adaptation with Nathan, albeit on Zoom.

But being the self-proclaimed “compulsive redrafter” that he is, Nathan sees the work as never being complete until it's published—or in this case, until it's before a live audience.

“I really like this notion that when something goes into the world, that's when it's done,” he says. “I am so excited to get to pick up a play, two years later, and rewrite it.”

In that vein, he'll spend the next month doing rewrites before heading out west to participate in the rehearsal process, which is something that most playwrights don't do.

Let's compare notes about being nomads...

Between book tours, teaching abroad and spending time in the rehearsal room, Nathan keeps himself grounded through creating routine, maintaining a positive attitude and taking necessary breaks.

“For me, it's learning that it's important to take a day off, like to have a Shabbat—whatever day of the week it is,” he explains. “I tell my students: writing six days a week is literally better than writing seven.”

It's in those moments of pause where some of the best ideas come to mind for him, whether it's in the shower or during a long walk.

Nathan also finds travel an amazing way to build a well of ideas for his creative pursuits.

He'll spend time in a place and then a decade or two later, draw upon his experiences and write a story inspired by them.

“It's been well more than a decade since I've lived out of the States and it feeds me—learning new worlds, and it feeds my work. Almost like being a spy.”

Let's wrap this up with some Judaism...

Although his novels are seeping in *Yiddishkeit*, Nathan doesn't see himself as writing specifically Jewish fiction.

“I write about people, I just tell stories.”

And between New York, Jerusalem and now Toronto, he's lived in “such Jewish places” that it's simply a part of his universe.

“If you build a world that is living—it's better to have everything in it.” ■

Ilana Zackon co-hosts Bonjour Chai and writes weekly for The CJN.