

The Canadian Jewish News



TEMERTY FACULTY OF MEDICINE
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO



Dr. Ayelet Kuper

ANTISEMITISM IN MED SCHOOL professor speaks out

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University of Toronto's medical school has been permeated with antisemitism and discrimination, charges a new report from one of its professors

/ Ellin Bessner

“There's a feeling of discomfort, existential discomfort, being on that campus.”

That's the message from longtime physician Philip Berger about the current heightened climate of antisemitism and anti-Israel rhetoric that's been making life stressful for some Jewish professors and students at the Temerty Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto.

Berger was reacting to a report released Dec. 5 by a colleague, Dr. Ayelet Kuper, which lists a litany of antisemitic insults and anti-Jewish stereotyping which she personally has encountered at the school. The paper was published by the Canadian Journal of Medical Education.

She didn't name names, saying it is too risky for her own career and for other victims who came forward to her while she was serving as the special advisor on antisemitism to the dean of medicine. She was appointed to that role in June 2021 and left in June 2022. The position has not been filled.

Kuper, a daughter and granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, isn't giving interviews at the moment, according to a spokesperson for the university's media team, due to the sizable volume of requests she has received since the report was made public.

But some of the highlights of her report include:

- Being told that because she was born in Israel and refuses to denounce the Jewish state, she is “inherently racist, and therefore any discrimination I encounter as a Jew in Canada is therefore deserved.”
- A faculty member [told her] that Jews mustn't be allowed to speak on their own behalf about antisemitism and shouldn't even be subject to the protection from discrimination as outlined in the Ontario Human Rights Code, on the grounds that what Jews call antisemitism isn't real.
- “In the years before the war in Gaza, I overheard faculty colleagues complaining about ‘those Jews who think their Holocaust means they know something about oppression.’”
- [I] heard about non-Jewish students who thought a Jewish classmate had the power to block their residency matches.
- Non-Jewish students asked her why educational content about Jews was “being forced on the students by the Jew who bought the faculty.”

(James Temerty, a Canadian businessman and philanthropist, donated millions to the school which was subsequently renamed in

the family's honour. He is not Jewish, but is a supporter of Jewish causes, particularly the Jewish community in his native Ukraine.)

The release of Kuper's paper confirms Berger's experiences as an associate professor in the faculty of medicine, where vocal Jewish supporters of Israel, like himself, receive pushback from some of their 9,000 colleagues.

“It's unsafe to do that in the faculty, and if one does, it leads to ostracism and really expulsion from any type of progressive causes in the faculty,” said Berger, who has worked with homeless people, HIV/AIDS patients, and addicts.

In his case, it was the result of an article about Israel that he wrote with the late human rights lawyer Clayton Ruby, which was published 20 years ago in the *Globe and Mail*.

“A close colleague, not Jewish, six months later said to me, ‘Let's go for lunch.’ And he said to me, ‘I couldn't talk to you for six months. I couldn't look at you for six months after you wrote that article.’”

Berger is a member of the advocacy group Doctors Against Racism and Antisemitism (DARA), which on Friday Dec. 9, issued a statement entitled “The Lid is Lifted on Antisemitism at the UofT's Temerty Faculty of Medicine”. The group calls on the highest echelons of the university to act to “protect Jewish faculty and learners.”

According to Dr. Steve Samuel, a DARA board member who himself graduated from the University of Toronto in the 1970s, it isn't the institution itself which is going out of its way to make life hard for Jewish learners and staff to live openly as Jews. Indeed, in September, the medical school held a much-publicized ceremony to formally apologize for decades of anti-Jewish quotas, which ended only in the 1950s.

These policies kept many students of Jewish faith from entering their chosen profession at the prestigious school, officials acknowledged on Sept. 29, but also hindered advancement for those young Jewish budding physicians who made it in.

“It's not the university that's attacking the Jewish students: it's tolerating attacks on Jewish students and faculty, and it's not doing anything about it,” said Samuels, in a Dec. 11 interview with *The CJN Daily*.

“The administration has to protect Jewish students and faculty in the same way as it protects other groups from being attacked by ignorant and racist individuals or groups, who don't really even care about the university's reputation.”

Both doctors say that the situation is not just being felt on campus, but also in the corridors of Toronto's major teaching hospitals, where Jewish students must work as residents and interns.

Samuel recounts one story he knows that happened when a Jewish medical student was presenting a patient to her supervising senior physician.

“In your description of the case, you would say, ‘This 65-year-old Israeli-born woman,’ and your supervisor rolls up his eyes; that speaks volumes as to what he feels about that student,” Samuel recalled.

The 2021 war in Gaza between Hamas and Israel may have prompted heightened levels of Jew hatred, Kuper writes, but the attacks on Jewish staff and students at U of T have existed for years before that. The difference is that the discussion is now couched in terms of criticism of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians and the right of Israel to exist, although when challenged, her colleagues and others deny their views smack of antisemitism.

One flashpoint for Berger and Samuel continues to be over a speech to the medical school in January 2022 by Irwin Cotler, Can-

ada's Special Envoy on Preserving Holocaust Remembrance and Combatting Antisemitism. His lecture was timed for the annual International Holocaust Remembrance Day (Jan. 27).

Subsequently, some 45 faculty members signed a letter to the school accusing Cotler of anti-Palestinian racism. The letter was leaked publicly, and caused outrage, especially for DARA members. Berger slams those colleagues for using arguments that themselves are antisemitic.

"It used classic antisemitic stereotypes and tropes: one of the worst was they attacked Professor Cotler for denouncing antisemitism at the United Nations conference in Durban," Berger said, referring to the 2001 anti-racism meeting in South Africa that became a hate-filled attack on Israel.

"They denounced him for criticizing the fact that at that conference, people were carrying placards saying 'If only Hitler had won' – they were issuing Protocols of the Elders of Zion, and those 45 faculty labelled that as legitimate criticism of Israel."

Kuper's report declined to name any of the perpetrators of the antisemitism individually, but she singled out in general some Jewish members of the UofT faculty for being behind the toxic atmosphere.

Some of these Jewish professors, she claims, are among the 45 faculty members who signed the letter.

"Some of those self-identified Jews have said discriminatory things to me about Jews; some of them have also described to me a deep embarrassment at being Jewish. However, their being Jewish is often used by them and by their non-Jewish colleagues to claim that what they are all saying or doing can't possibly be antisemitic," Kuper writes, describing this as "Jew-washing".

Some of the discord is also over whether the university should adopt the IHRA definition of antisemitism, which some critics say would stifle academic freedom and their ability to criticize Israel. Cotler has repeatedly insisted the IHRA definition—which Canada and three dozen other countries have adopted, along with five Canadian provinces—does not prevent legitimate criticism of Israel government policies, but does declare it antisemitism when all Jews are blamed, or when Israel's right to exist is opposed.

A working group on antisemitism at the UofT, which Kuper sat on, presented its report at the end of December 2021, but did not recommend that the school adopt the IHRA definition.

Dr. Samuel's DARA group hears from many Jewish students, he said, who feel they cannot approach their own faculty advisors when faced with uncomfortable situations over being Jewish or supporting Israel. That was the case with a UofT family doctor who takes very public anti-Israel and also antisemitic positions on her social media account.

This faculty member, Dr. Ritika Goel, was the lead for the school's social justice, anti-oppression and advocacy issues. In a 2013 tweet, she shows former Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper depicted as a puppet being controlled by Jews.

"This is an EDI (equity, diversity and inclusion) lead. So if a student who is being intimidated or harassed is to see this tweet, how comfortable will they feel to go to that individual and say, 'Look, I was attacked for being a Zionist.' Will they be able to do so? No," said Samuel.

The surgeon is frustrated by the current view popular in Canadian campus EDI programs, where special efforts are made to protect marginalized groups including Black, Muslim and Indigenous learners, but do not see Jewish people as facing oppression.

Kuper writes that she has been told by experts in critical race the-

ory and equity theory that because she has white skin, she has the same "privilege and ease in the world as any white person, and that I therefore can't possibly understand oppression."

For its part, the Temerty Faculty of Medicine's dean, Trevor Young, and the Associate Dean of Inclusion and Diversity Lisa Richardson, issued a joint statement confirming that they had read Kuper's report. The pair denounced antisemitism.

The statement did not outline any concrete steps which the school planned to take to tackle the issue.

"Ancient tropes and hatred have no home here. It is not who we are at the Temerty Faculty of Medicine. It is not what we stand for as a faculty, and we are wholly committed to doing better," read the statement. "We are listening to your experiences and evolving our programs and spaces, working toward our goal to be an inclusive and welcoming academic health science community in a diverse and welcoming Canadian metropolis."

Jewish organizations meanwhile have called for an independent investigation and for Ontario's Ministry of Colleges and Universities to intervene.

The statement also did not impress Kuper's colleagues, including Berger, who blames the president of the university, Meric Gertler, for not doing more on the antisemitism issue.

"It's really clear that the highest levels of the university administration are prepared to let people who oppose Israel run their policies and often do issue outright antisemitic slogans and tropes. They are, for some reason that is perplexing to me, afraid to take it on. Until they do, no Jewish student or faculty can feel safe in that university," Berger said.

Will the climate have a chilling impact on enrolment of Jewish medical students? Berger speculates this may be happening already.

"The number of Jewish medical students has dropped quite substantially over the years. So they're a very small minority now in the faculty of medicine as learners, as medical students," he said, acknowledging that he does not have any data on this.

"But this report isn't going to make it easier for Jewish students to want to go there. It's going to make them think twice." ■

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

Obituary: Winnipeg Liberal MP Jim Carr, 71, was a strong advocate for the Jewish community

/ John Longhurst

With the passing of Jim Carr, the member of Parliament for the riding of Winnipeg South Centre since 2015, Winnipeg's Jewish community has lost a friend, advocate and supporter.

Carr died Dec. 12 after battling multiple myeloma and kidney failure for the past three years. He was 71.

He served as minister of natural resources and then minister

of international trade diversification between 2015 and 2019. He was diagnosed with cancer the day after he was re-elected in 2019.

“As a dedicated elected official, business and community leader in Manitoba for over 30 years, Jim was loved and respected by so many and we know he will be profoundly missed,” his family said in a statement.

In 2018, Carr led a trade mission to Israel where he discussed how Canada could translate a modernized free trade agreement between the two countries into additional sales and partnerships.

“I’m delighted as (a) Jewish member of Parliament and as a Jewish member of the cabinet to be here representing Canada,” he said during the trip.

He noted there was “good alignment” between Canada and Israel in certain fields of research and praised “the Israeli innovative brilliance and leadership.”

Tributes from the Jewish community came pouring in soon after his death was announced.

“As a committed Canadian and community member, Jim served Manitobans of all walks of life advocating for human rights, supporting families through employment and business activities,” said Gustavo Zentner, president of the Jewish Federation of Winnipeg.

“Jim was a regular guest at our community events, bringing remarks and making connections with everyone around him as he shared his passion for the arts and music.”

Carr began his professional life as musician, playing oboe for the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, before leaving for McGill University.

After university, he was an editorial writer and columnist for the Winnipeg Free Press, executive director of the Manitoba Arts Council and president of the Business Council of Manitoba. He also was a member of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly for the provincial Liberal Party from 1988-92.

In 2011, Carr was awarded the Order of Manitoba for his contributions to the province.

Carr was immensely proud of his Jewish heritage, Zentner said, often reflecting on his experiences of growing up Jewish in Winnipeg.

“Throughout his career, he was a strong advocate for the Jewish community, made time to meet frequently, and often appeared at community events. His desire to build bridges was evident through his involvement with the local Arab-Jewish dialogue,” he added.

A descendant of immigrants who arrived from Russia in 1906, Carr had his bar mitzvah at Winnipeg’s Shaarey Zedek Synagogue.

When he was first elected in 2015, he reflected on his heritage in his victory speech.

“Going door to door over the past two years, I have met people from all over the world—people like my grandparents who came here from Russia over 100 years ago, seeking a better life—and I have heard all of their stories. We are a generous nation with tolerance for all,” he said.

In addition to his cabinet portfolios, Carr was also a member of the All-Party Interfaith Caucus, which he described as a group that could bring together people of different faiths “to reflect on human rights, inequality, social justice, the environment and nation building.”

Growing up Jewish in Winnipeg, “moulded” him, he said, noting it is one of the important ways he looked at issues and policies.

At the same time, being a victim of antisemitism as a teen also influenced “how I see the world,” he said, adding it led him to look for ways to promote understanding between different groups. This included being a member of the Jewish-Muslim cau-

cus within the Liberal Party.

“We have dinner together from time to time and communicate with each other,” he said of that caucus, adding the connections have caused them to “develop a great deal of affection for each other.”

For Elaine Goldstine, CEO of the Winnipeg Jewish Federation, Carr’s passing is “a sad day for Manitobans, who have lost a dedicated leader, community member, and advocate.”

He made “a positive contribution to the lives of so many,” she added.

Shimon Koffler Fogel, CEO of the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs, noted Carr’s “abiding passion for Canada, deep pride in his home province of Manitoba and unwavering commitment to his Jewish heritage. In touching the lives of so many, the common theme that marked Jim Carr’s many contributions was his dedication to making Canada a better place for all.”

In 1998, Carr worked with a group of Winnipeggers from different faith groups to create Faith and the Media, the first national conference on how the media covers religion in Canada.

In a statement, the family said Carr died peacefully at home, surrounded by his family, and that plans for a memorial service will be announced in the coming days. ■

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

Kosher food banks are finding it a challenge to keep up with the growing need for help in 2022

/ Lila Sarick

Kosher food banks across the country say the last few months have been unprecedented as growing numbers of people turn to them looking for help while food prices soar and wages fail to keep up.

Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver food banks all report that they are stretched ever thinner—and, in some cases, they have had no choice but to put people on waitlists, for the first time in their history.

Atop of the website for Toronto’s kosher food bank, Chasdei Kaduri, is a note in bold letters, capitalized and underlined: “We are facing a very high volume of applications for assistance. If you are seeking assistance, please be patient as we work on increasing our capacity and responding to all.”

Chasdei Kaduri now serves 4,000 people a month—up from 3,000 before COVID—said executive director Jonathan Tebeka. It has become the largest food bank in York Region, the sprawling suburban area just north of Toronto.

“The last three or four months we’re seeing a very, very big uptick—even more than during COVID,” Tebeka said. “That’s

because a number of things that came together all at once: Inflation, rising costs, rents. Everything else that came packaged during COVID is now unravelling. There's no government programs any more. It's very difficult."

Meanwhile, the organization is facing new challenges. Donations of both money and food soared as people were motivated by the crisis to help those less fortunate at the peak of the pandemic. But as life returns to a new normal, donations have dried up.

At the same time, food distributors are reserving stock for the big chain stores and setting aside less for smaller purchasers like food banks.

For now, Chasdei Kaduri has been able to purchase from supermarkets at competitive prices, Tebeka said.

Launched about a decade ago by Tebeka's mother—who knew a few hungry families in the neighbourhood—the food bank is entirely volunteer run. No one, including the executive director and the social workers assessing the claims, takes a salary.

People order what they need online and the groceries are quietly deposited on their doorstep, to maintain confidentiality.

But where it once took about a week to assess potential client needs, it can now take a month.

"It's longer than we would hope it to be. When someone needs help, and it's something like food, it's a very urgent matter," Tebeka said. "But at same time, people need to understand our help is not one time. We do need to do our due diligence."

The pressures besetting Chasdei Kaduri are not unique, nor are they likely to let up any time soon.

Canada's Food Price Report 2023 predicts a 5 percent to 7 percent price increase in food prices in 2023. The increase comes on top of a 10 percent rise in 2022.

The forecast prepared by several Canadian universities, estimates that a family of four will spend \$1,065 more on food next year.

Pressures are being felt by food banks across the country. Visits to food banks are up by 15 percent this year from 2021 and have grown by 35 percent since 2019, according to *Hunger Counts 2022*, a survey of 4,700 food banks.

In Montreal, where the Mada Community Centre is now in its 30th year providing meals and groceries, demand has gone up by 25 percent this year, said Paula Lecker, director of food services.

About 1,800 boxes of cooked meals are distributed weekly. Families can also order a box of groceries, about 5,000 boxes are distributed monthly.

At Rosh Hashanah, the centre distributed 20 percent more food boxes than usual, which went primarily to larger families struggling to make ends meet.

But even though demand in Montreal is growing, the agency is now starting to expand to Ottawa, after speaking with rabbis about the need for food assistance, Lecker said.

New immigrants (including from Ukraine), students and people who lost jobs during COVID and haven't found work again, all need help, in ways they didn't before, Lecker said.

The meal program which was started during COVID, mainly for seniors who were afraid to go out and shop or who were socially isolated, has also continued to grow.

The increased demand has put more emphasis than ever on fundraising, Lecker said, "We reach out to our community for more and more funding and we get creative to find donors who

are willing to help us, because the need is so great."

In Vancouver, the demand is stretching Jewish Food Services to the bursting point. In the last five months, about three new families are looking for food assistance every week, as many as 40 or 50 people a month, says Stacy Friedman, director of food security for the agency.

The JFS Grocery Program (formerly known as the Jewish Food Bank) serves 950 people. Another 700 to 800 receive kosher meals and food vouchers.

The grocery program has expanded and now offers food delivery at hubs outside the city, extending into the Lower Mainland. The food bank puts an emphasis on providing quality food and offers fresh produce, eggs and dairy products. Canned goods are limited to high-protein items and vegetables.

"We're at our internal capacity... We are starting to reach a capacity where it's not just about our finances, but also about our physical space," Friedman said.

"Literally, just in the last few weeks, we are hitting our capacity. We try to respond to everyone who comes to our door, but the numbers are growing."

Some of those seeking help have had to be put on waitlists, Friedman said.

The "critical" shortage of housing in Vancouver, as well as inflation and wages that haven't kept up, are factors driving the numbers.

"There were people who were getting by, people who were doing OK, but now it's pushing people to the limits," she said.

To cope with the growing numbers, JFS is looking for new space and trying to recruit more volunteer drivers to deliver food. The agency is also examining how to restructure its resources to meet the unceasing demand for assistance, Friedman said.

"There is a growing need and we want to address it both from a strategic way in our organization and by understanding that there are issues globally and within our community that need to change to ensure that everyone has access to healthy food." ■

Lila Sarick is news editor of The CJN.

'What was the guy who wrote "Suzanne" doing in the Sinai?': Matti Friedman talked about Leonard Cohen—and his own writing about Israel—during a visit to Montreal

/ Hannah Srour-Zackon

Israeli-Canadian author Matti Friedman's newest book is *Who By Fire: War, Atonement, and the Resurrection of Leon-*

ard Cohen, the story of Cohen's tour of Israel during the Yom Kippur War,

Friedman was in Montreal Dec. 1 for an event at the Jewish Public Library and sat down with The CJN's Hannah Srour-Zackon to talk about the book and about his writing more generally, including how being Canadian influences his work, and writing about Israel for North American audiences.

What drew you to write about Leonard Cohen for this book?

I grew up with Leonard Cohen like many young Canadian Jews and I was surprised to learn this story of his tour in the Yom Kippur War. It popped up in press coverage around the time he gave a concert in Israel in 2009. Israelis went crazy for Leonard Cohen and had a powerful connection to him, and it turned out that it was in part because of his tour during the Yom Kippur War. But I had never heard of it. I decided that someone needed to unravel the story.

I was also drawn to it as a Canadian-Israeli story, there aren't many of those. It's a story that puts together the two halves of my own life, as someone who grew up in Canada and moved to Israel when I was 17. But beyond that, I was interested in that tension that exists when art meets war. It works its way into art in interesting ways, and I was wondering if that had happened with Leonard Cohen. He seems so distant from wars and the Middle East. What was the guy who wrote "Suzanne" doing in the Sinai desert? That was all part of the draw for me.

One thing that stood out to me in the book was how Leonard Cohen had these different forces of home that were pulling at him, whether it was Canada, Greece (where he was at the time), or Israel. How do you think his experience during the Yom Kippur War changed his relationship with these different homes?

He moved around a lot and in many ways, he was homeless. He was on this island in Greece where he was unhappy, then he came to Israel, which he called his 'myth-home'. It's a very interesting phrase to unpack. He had a very powerful but also very upsetting experience there; he didn't feel at home in the 'myth-home'.

One of the interesting parts of the war stories is that he asks people to call him Eliezer (which is his Hebrew name), he wears something that looks like a uniform, and he sleeps on the ground with the soldiers. In the story of the missing verse from "Lover, Lover, Lover", he calls them his brothers, so there's something very familial going on there. He understands that this is somehow a place that has to do with him, but he can't stay there. Still, he feels deeply connected to it.

I don't claim to have intimate access to Leonard Cohen's brain, but I think his home is Montreal. He can never really escape the gravitational pull of Montreal and of the Shaar Hashomayim, which is why at the end of his life, he returns there.

In "You Want It Darker," he chooses Gideon Zelermyer, the cantor from his childhood shul, to sing the Hebrew word in one of his last songs. I think he sees himself as a man with various homes, but ultimately, he's Leonard Cohen from Westmount. In the end, he reconciles himself with that.

How did you go about researching this?

There were two main halves to my research: one in Israel, and one in the world of Leonard Cohen. First, I started by trying to find soldiers who had seen Cohen in the war and who had

interesting war stories to tell. That was a bit tricky at first, but in Israel, you can usually find someone who can give you a few more numbers. I ultimately collected a lot of stories, not all of which appear in the book but that was part of the research.

The other half of the research was trying to figure out what Leonard Cohen thought about all of this, which turned out to be hard. I had this moment when I thought I could interview Cohen in 2015. I discovered that my publisher in Canada, McClelland & Stewart, is Leonard Cohen's publisher.

I asked my editor in Toronto if it was possible to get to Cohen and he didn't see why not. He told me to write a summary of the book to send to Cohen's people. So in my head, I'm interviewing Leonard Cohen about the Yom Kippur War, which would solve the problem because we know nothing from him about the experience.

I wrote this summary and included the photograph of him with Ariel Sharon, which I thought would jog his memory, and sent it to my editor at McClelland & Stewart. This was November 2016. I went to bed and woke up the next morning to find an email in my inbox with the subject line "Holy shit," and it's Leonard Cohen's obituary. He died as I was writing that.

I did have two breakthroughs, though. One was an unpublished manuscript that he had written after the war, which was in the McMaster University Archives (where McClelland and Stewart keep their own archive). The truth is, as much as I would love to have met Leonard Cohen, journalistically that manuscript is better because it's written right after the event.

I also got access to his notebooks he wrote during the war from the Leonard Cohen estate. They had drafts of songs like "Lover, Lover, Lover", bits and pieces of experiences, and phone numbers and names. The book is based on all these sources.

Was there anything that surprised you during your research?

I was surprised to find how deep the trauma of the Yom Kippur War was for Israelis. I knew about the war, of course, but I don't think I really understood what it was like. It was an earthquake for people, and for a lot of Israelis it's still going on.

People who are responding to the book are responding in a deep way to an experience that shaped their lives. I didn't really understand that until I started working on the book, and particularly until it came out because I've received responses from readers beyond the usual 'I found your book interesting'. It's addressing a very central experience in the lives of Israelis.

How else have people responded to the book?

The book has come out in a few different languages, and in English people see it as a book about Cohen. In Israel, people mainly see it as a book about the Yom Kippur War and respond to it very strongly as a war story in which Leonard Cohen features.

Cohen is a figure that really speaks to people, and he meant something to people of that generation. Something about Leonard Cohen elicits deeply personal feelings, and a lot of the responses have been like that. It's a combination of a figure who means a lot to people and a historical event that means a lot of people that makes the response a bit potent at times.

As an English-language writer living in Israel, what is it like to write for a largely North American audience?

Writing for a foreign audience requires taking a few steps back from the nitty-gritty of life in Israel and looking at the

broader picture. This puts things in perspective, and I find writing for people outside of Israel makes my writing about Israel better as it takes you out of the day-to-day political story and forces you to think about it in a deeper way, making it accessible to readers from places like Montreal.

When I wrote my first book (*The Aleppo Codex*), I thought I would need to produce a different version for Israelis, but then it turned out almost everything I needed to explain to English readers also needed to be explained to Israelis. I found that Israelis responded positively to the tone, which was different from the very high-resolution stuff they're used to. It's good to be forced to take a few steps back and assess the things you think don't need explaining.

Do you feel that being a Canadian informs your writing and the stories you choose to cover?

The answer is yes definitely. As a Canadian, I don't have the same sense of borders as someone born in Israel. For example, I wrote this book called *Pumpkinflowers* which is about a war in Lebanon I was involved in in the late '90s when I moved to Israel and became a soldier. But it's also about a trip I took back to Lebanon as a Canadian tourist and saw it from the other side, something I could do because I was Canadian. I had this sense that the borders that apply to everyone in Israel didn't apply to me because I'm Canadian.

I can also empathize with anyone, even those diametrically opposed to me. I have that knowledge which allows me to interview people in different ways, even if I reject everything they're saying. I think I'm open to my surroundings in a way that is particularly Canadian.

Over the past few years there's been increasing political polarization among North American Jewry and I'm curious if you felt a shift as a result in the Jewish publishing landscape.

The political climate has become increasingly fraught in recent years. Books about Israel that would have easily been published a decade ago probably wouldn't be published today. The publishing industry in general has shifted, it's much more suspicious of Israel. I think the interest that used to be there in terms of sales isn't what it was, and the interest that exists is often hostile. Because of this, people are hesitant to touch on subjects that could get them in trouble.

The discourse surrounding Israel is more likely to be projections of American racial problems onto Israel, or of European colonialism. Israel is considered a politically problematic topic. Luckily my books have been published, but I know people who have had trouble getting books published.

Has this had any impact on the way that you engage with your North American audiences?

Yes, there have been many times where I've spoken to North Americans about the issues with the story they're getting about Israel. I've found that to even begin discussing a story like the one in my book, it's necessary to address the political fantasy news story that people are getting. This fantasy is designed to discredit the country which makes it difficult to engage with the country in a meaningful way, which is what I see as my actual job.

To a lesser extent, I also want to help people navigate through the positive propaganda; if you think Israel is a story about pioneers dancing around the bonfire, we're also not going to be able to talk about it as a real country. People are bombarded

with these narratives and it's having an impact. Anyone who deals with explaining Israel to English speakers is spending more and more time doing that kind of thing.

Shifting gears back to your book, it was just announced that it will be adapted as a limited TV series, making it the first non-documentary dramatization of Leonard Cohen onscreen. How did that project come together?

It came together thanks to producer Jill Offman. When the book was still in manuscript form, she heard about it and thought it would make a great drama. She very tenaciously pursued this project for almost two years, and she managed to get the cooperation of the Leonard Cohen estate; the biggest production company in Israel, Keshet International; and Yehonatan Indursky who created and wrote *Shtisel*.

I'll be very interested to see what they come up with, how they pull it off, who they get to play Cohen, and what the vibe is like between the American or North American actor who will play Cohen and the Israeli cast. I think it'll be an interesting process and I think the product is likely to be pretty interesting.

Are there any actors you would like to see play Leonard Cohen?

There've been a few names thrown around, one was a young Dustin Hoffman, and I have to say, he would've been perfect. But as for modern actors, it's not my world. You would need someone who has that intense, dark Leonard Cohen sexuality, which is not easy to nail. He's depressed in a way that somehow is evocative and not depressing to the people around him. I think they'll find someone good to pull it off. ■

Hannah Srour-Zackon writes about books for The CJN.

Back to the future for a Toronto couple whose parents all met each other in a displaced persons camp in Ainring, Germany

/Ron Csillag

This is where it all began for us, in this *gemutlich* Bavarian town of Ainring. Just 30 minutes west of Salzburg over the Austrian border into southern Germany, this sleepy place—verdant, tidy, ringed by splendid snow-topped mountains, home to 10,000 residents—is where my wife and I spoke of coming for all our 40 years together.

That's because this is where my parents met in a displaced persons camp in the American zone of post-Second World War Germany, and also where my wife's parents met. And also where the two couples became friends—and where they were

each other's witnesses at their civil marriage ceremony.

It's a wondrous story, arising from the foul war years, that's widely known among our friends and family. But actually going to Ainring didn't seem doable, until it did.

Our parents spoke highly of this place, one of many DP camps in Germany, Austria and Italy built for roughly 250,000 Jewish displaced persons who either could not, or, understandably, refused to return to their former homes. This is where they began to heal after years of degradation in Nazi concentration camps, wracked with disease, and dazed from sheer shock. They were fed, clothed, housed, and given jobs. They were rehumanized.

My father, who had been shot while serving in the Hungarian army on the Soviet front, then shipped to a forced labour battalion, then incarcerated at the Mauthausen concentration camp, was given a job as a dental technician at the local hospital. That's where he met my mother, who'd survived camps at Auschwitz and Stutthof. She was deputized a nurse.

My wife's Polish-born father, meantime, arrived at Ainring after surviving the Warsaw ghetto, the Majdanek and Buchenwald camps, and a death march. He was a trained machinist. My wife's Hungarian mother, a survivor of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, was all of 16 when she came to the camp and was too sick to work.

How and when the two couples met is lost to the mists of time. A photograph from the era sheds little light. The men in the camp formed two soccer teams, and a small sepia picture shows one of them. My father was at one end, and near him stood my future father-in-law. Whether this was taken before or after they had met their wives varied depending on my father's failing memory decades later.

But my late father was sure of this anecdote: One day, my wife's father returned from an errand holding two pieces of paper. "What are those?" my father asked. "They're marriage licenses," his soccer buddy explained. "Why two?" my father wondered. One, came the reply, for him and his betrothed, and the other was for my parents.

So the two couples set off for the local *burgermeister's* office and got hitched on Jan. 30, 1947. The story was that on the way there, the men pulled their brides on sleds through the deep snow. On the way back, the women pulled their new husbands.

Bored silly during a COVID lockdown, I wondered about the forms they must have signed. Using Google Translate, I composed very straightforward queries, supplying precise names and dates to the town's clerk, Herbert Reichenberger. Mere hours later came four pages, replete with the then mayor's exquisitely handwritten entries of names, dates of birth, hometowns, histories, and occupations. Sundry legalities were rendered in old Germanic script.

And, yes, there they were: The signature, next to "witness," of my wife's father on my parents' form, and my father's backhanded autograph on my in-laws' certificate.

Reichenberger was prepared for our visit to the *rathaus*, the local town hall. He had already pulled the volume off the shelf. "*Heiratsbuch* [marriage book], 1947-10.6.1948" read the spine, with L-shaped steel reinforcements on the book's corners. The

tome smelled aptly musty, and the documents seemed somehow more authentic in person. My wife lightly traced her fingers along her late parents' fading signatures.

Our guides today are Hans Eschlberger, the jovial former mayor of Ainring who happily fetched us from Salzburg, and Rainer Esterer, an instructor at the Bavarian Police Institute for Further Education. Officers from across Germany come here for training in academic subjects and law enforcement. It's in the basement of the institute where Ainring's history is told in glass cases and on large panels.

Ironically enough, the place where Jews found a haven after the war began as an airfield where Adolf Hitler's personal plane could land to take him to one of his residences. Dubbed the Eagles Nest, it's a 30-minute car ride from Ainring, 6,000 feet up, perched on a rocky outcrop near the town of Berchtesgaden, and supposedly has a stunning Alpine view. Tours are offered to the place, which is now a restaurant. We declined.

The airfield grew into a planned base for the Nazi air force, the *Luftwaffe*, but that was abandoned. For the duration of the war, it was home to the German Research Institute for Gliding, which the Allies refrained from bombing because they wanted its know-how.

The DP camp was established in late 1945. Logistics were provided by the U.S. Army but it was administered by UNRRA, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. The camp lasted only two years but in that time, Ainring developed an elementary school, vocational classes, sports clubs, a synagogue, a small hospital, an elected self-government, even a police force. At its peak, in February 1947, the population was 3,166, about 300 of whom were considered permanent residents.

Today, there's no trace of the camp, save for a small row of ramshackle barracks that are now home to a tombstone maker. The DP camp is commemorated on a bronze plaque near one of the town's sprawling fields. In German, it states that "remembrance applies to all victims, in particular the refugees and surviving inmates of the concentration camps who, after the war, out of bitter misery, found a new home here and all over the world."

That was true of my wife's parents, who made their way to Holland before coming to Canada in the early 1950s, and of my parents, who returned to Hungary, where more political upheaval sent them here in late 1956. In Montreal, the couples reconnected.

When I was born a few months later, there was only one person my parents knew who had a car that could take my mother and me home from the hospital. That was my future father-in-law, who preferred holding me over my mother's small suitcase.

The two couples got together yearly to mark their joint wedding anniversary. The tradition continued after my father-in-law died in 1973, and for the 1982 version of the dinner, my wife and I were invited and finally met for the first time.

We owe it all to Ainring. ■

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