

“We Started Over Again, We Were Young:’ Postwar Social Worlds of Child Holocaust Survivors in Montreal”

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POSTWAR MONTREAL AND ITS PROBLEMATIC WELCOME OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS

- **Thousands of child Holocaust survivors arrived in Montreal, Quebec between 1947 and 1952.** Their reception was complicated for a number of reasons. First, **the population of Quebec was known for their antisemitic rhetoric.** Second, Montreal was an ethnically, linguistically, and religiously divided city between French Catholics, English Catholics, English Protestants, Jews, and many other ethnic groups
- Some Jews had been living in Quebec for over a hundred years. However, much of the city’s **prewar Jewish community** was composed of Eastern Europeans. After fleeing pogroms in the early 20th century, this community **was struggling to establish their place in Quebec society.** They had just started seeing progress in their businesses and social lives when WWII broke out. Thus, they were uneasy about the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) bringing Holocaust survivors to Montreal
- Despite these challenges, Jewish Canadians went to great lengths to help survivors resettle in Montreal by establishing Jewish social services and institutions
- **Both the Jewish and non-Jewish public was unprepared to receive survivors’ stories.** They were either too difficult to hear, caused too much guilt for the listeners, or seemed too far-fetched to believe
- Social workers believed survivors were so damaged by their experiences that they would not be able to rebuild their lives. Additionally, poor upon their arrival and with their education interrupted, survivors were not considered suitable candidates for marriage
- **Feeling harshly judged and misunderstood, many survivors distanced themselves from Canadians and bonded only with other survivors.** This segregation led them to carve out numerous spaces for themselves in which they could feel like people, rather than survivors. Within these spaces, they were able to network, and eventually disprove the community’s depressing diagnoses by having families and integrating into society

CHILD SURVIVORS

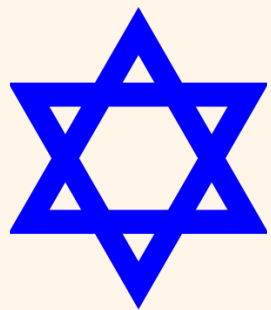
- Child survivors were undergoing two major changes in their lives: **they were children becoming adults and they were immigrants adjusting to a new country**
- Some arrived with family, a few came to stay with relatives, others immigrated alone or came with friends through the CJC’s War Orphans Project
- **Child survivors were not viewed as genuine victims by adult survivors, and were not encouraged to speak about their experiences.** They were considered too young to remember or feel. Without a space to share their experiences, most of their stories would remain unknown to the public for a long time

THE IMPORTANCE OF SURVIVORS’ ORAL HISTORY

- Over eight months, a team of interviewers met with eighteen Holocaust survivors who gave testimony in public. **The researchers wanted to know the survivors’ motivations for giving public speeches.** Specifically, they asked what survivors learned from recounting publicly, **how they transformed their memories into narratives** (tailored to a range of settings), and **what they thought was missing in Holocaust education**
- Unfortunately, **the survivors’ postwar lives were not treated with the same depth as the Holocaust itself. Little attention had been paid to understanding how survivors defied destruction and rebuilt their lives**
- **There were very few stories about survivors who had immigrated to Canada.** Most prominent survivors, who spoke and wrote about the Holocaust still lived in Europe
- **As the Nazi project aimed at silencing victims, it was important to examine how that legacy was defied in the postwar world**
- Existing, well-established literature described the reception and integration of Holocaust survivors in Montreal and Canada; Sheftel and Zembrzycki built on this research by **examining the early years of adjustment from survivors’ perspectives**

MAINSTREAM JEWISH COMMUNAL SPACES

The pre-existing Jewish community established a number of programs and clubs within extant and new spaces, designed to meet the needs of the new refugees.



These spaces were all in close proximity to one another, around Saint-Laurent Boulevard, or the Main. The Main remained the heart of Montreal's Jewish community in the immediate postwar period. It housed synagogues, smoked-meat shops, and kosher butchers. Yiddish could be heard on the streets

JEANNE MANCE HOUSE (JMH)

- The JMH was a community-created centre for orphaned survivors under the age of eighteen who came to Montreal between 1947 and 1949
- It served as a temporary dwelling while survivors awaited permanent placement. The JMH provided them with resources and a sense of safety
- Children spent time among peers, other survivors, and Canadian Jews. In addition to meeting other children, these survivors encountered volunteers and professionals, including social workers, doctors, dentists, psychologists and vocational guidance counsellors
- Children were encouraged to attend educational activities. Accelerated language courses took place in the mornings while afternoons were spent introducing children to life in Canada. Volunteer groups organized activities that included picnics, concerts, plays, shopping tours, and local excursions
- Although the House provided survivors with a sense of comfort, it was overcrowded, with twenty cots in one large room. It also lacked privacy. The children did not necessarily enjoy living under the watchful gaze of adults

THE YOUNG MEN'S AND YOUNG WOMEN'S HEBREW ASSOCIATION (YM-YWHA)

- The YM-YWHA was a communal space near the JMH that encouraged child and adult survivors to participate in its programs, offering free memberships to war orphans
- Program organizers hoped that these programs would help refugee youth integrate into the larger Jewish community, while socializing in a more diverse yet controlled space
- Instead of forming integrated mixed groups, survivors established newcomer groups. This was due in part to the language barrier but, more importantly, many survivors felt they were treated differently by Canadian Jewish youth

THE JEWISH PUBLIC LIBRARY (JPL)

- The JPL was an important communal space for child and adult survivors that did not require any type of membership or association
- The Library was devoid of gatekeepers, providing a setting in which survivors could resume their interrupted education without being scrutinized
- The Library organized courses on Yiddish literature, Bible studies, Jewish and world history, and the English language. Each course comprised ten to thirty lectures of one hour each, costing twenty-five cents per lecture
- Survivors, particularly adults who were not living in communal centres, cherished the Library. It gave them an opportunity to improve their English and find better jobs. They also met other survivors with whom they could easily relate to and learn from. They shared survival strategies, and supported each other's development and progress

EVERYDAY STRUGGLES AND TRANSFORMATIONS

- While many orphans remembered their early days in Montreal as mainly happy, they were also extremely challenging times. **Adjusting to their new-found freedom was difficult.** Musia Schwartz recalled being unable to believe she did not need an identification card to leave the reception centre. Ted Bolgar remembered making a habit of approaching police officers and asking them for directions, as a way of overcoming his phobia of uniforms
- Upon arrival to the JMC, war orphans were taken to a local factory to pick a suit, which made a huge impression on some of them. **A desire to look like a Canadian was very important to the refugees. It enabled them to begin to feel “normal”** (i.e. like everyone else, not excluded as outsiders)
- In the JPL, some survivors enrolled in the poet Irving Layton’s English class. The class was composed of recent immigrants who had minimal knowledge of the English language. In this class, the students would sit around the table listening to poetry. When asked to respond to the poems, **despite insecurities around their limited knowledge of the English language, survivors shared their feelings and stories, including their wartime experiences.** Layton listened carefully, showing an interest in understanding them fully. He was one of the few people who did not trivialize their harsh experiences. **This safe and supportive space helped survivors to process their experiences and emotions**
- **Survivors’ diverse social worlds combined their old and new lives.** The Holocaust wasn’t the only issue dividing Canadian Jews, Gentiles, and survivors; language, culture, and upbringing all played roles as well. Many child survivors chose to associate mainly with others from similar backgrounds, with whom they could sing European songs. **Beginning anew was easier when they did not have to forget the past and everything they had come from**

THE NEW WORLD CLUB (NWC)

- The NWC was founded and led by two German Jews, Dr. Reichman and Dr. Pfeifer. It was located in a rented space in the McGill ghetto. The Club had roughly two hundred members, all survivors, who gathered every Sunday
- Within the Club, there were two separate groups: child and adult survivors. Adults listened to speeches, arranged guest lectures, and recited poetry. The younger generation, however, was mostly interested in dances
- Child survivors came from various European countries. Since few could converse in English, the group was loosely divided along linguistic lines
- Many child survivors came to have fun. As most of them lived in cramped shared apartments, this was a much-needed, affordable space where they could be together and enjoy themselves
- For others, the NWC served as more of a support club. Survivors learned about employment opportunities, education and housing options, and/or day-to-day necessities such as where to shop for goods on consignment
- The NWC disbanded around 1951 when survivors began to integrate into the larger society. Although the Club had been short-lived, its legacy continued to affect those who had belonged to it. Many survivors created non-biological families with other survivors as well as met people who became family

SURVIVORS’ AGENCY

- One hundred and seventy-five **orphans formed eleven separate newcomer clubs** within the YM-YWHA. One of them was “The New Canadian Club.” For a year and a half, it organized weekly gatherings, dances, and community walks. The Club also published a bimonthly bulletin, “New Life,” in both English and Yiddish
- Although many survivors were advised by social workers and other professionals to continue with their education, **most chose to enter the workforce.** Above everything, **they wanted to get out in the world and become independent**
- Being away from the watchful gaze of gatekeepers allowed survivors to tap into their inner resourcefulness and hone their professional skills. **They built self-confidence and created social connections that helped them pursue their financial goals, such as finding higher-paid jobs, renting and/or buying their first homes**
- **Survivors wanted to be on equal grounds with other peers,** resisting pity. In NWC, they socialized among people who just understood them. Instead of constantly explaining themselves and talking only about the Holocaust, they could focus on what they had and whom. **Many married other survivors and/or forged lifelong friendships**

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