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"On the Right Side of History": Brian Mulroney's Enduring Battle Against Antisemitism

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and Monda Halpern**

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Donald E. Abelson and Monda Halpern

INTRODUCTION

In Judaism, the number 18 holds special meaning. Eighteen is the numerical value of the Hebrew letters that spell *chai*—the Hebrew word for life. For Jews, therefore, the number 18 is a symbolic affirmation of vitality and a mark of good luck. That Brian Mulroney was the 18th prime minister of Canada (1984–93), then, may be more than serendipitous. A staunch supporter of Jews, Mulroney established a trusted relationship with Canada’s Jewish community and has consistently decried antisemitism.

Mulroney has keenly recognized that despite collective post-Holocaust remorse and decades of Jewish upward mobility and acceptance in Canada, complacency about the status and welfare of Jews is a luxury that Canadians can ill-afford. As prime minister, Mulroney established a variety of initiatives to undercut and redress antisemitism: he consistently appointed Jewish Cabinet members and envoys, launched the Commission of Inquiry on Nazi War Criminals in Canada (the Deschênes Commission, 1985–87), and sought the protection and survival of Israel. In the years since his time in office, he has continued this commitment to the Jewish community, confronting and denouncing antisemitism passionately and publicly. Three factors help explain what motivated Mulroney, a man from Baie-Comeau, Québec, a small pulp and paper mill town that had no Jews, to battle antisemitism: his exposure to social justice issues while a student at St. Francis Xavier University (StFX), his years in Montréal in the 1960s, and his intense appreciation for the lessons of the past which inspired his consistent resolve to be “on the right side of history” (Gillespie, 2014).

Although a handful of historians and political scientists have studied the relationship between several prime ministers and the state of Israel—a litmus test for whether they are seen to support Jews and a Jewish homeland—far less consideration has been paid to how, and the extent to which, they have interacted with Canada’s Jewish community. Beyond the exclusionary immigration policies directed against European Jews by the Mackenzie King government during the Second World War (Abella &

Troper, 1986), little is known about the level of commitment by prime ministers in ensuring the well-being of Jews as related to Canada.

Indeed, Mulroney's tenure in office is most often associated with other policy and human rights issues. Focused on his critical role in strengthening the bilateral relationship with the United States and shaping the course of world and Canadian history, studies generally emphasize his negotiation of the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement, the North American Free Trade Agreement, and the Acid Rain Treaty, and his multiple efforts to engage in constitutional reform. Moreover, they rightly underscore his work to combat apartheid in South Africa, rescue Ethiopians from deadly famine, address discrimination of Indigenous communities, and safeguard French language minority rights in Manitoba. To date, despite copious contemporaneous stories on Mulroney and Jews in *The Canadian Jewish News*, the national Jewish newspaper, as well as a record of Mulroney's own words on the subject, few scholars have examined the robust relationship between the prime minister and Canada's Jews, his ongoing concerns regarding their treatment and security as well as those of Israel, his dire warnings about more frequent and virulent waves of antisemitism, and his motivation for publicizing and redressing the Jewish plight (Blake, 2007; Gollner & Salée, 1988; Gratton, 1990; Hampson, 2018; MacDonald, 1985; Sawatsky, 1991). This study seeks to fill this void and serves as a testament to how leaders should lead.

ANTISEMITISM IN CANADIAN HISTORY

Antisemitism has long been woven into the fabric of Canadian society, especially following the climax of Jewish immigration between 1880 and 1920. During these decades, approximately 100,000 Jews fled Eastern Europe for Canada, with most settling in Montréal, Toronto, and Winnipeg. This influx of Jews caused fear among nativist Canadians who perceived them as less than white—they were neither Anglo-Christian nor English-speaking and were also extremely poor. Moreover, Canada sought immigrants who would make good farmers, loggers, and miners, but Jewish culture tended to stress brains over brawn, and they were more likely to be peddlers and shopkeepers. Canadians were suspicious of Jewish resistance to reside in rural areas and small towns where they could more effectively assimilate. Furthermore, they were concerned with what they saw as the Jewish proclivity for communism and crime.

Hostility toward the Jews was particularly intense in the 1920s and 1930s. As historian Richard Menkis noted, "The 1930s were the bleakest period for Canada's Jews" (Menkis, 2001, p. 49). It was partly fuelled by hate rhetoric promoted by American luminaries such as radio preacher Charles Coughlin, business tycoon Henry Ford, and pilot Charles Lindbergh, and by numerous Fascist organizations popping up throughout Canada, particularly in the West (Palmer, 1992, p. 173, 169–73; Wallace, 2003). In addition, countless schoolyard skirmishes and incidents of synagogue and Jewish-school vandalism culminated in August 1933 with Toronto's Christie Pits riot: After a summer of anti-Jewish

protests, swastika banners, “Heil Hitler” salutes, and antisemitic slogans initiated by local Nazi-inspired swastika clubs on the beaches and in the parks of Toronto, the riot saw Jewish teenage boys fight back after an enormous swastika sign was unfurled at a local baseball game. Jews confronted gentile boys in a fierce battle that included thousands and lasted six hours. Fortunately, no one was killed, despite being the largest and most violent ethnic conflict in the city’s history (Halpern, 2019).

Jews were also denied entry into many jobs, professions, universities, social and athletic clubs, summer resorts, and neighbourhoods, and, if not completely excluded, were subjected to antagonism and quotas (Menkis, 2001, p. 41–49; Robinson, 2015). Restrictive covenants, for example, were common among neighbourhood property owners who refused to sell or rent homes or cottages to members of certain races, including Jews. The covenants were also stipulated by many land developers who prohibited Jews from purchasing property in new suburban enclaves (“Canadian Appellate Court,” 1949; Gladstone, 2011, p. 157–58).

Mulroney’s home province of Québec was especially antagonistic to Jews. The Catholic Church and French nationalists spearheaded this hostility, generally opposed to anyone who wasn’t Catholic, French, and francophone, and who seemed to represent urban interests, materialism, communism,

Restrictive covenants, for example, were common among neighbourhood property owners who refused to sell or rent homes or cottages to members of certain races, including Jews.

and modernism. For many Catholic Quebecers, Jews embodied these undesirable traits. But Protestants in Québec could be equally hostile: As Jews were shut out of the Catholic school system, they were forced to attend Protestant schools whose administrators and teachers resented their enrolment, and institutionally barred the involvement of Jewish parents and trustees (Abella, 1999, p. 130–33; Tulchinsky, 2008, p. 283–300). In short, the French Catholics despised Jews because they were neither French nor Catholic, and the English Protestants despised them because they were neither Anglo nor Protestant. Thus, Jews were outliers, a “third solitude,” and mistreated by both groups (Troper, 2010, p. 41). Fanning the flames was fascist leader Adrien Arcand, who regularly spewed his antisemitic rhetoric in *Le*

Patriote, a Montréal fascist newspaper. In 1934, he formed his Nazi-inspired Christian National Social Party that organized antisemitic rallies, boycotts of Jewish-owned stores, and the dissemination of antisemitic propaganda, and that inspired the launch of other Nazi-like organizations throughout Canada (Speisman, 1992, p. 120). Moreover, in 1934, all 14 interns at Notre-Dame Hospital in Montréal walked off the job to protest the hiring of a Jew, Dr. Samuel Rabinovitch. For days, they picketed the hospital and refused to work, telling the Montréal press that patients would surely resist examination by a Jewish physician. Soon, they were joined in their protest by interns at other Catholic hospitals, as well as by local prominent clergy. Eventually, Rabinovitch resigned his position (Abella 1999, p. 179–80). Ten years later, on May 21, 1944, fire erupted in a newly erected synagogue in Québec City, an incident that was immediately identified as arson motivated by antisemitism (“Attorney-General,” 1944).

In the late 1930s, with little empathy toward the worsening plight of European Jews and worried about alienating Quebecers, the King government severely restricted the immigration of Jews to Canada, rejecting almost all Jewish refugees from Nazi Europe. These included the 937 Jewish passengers on the *MS St. Louis*, the German ship turned away from Cuba, refused disembarkation in Canada and other countries, and forced to return to Europe where many of its passengers perished (Anctil & Comeau, 2021). Accordingly, Canada, with its expansive land mass and relatively scant population, welcomed fewer than 6,000 Jews between 1933 and 1938; this number was among the worst of any country accepting Jewish refugees, including much smaller countries like Argentina, which took in 63,500 (Gilbert, 2000, p. 39). As one King immigration official now famously remarked about the prospect of Jewish refugees in Canada, “none is too many” (Abella & Troper 1986, p. xxi).

Jews resisted the antisemitism levelled against them, especially after 1933. They organized marches and rallies to protest Nazism and reconstituted the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC), a national coalition organization that battled antisemitism and represented their collective interests (Troper, 2010, p. 31). Most of all, they succeeded in the face of both systemic and informal obstacles by upholding their religious and cultural distinctiveness while embracing their Canadian identity.

In the 1950s and 1960s, partly in response to the horrors of the Holocaust and due to increasing anti-racist legislation, a climate of minority rights and multiculturalism, and the official rebuke of antisemitism by the Second Vatican Council, overt antisemitism in Canada and the US subsided (Robinson, 2015, p. 115–16). This decline was also both the cause and effect of Jewish upward mobility and professionalization which invited greater respectability, integration, and acceptance (Troper, 2010). According to historian Harold Troper (2010), the 1960s “was a decade in which barriers to Jewish participation in the larger Canadian social, political, and economic mainstream slipped away” (p. 4).

But much work still needed to be done. As Ira Robinson noted in *A History of Antisemitism in Canada* (2015), “for all the social progress Jews experienced in the postwar period, it remained patently clear that certain deep-seated prejudicial attitudes in Canadian society remained” (p. 115). Perhaps no Canadian statesman embodied them more in the 1950s than Governor General Vincent Massey who “harboured a deep and personal distaste for Jews” (Troper, 2010, p. 5). As for Pierre Trudeau, who became prime minister in 1968, his relationship with Jews was far more complex, making it “at once close and prickly” (Troper, 2010, p. 204): While he came to represent liberalism, progressivism, and human rights, in his early political life, “Trudeau’s Québec had no room for ‘ethnics’ and certainly not for Jews, whom he saw as alien to the values of Catholic Quebec” (Troper, 2010, p. 208). (Mulroney, baffled by the Jewish support that his predecessor and the Liberals enjoyed, viewed Trudeau as a “blatant antisemite” for believing that “Jewish wartime immigration to Canada was a greater threat than German tanks rolling across Europe,” and condemned his general silence regarding both the historical and contemporary mistreatment of Jews (Mulroney, 2022; Mulroney 2007, p. 532–33)). In Québec especially, Jews continued to be the object of antagonism, not only due to exaggerated French-Canadian perceptions of Jewish affluence, influence, and self-interest, but to intensifying Québec nationalism and a growing separatist movement. In response to this increasing hostility,

Québec experienced a “Jewish exodus” over the next three decades, with 30,000–40,000 Jews leaving the province (Robinson, 2015, p. 121–23). Noting the “high level of anti-Semitism” in Québec, sociologists Robert J. Brym and Rhonda Lenton projected in 1991 that “It is certainly possible that as Québécois become better educated and more secularized the level of anti-Semitism in Québec will drop”; they observed, however, “that secularized Québécois have a home waiting for them on the left – a home that is scarcely more hospitable for the Jews than the more religious right” (Brym & Lenton, 1991, p. 416).

The 1980s saw the notable rise of antisemitic propagandists and Holocaust deniers. Jim Keegstra (1934–2014), for example, the mayor of Eckville, Alberta, and a high school teacher, preached antisemitic rhetoric to his students which highlighted his belief in malevolent Jewish character traits and global conspiracies and that decried the Holocaust as a hoax. In 1984, the start of Mulroney’s tenure as prime minister, Keegstra was charged under the Criminal Code for promoting hatred of an identifiable group. He appealed his conviction, which was ultimately upheld by the Supreme Court of Canada (*R v Keegstra*, 1996) (Robinson, 2015, 139–40). Ernst Zündel (1939–2017), a German immigrant to Canada in 1958 and a young protégé of Adrien Arcand, was also charged in 1984 for publishing and disseminating antisemitic pamphlets that declared the Holocaust as fake. After two trials, he was convicted but was acquitted on appeal by the Supreme Court of Canada (*R v Zundel*, 1992) who affirmed Zündel’s right to freedom of expression (Robinson, 2015, p. 140–42). The 1980s demonstrated that although there had been significant social and legal reforms since the post-war period, antisemitism was still active and pervasive.

COMMITMENT AS PRIME MINISTER

With the 1984 federal election, Progressive Conservative Brian Mulroney won the largest majority in Canadian history. Despite this popularity, the Jewish community was anxious about the newcomer and its untested relationship with his government (Troper & Weinfeld, 1992, p. 292); however, against the backdrop of Holocaust denial and neo-Nazi ferment, Prime Minister Mulroney sought to combat this culture of prejudice and discrimination. This effort should not be viewed through the lens of political expediency: With Jews representing less than two per cent of Canada’s electorate, Mulroney had little to gain politically by garnering favour with the Jewish community; instead, he was fulfilling an ethical imperative—pushing for Jews in federal politics and diplomatic posts, establishing the Deschênes Commission, and supporting the existence and self-preservation of Israel.

Jewish Representation in Federal Politics

Aware of the absence of Jews from the formal institutions of political power, Brian Mulroney, during his years as prime minister, sought to increase the participation of Jews in federal politics. Despite a long history of vigorous political activism and established partisan affiliations, Jews held few appointed and elected positions, providing little influence at the federal level. Mulroney successively

appointed three Jews as chief of staff to the prime minister, “perhaps the most sensitive and influential unelected position in Ottawa,” and one that had never before been held by a Jew (Mulroney, 2005, p. 22). These men were Stanley Hartt (1989–90), Norman Spector (1990–92), and Hugh Segal (1992–93).

In 1992, Mulroney then appointed Norman Spector as Canada’s first Jewish Ambassador to Israel. This appointment shattered the long-held notion that Jews possessed a divided loyalty to their country of citizenship and to Israel, making their allegiance to Canada dubious (Mulroney, 2005, p. 23). The events leading up to Mulroney’s decision to appoint Spector as Canada’s ambassador to Israel are worth recalling. After Spector resigned as chief of staff in December 1992, Mulroney asked him directly what his plans were. Armed with a PhD in Political Science from Columbia University, Spector said that he would likely return to British Columbia and teach at a university. “‘Well, Norman.’ I said, ‘that’s what you *plan* to do. What would you *like* to do?’ ‘Well, I’d love to be Canada’s ambassador to Israel, but that will never happen because I’m Jewish,’ he replied [emphasis in original].” As Mulroney recalls in his memoirs:

Up until then, there had been an unwritten policy in the Government of Canada that implied that Jews had dual loyalties and thus could not be appointed ambassadors to Israel. After Norman left, I called the deputy minister of external affairs and asked if the current list of proposed ambassadors was complete. Specifically, I asked, ‘Do you have someone for Israel?’ ‘Yes,’ came the response. ‘I think you have a new candidate.’ (Mulroney, 2007, p. 880–81)

Mulroney wasted little time putting forward the name of Spector, who was “an unabashed Zionist” and fluent in Hebrew (Kirshner, 1993, p. 6). “‘This question of dual loyalties...never prevented us from appointing French Canadians to Paris, or English Canadians to England,’” said the three-time university debating champion, “‘So let’s just toss that aside as a silly part of our past, and I will sign the order appointing Spector to Tel Aviv’” (Mulroney, 2007, p. 881).

Mulroney also made other significant appointments. Senator David Croll, a Liberal elected to Parliament in 1945, was commonly regarded as ideally suited for a Cabinet position, but was passed over, according to Mulroney, “for no apparent reason at the time other than his Jewishness” (Mulroney, 2005, p. 23); in 1990, he appointed the 90-year-old Croll (Canada’s first Jewish senator) to the Queen’s Privy Council. In 1986, he also appointed Canada’s first Jewish female senator, Manitoba’s Mira Spivak (Love, 1986, p. 1). And, in 1984, he made former provincial New Democratic Party leader Stephen Lewis Canadian ambassador to the United Nations, a notable selection in light of his party affiliation.

The Deschênes Commission (1985–87)

With the existence in Canada of 2,000 Nazi war criminals, whose suspected presence had been “ignored by the Canadian government,” Mulroney initiated the Deschênes Commission of Inquiry on

Nazi War Criminals in 1985 (Hellin Learning Centre, n.d., p. 1). Ira Robinson noted that his stated plan for the Commission was “one of his first steps as prime minister” and that it was “unexpectedly and seemingly without overt pressure from the Canadian Jewish community” (Robinson, 2015, p. 138). Indeed, CJC leaders, who neither lobbied for the Inquiry nor had close ties with Mulroney, “reacted with disbelief” (Troper & Weinfeld, 1992, p. 294). Rumours had been circulating that Josef Mengele, the notorious doctor who performed brutal medical experiments in Nazi concentration camps, was residing in Canada. This suspicion, which would later prove untrue, spawned the investigation into former Nazi officers who had escaped to Canada after the war where they were able to elude punishment and establish new lives. The Commission affirmed the existence of 20 Nazi war criminals in Canada, and the Mulroney government promptly avowed to amend the Criminal Code to ensure they would face trial in Canada (Troper & Weinfeld 1992, p. 295); in 1987, the *Crimes Against Humanity and War Crimes Act* was passed which permitted Canadian courts to prosecute war criminals living in Canada (Hellin Learning Centre, n.d., p. 1).

Much controversy surrounded the Commission. Even with Canada denouncing the popularity of Holocaust denial, there were opponents of the investigation who questioned the merit of delving into the past: Holocaust survivors were aging and their memories fading, and accused perpetrators were often ensconced in ethnic communities proud of their military service and patriotism, had lived otherwise productive and lawful lives, and were too elderly and frail for possible jail time (Mulroney, 2005, p. 22). As well, the investigation was exacerbating tensions between Jews and Ukrainians, the latter of whom felt targeted and defamed with the hunt for Nazi collaborators (Troper & Weinfeld, 1992, p. 295). Overall, the Commission dug up a history that for many was just too old and too agonizing (Mulroney, 2005, p. 22).

Despite these contentious issues, Mulroney insisted that “the government should proceed with this major initiative because it was simply the right thing to do for the Holocaust survivors, for the dignity of the Jewish community, and for the honour of Canada” (Mulroney, 2005, p. 22). The Commission not only sought to bring Nazis to justice, it attracted national attention to the reality of antisemitism in Canada and to the compelling connections between Canadian indifference to war criminals and the apparent rise of Holocaust denial (Robinson, 2015, p. 138–39). In 1985, in response to the Commission, Mulroney was an invited guest to a conference in Ottawa organized by the CJC for several thousand appreciative survivors and their children living in Canada (“Holocaust Survivors Gathering,” 1985). As scholars Harold Troper and Morton Weinfeld note, with the Deschênes Commission, “40 years of federal inaction appeared to be at an end, the long struggle for justice realized, the suffering of Holocaust victims not forgotten, nor their memory betrayed” (Troper & Weinfeld, 1992, p. 295).

Israel

Mulroney was also a loyal friend to, and steadfast defender of, Israel, who frequently pledged that Canada’s foreign policy in the Middle East would see Canada “make an ‘unshakable commitment’ to

the integrity and well-being of Israel” (Mulroney, 2007, p. 378; Mulroney, 2005, p. 23). Unlike other Western leaders whose support of Israel has been lukewarm or has been rooted in evangelical dogma antithetical to Jewish continuity or in securing an evangelical electoral base, Mulroney believed in Israel’s self-determination as a “legitimate and independent state” (Engler, 2010; “PM Calls for Moderation” 1989, p. 1; Robins, 2017). As an early symbol of this declaration, he invited Israeli president Chaim Herzog for an official state visit to Canada in 1989; it marked the first by an Israeli president since the creation of the state over four decades earlier (Mulroney, 2005, p. 23). Herzog, in turn, acknowledged Mulroney as ““a tried and trusted friend of our people and country,”” a sentiment echoed by former prime minister Shimon Peres (Arnold, 1989; Mulroney, 2007, p. 365).

Indeed, for Mulroney, Canada’s participation in the Gulf War was motivated not only by the desire to free Kuwait from Iraq and maintain Canada’s collective security but also to help ensure Israel’s safety.

Notably, Mulroney’s unreserved support of Israel was the cause of “many and public disagreements” with Secretary of State for External Affairs Joe Clark. Clark espoused that the PLO should be regarded as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people while Mulroney deemed the PLO a terrorist organization with whom negotiation was untenable (Csillag, 1993, p. 4; Fisher, 1991, p. 17). Mulroney was stunned by his Cabinet’s expressed hostility toward Israel, exasperated by the fact that ““They just don’t get it”” (O’Callaghan, 2022). For Jews, it was this conflict between the prime minister and his own Cabinet member that exemplified Mulroney’s unqualified pro-Israel Mideast policy (Csillag, 1993, p. 4).

Indeed, for Mulroney, Canada’s participation in the Gulf War was motivated not only by the desire to free Kuwait from Iraq and maintain Canada’s collective security but also to help ensure Israel’s safety (Mulroney, 2005, p. 23). Affirming its autonomy and agency, Mulroney maintained, however, that “considerations of its internal security are for Israel, and Israel alone, to determine,” as ““for very important historical reasons, Israel is of course better qualified than most to make determinations about its own well-being”” (Mulroney, 2005, p. 23). In a joint statement expressing gratitude for Mulroney’s “condemnation of Iraq’s criminal attacks on Israel,” Canada’s six largest Jewish women’s organizations, collectively representing more than 50,000 women, praised Mulroney and his government for their ““unwavering support of Israel in this time of crisis”” (“Women’s Groups,” 1991, p. 3).

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COMMITMENT AFTER PUBLIC OFFICE

When Mulroney announced his resignation in February 1993, *The Canadian Jewish News* declared that “By all official accounts,” Canada’s Jewish community and Israel “are losing one of the best friends they ever had in Brian Mulroney.” The newspaper reported that “Jewish communal leaders

agree” that he was “as sensitive to the needs and desires of Canadian Jewry and as staunch a supporter of Israel as anyone could hope for” (Csillag, 1993, p. 4). Irving Abella, president of the CJC, stated that Mulroney “demonstrated great personal interest and sensitivity to the domestic and international concerns of the Jewish community of Canada.” Abella also expressed appreciation for “his longstanding friendship and understanding for Israel,” noting that Mulroney “had a visceral attachment” to the country” (Csillag, 1993, p. 4; “Mulroney, Announcing Resignation,” 1993). Mulroney’s unfaltering support of Israel was also recognized that same year by B’nai Brith and the Canada-Israel Committee (“Mulroney, Announcing Resignation,” 1993).

In the decades since holding public office, Mulroney has continued his efforts condemning antisemitism and warning against impending aggression. “When I ceased being prime minister,” he wrote, “I maintained that attitude, publicly denouncing those, from the United Nations to the Canadian government to foreign governments and organizations, who showed hostility or malice to Israel or the Jews” (Mulroney, 2005, p. 24). In 2000, the CJC, Québec Region, presented Mulroney with a glass encased *mezuzah* in recognition of his “unwavering support for the Jewish community of Canada and for the State of Israel, as Canada’s Prime Minister and throughout his public life” (Glass-encased *mezuzah*, 2000).

A zealous missionary in publicly promoting the evils of antisemitism, Mulroney has regularly and repeatedly spread his message. It is formally expounded not only in his 2005 article “Antisemitism: An Enduring Reality,” but has also appeared in his various books and in a variety of news and current affairs outlets, including the *National Post* (June 2010; March 2019) and the *Huffington Post* (October 2013). Even with the urgencies of the pandemic, he mentioned the abolition of antisemitism in an article on his stated priorities for a post-COVID-19 world (Mulroney, 2020). He has also shared his views in numerous guest lectures and speeches (Arnold, 2013; Mulroney, 2019).

In confronting antisemitism, Mulroney has never shied away from exposing Canada’s unsavoury historical record. In his 2003 article, for example, he outlined some of these black marks, including the riot at Christie Pits and the Rabinovitch affair (Mulroney, 2005, p. 19–20). He has also relayed more personal encounters with antisemitism: for example, at the 1976 Québec Economic Summit where Yvon Charbonneau publicly condemned the Montréal Jewish elite in “a decidedly racist manner” (Mulroney, executive vice-president of Iron Ore of Canada at the time, “demanded the microphone and denounced Charbonneau and his views on the spot.”) (Mulroney, 2005, p. 22). Mulroney understands that contemporary antisemitism does not “surface suddenly, in a vacuum...it forms part of a historical continuum” (Mulroney, 2005, p. 16). As such, he does not assume that antisemitism will readily vanish or that Canadians should be any less vigilant.

Mulroney’s close ties to the Jewish community are evident in his tight circle of Jewish friends and colleagues. Many of them are renowned philanthropists who support Mulroney’s leadership endeavours and his own philanthropic causes: they include highly esteemed entrepreneurs Charles Bronfman and Leonard Lauder. In introducing a 2011 panel discussion between Mulroney and former US Secretary of State James Baker, Bronfman praised Mulroney for his many achievements,

bemoaning that he is “one of the most underrated and underappreciated” Canadian prime ministers (“Bronfman Lauds,” 2011). In 2014, Mulroney celebrated with Bruce Kent, vice-president RBC Dominion Securities, who, marking an anniversary with the firm, and as the son of a Holocaust survivor, pledged \$100,000 to the Canadian Society for Yad Vashem (Arnold, 2014).

INFLUENCES

Mulroney’s formative years did not foretell his sensitivity to the treatment and concerns of Jews. There were no Jews in Baie-Comeau, where he was born in 1939; indeed, he first met a Jewish person, the son of a local clothier, when he was a student at St. Thomas High School in Chatham, New Brunswick (Mulroney, 2005, p. 15). Although his father had marched up Champlain Street in Baie-Comeau as part of his local militia, signalling his readiness to serve against Hitler, the ravages of war and antisemitism in Europe, not surprisingly, had largely escaped the notice of a small-town, working-class boy (Mulroney, 2005, p. 15). His sheltered childhood may help explain why scholars examining Mulroney’s unforeseen pronouncement of the government inquiry into Nazi war criminals, “could not find a motive” for this commitment (Bialystok, 2022, p. 273). Three factors, however, inspired this and his other initiatives to help eradicate antisemitism: his time at StFX, his early years in Montréal, and his resolve to nurture a legacy of integrity.

St. Francis Xavier University

Mulroney’s years as an undergraduate student at StFX, a small, predominantly Catholic university nestled on a hill overlooking downtown Antigonish in rural Nova Scotia, would be life-altering. There he acquired the reputation as a leader imbued with a sense of public service and social justice. After graduating from St. Thomas High School (now St. Thomas University), he entered the freshman class in the fall of 1955. As one of approximately a thousand students, the young Mulroney soon became immersed in student politics. Although his parents were lifelong Liberals, not unusual for French-speaking Catholics at the time, Mulroney soon gravitated to the young Conservatives on campus (MacDonald, 1985, p. 37–38, 41–43). It did not take long for him to move up the ladder in the Conservative movement both at StFX and federally when he began campaigning for John Diefenbaker (MacDonald, 1985, p. 42–43). Mulroney’s charm, tenacity, and ability to create and nurture relationships soon made him a popular choice for helping to develop the young Conservative party at StFX., as well as for organizing successful charitable pursuits, including his fundraising project that raised \$1,100 for Hungarian refugees (MacDonald, 1985, p. 43).

While studying history and political science, Mulroney was exposed to the teachings of Reverend Dr. Moses Coady. Coady, a Roman Catholic priest, educator, and co-operative entrepreneur, was known widely for spearheading the Antigonish movement, a program dedicated to elevating and empowering struggling rural communities locally and abroad (MacDonald, 1985, p. 43). Coady’s lifelong commitment to social justice was not lost on Mulroney. He recollected that “The Coady

International Institute [that was founded in 1959 at StFX] was designed to improve standards of living of people in developing countries; and the education of successive generations of students who were formed in this atmosphere [were] rendered more gentle and caring as a result ... I know from personal experience that few people can be educated at St.FX, and emerge untouched by those values” (Mulroney, 1983, p. 88). There is little doubt that the lessons he learned from Coady helped shape his thinking around the scourge of antisemitism.

Montréal

In 1964, with his move to Montréal as an aspiring labour lawyer, Mulroney interacted with a vast and active Jewish community. Here he formed life-long friendships, meeting men like Stanley Hartt, a legal colleague who would become his future chief of staff and federal deputy Finance Minister (Arnold, 1985, p. 3). Although he “really came to know the Jews for the first time” at law school at Laval (Mulroney, 2005, p. 15–16), it was his early years in Montréal when he “learned of the shocking culture of anti-Semitism that prevailed in this country and this city within our own lifetimes” and that inspired his “interest in and support of the Jews and Israel” (Mulroney, 2013, p. 2; Mulroney, 2005, p. 16). He recollected that “The Jews of Montreal were, in my judgement, remarkable. Families were

Mulroney’s flattering impressions of Jewish vitality, resilience, and success were not youthful exaggeration; they were rooted in a reality particular to 1960s Montréal.

close, values were taught, education was revered, work was honoured, and success was expected; these principles had spawned over the decades an extraordinary community of teachers, doctors, lawyers, writers, and business leaders” (Mulroney, 2005, p. 16).

Mulroney’s flattering impressions of Jewish vitality, resilience, and success were not youthful exaggeration; they were rooted in a reality particular to 1960s Montréal. With more than 100,000 Jews, Montréal (and increasingly Toronto) was the centre of Canada’s Jewish community, and, unlike in most other places, their number was growing in the post-war years (Troper, 2010, p. 26, 42). Tens of thousands of Jewish immigrants were flocking there, many among them Holocaust survivors with families and French-speaking Sephardim from Morocco (Troper, 2010, p. 26, 44, 45). Adult children who grew up in the city were also remaining to attend university, and many of them, despite suffering insidious forms of discrimination, became prosperous entrepreneurs and professionals who moved to affluent neighbourhoods and started families of their own (Troper, 2010, p. 27, 28). Montréal was also where “Jewish organizational and institutional life was thick on the ground,” creating a crowded but extraordinary landscape of social, political, educational, religious, and social welfare associations, including the head office of the CJC, designed to unite, elevate, and fortify the Jewish community (Troper, 2010, p. 29, 31). At the helm of this institutional structure comprising an army of volunteers was an elite group of wealthy entrepreneurs and philanthropists, such as Sam Bronfman, who exerted their substantial influence over a community that experienced unprecedented resources and “pulsed with a vibrant cultural and intellectual life of its own” (Troper, 2010, p. 30–32, 41). These years of

Jewish community-building and rising success in Montréal left an indelible mark on Mulroney who routinely wondered

How could it be...that the progenitors of such a law abiding and productive group that was demonstrably making such a powerful contribution to the economic, cultural, and political life of Montreal and Canada were reviled over centuries and decimated in a six-year period, beginning in the year of my birth? Thus began my first serious reflections on and encounters with antisemitism. (Mulroney, 2005, p. 16)

The Right Side of History

The Holocaust, only 20 years over by the mid-1960s when Mulroney arrived in Montréal, significantly shaped his perception of antisemitism and the Jews. In 2005, he wrote “To this day, I cannot watch footage of the faces of Jewish mothers, fathers, and children consigned to the gas chambers in German concentration camps without, as a Canadian, feeling a great sense of sorrow, loss, and guilt” (Mulroney, 2005, p. 16). He later noted that “Canadians talk proudly of our tolerance and fair-mindedness. Often a tone of moral superiority insinuates itself into our national discourse. But these virtues are of fairly recent vintage. The truth is we have little to be smug about” (Mulroney, 2005, p. 19; Mulroney, 2010, p. 3).

For Mulroney, Canada’s collective shame rests largely in the treatment of the Jews by the Mackenzie King government (Mulroney, 2005, p. 19–21). Appalled by the way in which King mishandled the Jewish refugee crisis based on his “visceral distrust of Jews” and on “political expediency,” Mulroney has been blunt about “Ottawa’s abdication of moral leadership” (Mulroney, 2005, p. 21). “This was a moment,” asserted Mulroney, “when Canada’s heritage and promise were betrayed. Canada’s conduct was absolutely disgraceful” (Mulroney, 2005, p. 21). Reflecting on this transgression, Mulroney asserts “Prime ministers are not chosen to seek popularity. They are elected to provide leadership. Prime ministers are supposed to tell Canadians not what they want *to hear* but what they have *to know* [emphasis in original]” (Mulroney, 2005, p. 21).

Mulroney looked to the lessons of the Holocaust as inspiration for helping to redress other injustices. He wrote,

I viewed apartheid with the same degree of disgust that I attached to the Nazis - the authors of the most odious offence in modern history. My strong and unwavering support of Israel and the Jewish community of Canada was based on this view. In both these areas, I was resolved from the moment I became prime minister that any government I headed would speak in the finest traditions of Canada. (Mulroney, 2007, p. 398)

In weighing the bigotry faced by other minority groups in Canada, however, he has distinguished the Jewish experience: “the story of the Jews remains markedly different. The Holocaust saw to that” (Mulroney, 2005, p. 23–24).

History reminds us that, by definition, antisemitism will always conclude that Jews are undesirables. They have been deemed either too poor or too rich, too stupid or too smart, too weak or too strong, or too much outsiders or too much insiders. Recognizing the historical consequences of these dangerous judgements, Mulroney noted that opposition to them must be clear: “ambivalence on an issue of such importance is for the cowardly, which is why...our elected leaders cannot duck or dodge” (Mulroney, 2005, p. 21–22).

Significantly, Mulroney’s resolve to be on the right side of history concerning the Jews was not reserved only for the fight against antisemitism. An important initiative by his government to combat misogyny in the Jewish community occurred in 1991 with an amendment to the federal *Divorce Act*.

More generally, Mulroney’s keen appreciation for the lessons of the past helped institute another reform directed at historically victimized groups in Canada: the practice of official government apologies.

The amendment prevented the *get* (Jewish divorce) from being used as a bargaining tool in civil divorce negotiations (typically by husbands as only they can initiate a *get*), a strategy designed to extort concessions from wives, and hold them hostage in unwanted marriages and unable to remarry (Csillag, 1993, p. 4). With the new legislation, husbands who denied their wives a *get* were not allowed to seek civil resolution (e.g., child custody or property division) until they granted the religious divorce. This revision was a rare, cutting-edge feminist reform.

More generally, Mulroney’s keen appreciation for the lessons of the past helped institute another reform directed at historically victimized groups in Canada: the practice of official government apologies. In contrast to his predecessor, Prime Minister Trudeau, who “spurned these sorts of official apologies,”

Mulroney “bucked the trend,” apologizing in 1988 for the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War (“Trudeau to Offer Formal Apology,” 2018, p. 3). This significant gesture paved the way for prime ministers Stephen Harper and Justin Trudeau to issue apologies to other historically disenfranchised groups, including the Jews of the *MS St. Louis* and their Canadian brethren (“Trudeau to Offer Formal Apology,” 2018, p. 1–3).

For Mulroney, Canada must confront its faulty past in order to create a more just future. He has proposed that “new steps must be taken.” These include the federal government’s appointment of a “blue-ribbon panel” who could “examine the growth of Holocaust denial, introduce action in cooperation with the provinces and territories of obligatory education about the Holocaust and the courageous history of Jewish survival, and urge the consideration and implementation of a national action plan to combat anti-Semitism, as Norway and France have done” (Mulroney, 2019, p. 3). These initiatives, Mulroney has emphasized, require the participation and education of Canadian youth so



that they and every Canadian can engage in “real progress” (Mulroney, 2019, p. 3). “And why is it important that we all continue to do that? Simply because history has taught us what happens when we do not” (Mulroney, 2005, p. 24).

CONCLUSION

Brian Mulroney’s efforts on behalf of the Jewish community have been consistent, explicit, and historic, and constitute a profile in courage. Influenced by his studies at StFX, his years in Montréal, and his awareness of history and his own place within it, Prime Minister Mulroney augmented the number of Jews in federal politics, launched the Deschênes Commission, and promoted the autonomy and safety of Israel; since his time in office, he has continued promulgating the case against antisemitism in his writings and in numerous speeches and interviews. When it has become far more expedient for political leaders to turn a blind eye to sensitive and politically volatile issues rather than risk a backlash from voters, Mulroney has not hesitated to jump with both feet into this political firestorm. Today, with antisemitism on the rise across the globe, facilitated by dark forces on social media spreading their hate and vitriol, Mulroney’s ongoing efforts to speak out against antisemitism should serve as a rallying cry to all leaders, regardless of party affiliation, to seek out and challenge hate and injustice. In one of Mulroney’s favourite quotations about political fortitude and conviction, Theodore Roosevelt maintained that

It is not the critic who counts: not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming, but who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself for a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat. (Roosevelt, 1910)

For nine years in office and in the decades that have followed, Brian Mulroney has taken his share of political hits and risks in the arena, and in the process has recorded a list of momentous achievements. These include a host of bold humanitarian efforts to which he has been fiercely committed; among them, his fight against antisemitism has arguably been his most articulated, passionate, and enduring.

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