

## Jews Inventing Ethnicity?: A Review Essay

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Volume 35, 1995

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt35re04>

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### Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

### ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

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### Cite this article

Loewen, R. (1995). Jews Inventing Ethnicity?: A Review Essay. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 35, 309–319.

# Jews Inventing Ethnicity?: A Review Essay

Royden Loewen

Ruth A. Frager, *Sweatshop Strife: Class, Ethnicity and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto, 1900-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1992).

Gerald Tulchinsky, *Taking Root: The Origins of the Canadian Jewish Community* (Toronto: Lester 1992).

AT FIRST GLANCE only the ethnicity of their subjects link these two histories of the Jewish experience in Canada. *Taking Root*, exquisitely written by a senior Canadian historian, is a comprehensive account of the history of the Canadian Jewish community over two centuries, from the 1760s to the 1920s; *Sweatshop Strife* is a case study of an urban working-class community over a 40 year period in which Jewish ethnicity was just one of several factors shaping self-identity, culture, and social behaviour.

Tulchinsky's book sets out to establish the specific contours of the Jewish community in Canada. While acknowledging that Canadian and American Jews shared many characteristics — dialect, religion, minority status — he argues forcefully that the Canadian experience moulded Jews into a distinctive and, in some ways, a homogenous community. The narrative of the book, thus, is not only a general history of Canadian Jews; it is also an argument supporting the idea of their uniqueness. As a comprehensive text, the volume describes the various Jewish migrations in detail. It begins with the coming of a few dozen English-speaking Jews following the conquest of New France and the establishment of a tiny Jewish congregation in Montréal in 1768; it ends with the integration of the 100,000 East European Jewish immigrants into Canadian society by the 1920s, a phenomenon that led the Canadian community to reach a point of "maturation." Tulchinsky's Royden Loewen, "Jews Inventing Ethnicity?: A Review Essay," *Labour/Le Travail*, 35 (Spring 1995), pp. 309-18.

implicit argument in each of the sections covering immigration is that the particular mix of Orthodox English-speaking and conservative Russian, Yiddish-speaking Jews ensured the development of a Canadian community that was quite distinct from the reform-minded, German-Jewish dominated community in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Specifically Canadian, too, were the various expressions of anti-Semitism. These included public acts such as the restrictions of Jewish political activity in Lower Canada, and the "virulent" anti-Semitism of such Canadian cultural spokespersons as Goldwin Smith and Ralph Connor in English Canada and Henri Bourassa and Joseph Edouard Plamondon in Québec. Of particular importance for this story is the severity of anti-Semitism in Québec, more pronounced than "anywhere else in North America." The result was a high degree of fear and uncertainty in the wider Canadian Jewish community, leading to a much more intense commitment to national organizations than in the United States where anti-Semitism was more benign.

As narrator of the national community, Tulchinsky also takes his readers on a cross-country tour, from the urban *shtetls* in Montréal, Toronto, and Winnipeg, to smaller, "withering" communities in the small towns of Western Canada and the Maritimes, and to the farming communities of the Canadian prairies. Again, a uniquely Canadian experience emerges; Jews were concentrated in the three larger cities, enabling the development of a cohesiveness unknown in the United States where Jews were more dispersed.

As expected, the book also portrays the institutional side of Jewish ethnicity; the book surveys the founding of the first synagogue, the first private school, the first Jewish cemeteries, the various philanthropic organizations and socialist clubs; of special importance are the national Canadian organizations — the early Federation of Canadian Zionist Societies and the later Canadian Jewish Congress — that gave Canadian Jews an institutional unity missing in the American community. The story also discusses the "great men" of the community, including Reverend Abraham de Sola and son Meldola, manufacturer Noah Friedman and Son David, and many others, sometimes in encyclopedic fashion. But never distant is Tulchinsky's thesis of a uniquely Canadian corps of leaders who, given the flexibility of Canada's biculturalism, tory society, and link to British imperialism, more easily embraced Zionism than did their American counterparts.

Frager's book belongs to a different genre. This is first and foremost labour history, the account of the struggle of Jewish workers — women and men — to attain improved working conditions in Toronto's needlecraft industry and eventu-

<sup>1</sup>Ironically, this analysis comes at the very time that American Jewish historians have argued that the characterization of 19th-century American Jews as "German" is simplistic and inaccurate. See, Hasia R. Diner, *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration, 1820-1880* (Baltimore 1992). Another recent work that has downplayed the differences between American and Canadian Jews is Moses Rischin, ed., *The Jews of North America* (Detroit 1987).

ally to secure a wider social reformation. The book places the workers in the context of global labour migrations that saw 2,000,000 East European Jews migrate to North America between 1880 and 1920. It focuses on the working-class experience of these Jews, who made the transition from an Old World craft-based economy to factory labour in an industrialized North American city. It richly details the highly competitive, dangerous and exhausting work, and describes the Jewish labour organizations, ranging from the transplanted, exclusively Jewish *Arbeiter Ring* and *Labour League*, to the institutions of the New World — the local branches of international-based unions like the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. And the book describes the ideologies, the religious-based ideas that represented North America as a "new Jerusalem," and the socialist ideas that undergirded labour activism and most of the Zionism in this urban enclave.

Specifically, the book is about the rise and fall of the labour movement in the Jewish community in Spadina. It seeks to account for the fact that Toronto cloakmakers and dressmakers built "one of the most advanced labour movements working people have ever created in North America," (211) but also that the movement "was relatively short-lived," "weakened by ... [insurmountable] divisions within the work force" and embodying an aim ultimately "beyond their reach." (216-7) The book finds its theoretical bearings in a labour historiography that has vigorously debated the variables of ethnicity and of gender in the fortune of the labour movement. Was ethnicity a divisive factor in the labour movement, or a resource of leadership and cultural form for protest? Was gender, given traditional roles, divisive in working-class formation, or given the common suffering of men and women, did it sustain class consciousness and class action? What was the result of the interaction of class, gender, and ethnicity? Clearly, as Frager argues, each social category affected the other; but her evidence suggests that of the three categories ethnicity was the most significant and enduring. The corps of Yiddish literature, Jewish mythology, and ethnic community boundaries were the foundations of the labour movement at its apex; similarly, these ethnic identities also provided women with both their culture of protest that strengthened the Jewish labour movement, and their continued subordination to men and separation from the wider Canadian women's movement, dimensions of their experience that would prove problematic.

Tulchinsky's and Frager's books thus offer two different accounts of the Jewish experience in Canada; one is a general account of a national ethnic community, the other a social analysis of an urban enclave. The two books, however, share a common strength. Both see the immigrant experience as a dynamic cultural response to particular events and environments. Without stating so explicitly, both books appear to accept a dynamic approach to ethnic history that has only recently begun developing in Canada. These new histories go beyond the older, but still used, association of the word "ethnic" with "the primordial group

into which one was born" and the word "culture" with the "primordial set of behaviours and attitudes that one ... displays."<sup>2</sup> Ethnicity and culture as employed in Tulchinsky's and Frager's books are less primordial and more situational. This approach reflects the suggestion in a recent and seminal work that "ethnicity itself is to be understood as a cultural construction accomplished over historical time," and as an identity that "is continuously being reinvented in response to changing realities both within the group and host society."<sup>3</sup>

By seeing ethnicity as dynamic, these studies are part of that cadre that has taken Canadian ethnic and immigration history beyond older models. The much criticized filiopietistic "contribution" history that prodigiously catalogued ethnic group achievements is absent in both *Taking Root* and *Sweatshop Strife*. But the books also seem to move beyond the once-pressing, but by now largely-fulfilled agenda, of making ethnic history "an integral part of the Canadian past."<sup>4</sup> In these older schemes, historians, reacting to unilinear assimilationist and modernizationist models and encouraged by Canada's Multicultural Secretariat, argued that ethnic groups had the resources to survive and persist on North American soil. This agenda seemed to be changing by the early 1990s as ethnicity, multiculturalism, and pluralism became more than persisting social phenomena; clearly, these categories were born or reborn at a time when society and culture were homogenizing and fragmenting simultaneously. Social commentators noted that as the global economy was creating a world-wide "McCulture" it was also driving people to seek familiar identities in localized worlds.<sup>5</sup>

A postmodernist analysis that dissects this globalized culture, seeing the "intrinsic dissonance in social life" and the "surrealist qualities of ... cultural repertoires" seems applicable to the study of ethnicity.<sup>6</sup> In this paradigm, ethnicity is ephemeral — disappearing, reappearing, symbiotic, multifaceted, multivariant, invented, and reinvented. In this view, ethnicity is not biological, not a group defined by cultural traits, but a set of identities that are contextual, cultural responses to particular historical situations. In this scheme disparate ethnic identities seem to be the authentic voices of people in local settings, the voices outside the glossy national metanarratives. Ethnicity becomes what Fredrik Barth has

<sup>2</sup>J.W. Berry and J.A. Laponce, *Ethnicity and Culture in Canada: The Research Landscape* (Toronto 1994), 6.

<sup>3</sup>Kathleen Neils Conzen, David Gerber, Ewa Morawska, George Pozzetta and Rudolph Vecoli, "The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the USA," *Altreitalia*, 2 (1990), 38; also published in the *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 29 (1992), 3-41.

<sup>4</sup>Howard Palmer, "Canadian Immigration and Ethnic History in the 1970s and 1980s," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 17 (1982), 46; Roberto Perin, "Writing About Ethnicity," in John Schultz, ed., *Writing About Canada: A Handbook for Modern Canadian History* (Scarborough 1990), 201-30.

<sup>5</sup>David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford 1990).

<sup>6</sup>Fredrik Barth, "Introduction," *Balinese Worlds* (Chicago 1993), 7.

suggested all "local variation in a traditional civilization" is, "the work done by people in the social and cultural construction of their realities..."<sup>7</sup>

In many ways the two works under examination embody this developing approach to ethnic history. True, both books establish the formal and definitive story with lists of names and institutions. True, too, neither book goes so far as to dismiss the notion of a persisting sense of Jewish peoplehood. Still, ethnicity here is not biological, descriptive or primordial. Both books have as a central theme, the shifting, contradictory, and developing set of identities known as Jewishness. In both accounts, Jewish immigrants are reinventing ethnicities in their adaptation to specific national and local circumstances.

Tulchinsky's book, which aims to establish the characteristics of a Canadian Jewish community, acknowledges that ethnicity changes, that it interacts with the cultural constructs of the host society, and that its formal unity overlays a fragmented and multifaceted ethnicity. There are few traces here of an earlier generation of "official history"; indeed, Tulchinsky distances himself from Benjamin Sack's 1945 *Geschichte fun Yidn in Kanada* which he notes elsewhere was "too much like a chronicle of events and list of important people";<sup>8</sup> and, clearly Tulchinsky also rejects the apologia of such a notable Jewish historian as Arthur Chiel whose 1961 study of Manitoba Jews concluded that "living as Jews did not detract from the sum total of the Canadian pattern but rather contributed to it more ... creatively" and that the Manitoba Jews were a "far cry from the 'marginal men' of some communities..."<sup>9</sup> *Taking Root* is neither a record of persistence nor a celebration of Jewish contributions.

It is true that Tulchinsky perpetuates some teachings of an older school and attempts what other ethnic historians have discouraged, "to write a pan-Canadian synthesis of an immigrant group."<sup>10</sup> He makes a strong case for a common Canadian Jewishness, conservative, orthodox, and Zionist and tied together by national Jewish organizations. However, he also argues that these organizations did not create an "intellectually homogeneous" or a "unified" community. Jewish ethnicity is disparate. Even the Canadian Jewish Congress founded with so much euphoria in March 1919 and bearing such a "remarkably clear statement of concern about the community's self-image and future," founded in a context in which "Canadian Jewry had become so diversified and so complex ...." (275)

Tulchinsky's Canadian Jewish community may have strong institutional centres or representation; still, much of the evidence reveals a community with less than neat social boundaries, a struggling "institutional completeness" at the local level, and little communal consensus. The tiny mid-century Montréal community

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Gerald Tulchinsky, "Recent Developments in Canadian Jewish Historiography," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 14 (1982), 121.

<sup>9</sup> Arthur A. Chiel, *The Jews in Manitoba: A Social History* (Toronto 1961), 182.

<sup>10</sup> Perin, "Writing About Ethnicity," 223.

was fraught with tension as the Sephardic religious tradition battled and subdued the Ashkenazic traditions, as Canadian-born Jews resisted identification with Polish newcomers bearing "strange accents and manners," (55) and as economic divisions separated the Jewish peddlers of St. Lawrence Street from the business tycoons residing near McGill College. These divisions became exacerbated in time as impoverished Eastern Europeans flooded the Canadian Jewish establishment. Jewish clothiers, manufacturers, and contractors hired members of their own ethnic group and families as workers in a "Hobbesian crushing system of undeclared war of 'all against all.'" (135) They resurfaced even as the international Jewish community assembled resources to establish farm settlements in western Canada; the author repeats Anthony Rasporich's finding that Jewish settlements in the West failed in part because they lacked "internal coherence of commanding communal religious beliefs and values." (168)

Tulchinsky may speak of a "homogeneous" community, but he also documents contradictory ideas of Jewishness, ranging from those held by orthodox Zionists to those of atheistic socialists. Only occasionally did this polarized community come together: as when Jewish rabbis supported "god-less" Jewish socialists because they sought justice as the *Torah* commanded; or when Jewish communists in small towns participated in "awkward unions" in the Passover to ensure the required quorum for the initiation of a Jewish community. And if internal cohesion was often lacking, social boundaries were also amorphous. Canadian Jews possessed multiple identities: intellectuals identified easily and emotionally with the pursuits and ideals of British imperialism; members of the upper classes mixed with Anglo-Canadians at the top of the "vertical mosaic"; workers joined non-Jews in creating unions to battle Jewish businesses; wealthy Jewish subgroups aligned themselves with non-Jewish schoolboards to distance themselves from poorer Jews.

In Tulchinsky's portrayal ethnic identities wax, wane, and are redefined in specific historic contexts. Anti-Semitism, as one might suspect, had a direct impact on self-definition; pogroms in Eastern Europe in the late 19th century and persecution during World War I brought Jews of diverse ideologies and national backgrounds together to pursue a "better future" for their people. Industrialization helped redefine Jewishness: *Haskalah*, the Reformist, pro-assimilationist Jewish ideology, shifted after Jewish traders and craftsmen were displaced in an industrializing Russia; Tulchinsky concludes that both Zionism and the various brands of socialism that appeared "were vehicles of a complex revolution in the self-understanding of vast numbers of Jews." (181) Immigration had an effect on the concept of Jewish community; despite their designation as "ethnoreligious," a minority of Jewish immigrants "were religious Jews who found their principal means of Jewish affiliation in a synagogue. ... Many other associations ... formed to encourage affiliation with friends. ... from the old land, and to help lessen the hazards of sickness and death." (131) The act of uprooting and relocating itself had reshaped ethnicity.

Like Tulchinsky's book, Frager's pursues a narrative that outlines the "fate" of a social collective; in undertaking this task, she, like Tulchinsky, sheds valuable light on the process of ethnicization. Ethnicity in *Sweatshop Strife* is not merely transplanted from the *shetl* in agrarian Europe to the factory in industrialized North America; it is fluid, reasserted, and reshaped in the context of the everyday life of factory work. Jewishness survived the difficult social and economic upheavals of Eastern Europe by asserting a heightened sense of peoplehood and an articulated hope of *di goldene medine* in North America. In Toronto several factors jelled to allow ethnicity to remain relevant. Jews established a "critical mass" in Toronto's Spadina district, thus allowing a Yiddish-based culture to consolidate; Jews established a majority presence at work as they moved easily from the household crafts they had perfected in Russia to the needle trades; Jews, unlike the re-migrating Italians, were compelled to stay in the New World, and were forced to adapt to unpleasant situations. The resultant ethnicity was given expression through Jewish domination of local chapters of North American-based clothing-industry unions. Here was a "vibrant Jewish working class culture that wove together their class and ethnic identities." (8)

It was an ethnicity, however, that was not merely transplanted to North America. A new Jewishness was born as Spadina's workers brought Old World social and cultural practices to bear on New World social and economic realities. As an oppressed religious minority in the Old World, Jews had developed a culture of "political awareness" and a "commitment to activism" (35); in North America's workplaces that culture was adapted by workers to protest against terrible working conditions. As a religion that traditionally reserved the study of the Hebrew *Talmud* for men, Judaism gave women more power in managing the household economy and its relationship to the marketplace, and thus encouraged them to assert themselves publicly to secure the economic well-being of their families: the boycotts of expensive Kosher meats were easily translated into activism within the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. And, as adherents of a religion with ancient teachings of social ideals and justice, Jewish atheists and communists had deep intellectual roots, as well as the cultural language to spread their message to the most conservative among their community.

If ethnicity is situational, as Tulchinsky's and Frager's books imply, then a closer look at the vehicles of that ethnicity becomes important. On one hand those vehicles are quite apparent: old world mythologies, the urban enclave, institutional completeness, oppressive working conditions. But evidence from both books hints that those mechanisms might be located in unexpected places. Indeed, what may seem as dysfunctional, circumstantial or of peripheral importance may in fact have been crucial to the establishment of Jewishness.

Both authors, for example, recognize that anti-Semitism was much more than an injustice perpetrated in Canada; both move beyond the agenda set by Irving



Abella and Harold Troper to expose "Jew hate."<sup>11</sup> Tulchinsky and Frager seem to be saying that what is significant about anti-Semitism is not that it happened in a supposedly tolerant place like Canada, but that it shaped a particular Jewish identity. Both authors conclude that opposition from the outside bolstered social boundaries and enriched Jewish cultural expression. Anti-Semitism in Québec led to the establishment of Jewish institutions, in Toronto to Jewish unions. Pogroms at various times in Europe engendered visions of a New Jerusalem among immigrant workers, drew Canadian Jews together to form the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC), and were the underpinning of Zionism that crossed ideological lines. It is significant that it was the perception of anti-Jewishness, as well as its reality, that drew Jews together. Tulchinsky notes that Japanese and Chinese in Canada faced greater hostility than did the Jews, and, ironically, Frager comments that the most discriminatory acts were often perpetrated by Jewish owners on Jewish workers.

The authors place less stress on social variables that another approach might contend were crucial in the process of Jewish ethnicization — inter-communal conflict, literacy, and household dynamics. As studies of other ethnic groups have concluded, the base of the immigrant community was the family, yet neither Frager nor Tulchinsky develops this difficult-to-write social analysis to great depth.<sup>12</sup> Both emphasize instead the public side of the ethnic community, the institutions and the unions. Frager notes that female assertiveness may have been rooted in women's roles within the household, but subordinates the analysis of this base to the oral memories of women on the picket line; there is little sense here of the continuing link between the majority of the women in the household and the minority of single women who worked in the factories. Tulchinsky concedes that, with reference to prairie farm settlements, what "has been less than adequately examined is the life of the Jewish men, women and children in these settlements"; but there is scant development of family and household dynamics, no mention of

<sup>11</sup>Irving Abella and Harold Troper, *None is Too Many* (Toronto 1983). Two recent works have moved the study of anti-Semitism in yet another direction, linking it to the expression of the nationalism of the host society. See: Harold Troper and Morton Weinfeld, "Jewish-Ukrainian Relations in Canada Since World War II and the Nazi War Criminal Issue," in Alan Davies, ed., *Antisemitism in Canada: History and Interpretation* (Waterloo 1992), 279-300; Ester Delisle, *The Traitor and the Jew: Anti-Semitism and the Delirium of Extremist Right-Wing Nationalism in French Canada from 1929-1939* (Montréal 1993).

<sup>12</sup>See, Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, *Family and Community: Italian Immigrants in Buffalo, 1880-1930* (Ithaca 1971), 262; Tamara Hareven, "The Laborers of Manchester, New Hampshire, 1912-1922: The Role of the Family and Ethnicity in Adjustment to Industrial Life," *Labor History*, 16 (1975), 265; Judith E. Smith, "Our Own Kind: Family and Community Networks in Providence," *Radical History Review*, 17 (1978), 99-120; John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants to Urban America* (Bloomington 1985), 84. For an analysis of the importance of the family in Jewish group-identity, see, Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life is With People: the Culture of Shtetl* (New York 1952), 269-430.

generational succession, of kinship networks, of household composition and of gender roles. (168) In a sense, even as Tulchinsky takes the reader into the heart of the St. John's *shtetl* in Toronto, portraying "its crowded conditions, filth, squalor, poverty," he leaves the reader at the thresholds of the houses (172); the only social interaction to which readers are privy occurs in the public sphere.

Both authors also note the importance of Jewish literature in the formation of identity; Jews not only based their ethnicity on sacred texts, but they also developed a rich popular literature in Yiddish. In this they agree with Ira Robinson and others who have argued that "the principal vehicle of [Yiddish Montreal] culture was literacy, made necessary by the requirements of a text-centered religious life which sanctified the word"<sup>13</sup>; it was a skill that was easily transferred to non-religious Jewish writing after secularization swept the community at the turn of the century. But could the two studies have gone further by analysing the importance of literacy *per se*? What, for example, was the effect of literacy itself on self-perceptions and identities. Walter Ong has argued that "writing fosters abstractions that disengage knowledge from the arena where human beings struggle with one another."<sup>14</sup> It provides historical actors with a sense of control over the flux of daily life; it may have been crucial in the formation of social boundaries and networks that enveloped Jewish ethnicity, or it may have been the source of integration with the larger Canadian community.

A fourth unlikely vehicle of ethnicization is inter-communal conflict. Like writers of other ethnic histories, Frager and Tulchinsky outline a host of different types of conflict in their particular ethnic group — religious, economic, social, personal, institutional, international. And like other writers, Frager and Tulchinsky decry the apparent fragmentation of community. Gender divisions in the Jewish community "significantly fragmented" Toronto's Jewish labour movement; divisions between different branches of socialism led to the "pulling apart" of the community. Neither author explores the process of ethnicization that may have resulted from this dynamic interaction. Historians of other ethnic groups have suggested that in places where discourse is dominated by internal conflict, there is room for little other discourse; a common language and array of symbols is ironically perpetuated or created. Stanley Nadel's study of German-speaking New Yorkers, including Jews, may be helpful here; he suggests that "complexity" should not be confused "with chaos"; he notes that in New York's German-speaking community "the hostility between [any two subcommunities] ... reinforced [the common] identity of both groups in a bond of mutual hatred that fostered a sort of segmentary solidarity."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Ira Robinson, Pierre Anctil and Mervin Boutovsky, *An Everyday Miracle: Yiddish Culture in Montreal* (Montréal 1990), 11.

<sup>14</sup>Walter Ong, *Orality and Language: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York 1982), 42.

<sup>15</sup>Stanley Nadel, *Little Germany: Ethnicity, Religion and Class in New York, 1845-80* (Urbana 1990), 4.

These two books, then, represent different approaches to the history of the Jewish experience in Canada, but share important commonalities. They are the culmination of a generation of intense Jewish historiographical activity, an activity noted by Tulchinsky himself more than ten years ago as a "modest renaissance." But if the books are a part of a wave that has documented the rich varieties of the ethnic experience in Canada, they also help point the field in new directions. Ethnicity in this case becomes less a phenomenon to be documented, than a facet of the complex experience of humankind that existed alongside and was intersected by other identities — national, gender, class, regional, and local. Historians are no longer merely filling in "gaps" in Canadian history. To that degree ethnic historiography "has come of age."<sup>16</sup> It is time to follow the lead of these books in interweaving ethnicity with other identities and seeing it as a dynamic force among others employed by individuals, families, and groups as they adjust to changing social and economic realities. Even the Jews, historically among the most intent and successful of Canadian ethnic groups in articulating a separate identity, have experienced an ethnicity that wanes and waxes, shifts and redefines itself, falters and is reinvented.

<sup>16</sup>Anthony W. Rasporich, "Ethnicity in Canadian Historical Writing, 1970-1990," in J.W. Berry and J.A. Laponce, eds., *Ethnicity and Culture in Canada: The Research Landscape* (Toronto 1994), 153.

*I acknowledge with gratitude the assistance in directing me to sources and in offering comments on the text of this review of Professors Richard Menkis, Gerald Friesen, Tom Nesmith, Hymie Rubenstein, and Henry Trachtenberg.*