



The country that might have been

Thousands of Jewish refugees were denied refuge in Newfoundland during the 1930s. Could the territory have become a Jewish hub and would that have stopped it from joining Canada? **Bernard Dichek** *Corner Brook, Newfoundland*



BERNARD DICHEK

THE CABINET minister slows the car down as he approaches what was once the main business street in the small town where he had grown up in eastern Canada. “This is where Harry Brenner had a dry goods store; over there was the large clothing store that Morris Gordon ran; and next to it Swirsky’s place,” says Tom Marshall, enthusiastically pointing out the locations of the Jewish-owned stores that once filled Broadway Avenue, situated on a hilltop overlooking Corner Brook, Newfoundland.

“At its peak, there were about 20 Jewish families living in Corner Brook,” estimates Marshall, the provincial attorney-general and minister of natural resources.

He turns the corner onto Concord Avenue and points to an overgrown field where a synagogue stood until the early 1970s. “I guess I’m the only one left,” he tells *The Jerusalem Report*, referring to the fact that the rest of the town’s veteran Jewish families have relocated to Montreal or Toronto, or another of Canada’s metropolises with large Jewish communities.

The Jewish families that settled in the sparsely populated territory of Newfound-

land and Labrador during the last century moved away for the same reasons that Jews have left numerous small towns across North America. For members of the immigrant generation, often the only places where they could find work was in remote locations. Then, as their children and grandchildren left for the bigger cities to study at universities and look for jobs and spouses, “the older generation grew lonely and packed up to join their offspring,” observes Dr. Douglas Wilansky, 83, a well-known Canadian medical researcher who himself left for Montreal and eventually Toronto, after growing up in St. John’s, the Newfoundland capital, where his father founded a synagogue in the 1920s.

But in Newfoundland, the pattern could have been reversed, suggests Robin McGrath, the author of a history of the Jews of Newfoundland and Labrador. McGrath tells *The Report* that Newfoundland could have flourished economically and even become a Jewish hub if the former British dominion, which did not join Canada until 1949, “had adopted a different policy towards the thousands of Jewish refugees who sought sanctuary during the 1930s.”

A remote fishing port on the northern coast of Newfoundland

McGrath’s book, “Salt Fish & Shmattes,” along with the research of Memorial University historian Gerhard Bassler, shows how Newfoundland’s immigration policy towards Jewish refugees of The Third Reich was arguably the most tightfisted of any place where they sought shelter. Out of 12,000 Jews who applied to immigrate or were part of proposals made by Jewish refugee organizations, less than 10 were admitted.

One of those proposals, made by Froim Banikhin in 1936, could have jump-started Newfoundland’s ailing economy.

Banikhin was a local Jewish entrepreneur, a member of one of the approximately 20 Jewish families living in Newfoundland at the time, who proposed bringing in several thousand highly skilled German Jewish refugees to develop a hydroelectric plant at Churchill Falls and exploit the area’s iron ore deposits.

Dr. Douglas Wilansky, who knew Banikhin

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while growing up in St. John's, says he is confident that Banikhin would have carried out his plan had he been given the chance. "Banikhin was a serious kind of guy who got things done," Wilansky recalls in an interview with *The Report*.

He certainly had the business track record to prove it. A decade earlier, Banikhin had noticed that local fishermen along the Labrador coast were using the abundant supply of *matjes* herring in the Gulf of St. Lawrence as bait. For the Ukraine-born Banikhin, who was aware of the huge market potential that herring had in Europe, seeing the fish "used for bait or thrown to the dogs was like watching someone tear up hundred dollar bills to start a fire," says McGrath.

Banikhin went on to set up 29 herring factories that employed hundreds of local workers.

ANOTHER PROPOSAL, put forth in 1934 by Simon Belkin, could have solved Newfoundland's desperate shortage of medical professionals at a time when the territory was struggling to control tuberculosis.

Belkin, who headed the Canadian office of the Paris-based Jewish Colonization Association, proposed bringing about 50 German Jewish doctors to isolated fishing ports who were willing "to answer calls using open boats in the summer and sleighs in the winter."

But the Newfoundland government, ruled by a joint council of British and local commissioners ultimately rejected these proposals. As Gerhard Bassler explains in his book, "Sanctuary Denied," the commissioners followed the dictates of a small group of some 300 merchant families who controlled the fishing and lumber industry. The xenophobic merchant elite who were all of British origins, notes Bassler, opposed the admission of anyone who wasn't of "British stock."

Most ironic was the reply the commissioners gave to a proposal made in 1939 by Budapest lawyer Dr. George Lichtenstern, who offered to bring 1,000 highly educated and skilled Hungarian Jewish farming families to the region.

"There is no prospect of room being found on the island for the settlers," wrote the Immigration Commission in 1939, notwithstanding the fact that Newfoundland and Labrador make up a largely uninhabited land mass twice the size of the entire United Kingdom.

The only refugees who were admitted were a handful of female German and Austrian Jewish doctors, who had escaped



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to Britain and who were recruited in 1939 to work as nurses. Humanitarian considerations did not enter into the decision to admit them, but rather, a desperate need to bring health care to remote fishing ports.

Nonetheless, the highly experienced refugee doctors were often treated by the general public with suspicion. Newspaper reports suggested that they might be German spies. In one case, the police received a complaint signed by 16 members of the staff at St. John's General Hospital accusing one of the refugee doctor-nurses, Dr. Ilka Deutsch, of sending light signals from her room.

After the war, Newfoundland continued to keep its doors closed to Holocaust survivors. And only after the territory joined Canada in 1949 did about 30 survivors gain entry. In the years that followed, a small number of Jews also arrived from other parts of Canada. Among them was Tom Marshall's father, Jack, a war hero who had led a Canadian infantry regiment during the D-Day landing in Normandy. Originally from Nova Scotia,

Jack Marshall managed a drugstore in Corner Brook before being elected to the Canadian parliament in 1968 and subsequently appointed to the Senate.

But it was his army career that meant the most to him.

"He loved the army," recalls Tom Marshall, noting that when he asked his father on his deathbed what he would have done differently if he could live his life over, he replied that he would have stayed in the army.

But the reason Jack Marshall left the army after the war, notes Tom Marshall, was that he understood that there was no chance of him advancing in the army hierarchy. "People said to him, 'Given your religion, you're not going to rise higher because after a certain level [army appointments] are political.'"

Tom Marshall himself doesn't recall ever experiencing anti-Semitism as a child growing up in Corner Brook, later on as a practicing lawyer, or during the past 10 years as a cabinet minister.

"I never wanted to leave here," says Marshall, acknowledging that he understands how the small size of the Jewish community eventually led others to depart. "Newfoundland is known for its natural beauty, but for me the nicest part was always the people. I had a wonderful childhood here and this is where I wanted to bring up my kids."

Marshall has been a popular politician, garnering more than 80 percent of the vote in his home riding of Humber East in several elections. After achieving budget surpluses during his years as provincial finance min-



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ister, political observers considered him a likely candidate for the premiership. However, he has announced that he plans to retire from politics when his current term ends in two years.

As minister of natural resources, he is currently focused on improving the lot of those affected by the province's beleaguered fishing, hunting and logging industries. Pointing to a sealskin wallet on his desk, he criticizes the way the anti-seal hunt lobby has deprived many of an important source of their livelihood.

"For years and years, people here hunted the adult seals, not the baby seals as the anti-seal hunt ads incorrectly show," he points out, adding that "the seal was an important part of the aboriginal culture too."

But if fighting the seal lobby has proven tough, he remains determined to preserve the pulp and paper industry "that has gone through hard times.

"THERE USED to be three mills in Corner Brook; now there's just one left and a lot of people's pensions are tied up in it," he says.

In pursuit of ways to expand the local economy, he is exploring trade opportunities with Israel. As both Newfoundland and Israel have in recent years discovered offshore oil and natural gas reserves, he notes that there may be opportunities for collaboration. In addition, there may be synergies in other areas such as agri-foods and applications for tree-derived fiber.

Marshall has also attempted to resolve a problem that continues to haunt Newfound-

land – the shortage of doctors in rural regions. When Marshall met with Alan Baker several years ago during Baker's tenure as Israel's ambassador to Canada, Marshall inquired about the possibility of bringing Israeli medical specialists over on a temporary basis.

"Ambassador Baker was very much impressed with the icebergs off the coast of Newfoundland and talked about how a few of them would solve Israel's water problems," recalls Marshall, adding with a smile. "I offered him all the icebergs he wanted in exchange for a team of medical specialists."

Even though the total number of Jewish families that have lived in Newfoundland has never exceeded more than 200 at any one time, their contribution has been substantial. Leading figures include Andreas Balaban, known for many years as Mr. Music in St. John's, where he founded the city's first piano studio and served as a conductor of the St. John's Symphony Orchestra; Dr. Leonard Miller and Dr. Horace Rosenberg, prominent medical leaders; Supreme Court Justice Abraham Schwartz; physicist Ernst Deutch; Boyd Cohen, of Grand Falls, who founded a chain of furniture stores; and others.

Still, as the province of only 500,000 inhabitants continues to struggle economically to this day, one cannot help but wonder what the province would have been like if more refugees had been admitted in the 1930s. During that period, among the Jews that fled to Britain from Germany were 18 future Nobel prizewinners, including Ernst Chain, the co-inventor of penicillin.

Newfoundland's Attorney General and Minister of Natural Resources Tom Marshall is one of the few Jews remaining in the province. He once offered Israel's ambassador to Canada 'all the icebergs he wanted' in exchange for much-needed medical specialists

"A few dozen Jewish businessmen with their families, some capital perhaps, and their best-trained workers could have transformed this place so that so many of us wouldn't have had to migrate out of here," says Robin McGrath, noting that it is not only Jews who have continued to migrate out of the province. Like many Newfoundland families, her own has had more members leave than stay.

"My father's brothers and sister all left and my mother had eight of her 10 siblings emigrate to mainland Canada and the US. Only two of my 10 siblings stayed in the province, and my kids all live and work elsewhere," she laments.

Summing up Newfoundland's missed opportunity, McGrath points out that when a referendum was held in 1948 to determine Newfoundland's future, "the vote in favor of joining Canada passed by the slimmest of margins, with less than 52 percent of the population voting in favor.

"If we'd had more Jewish entrepreneurs here before the war, I think we might never have joined Canada," she concludes. "We'd still be our own country." ■