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IMAGES OF THE FOREIGNER IN TORONTO,
1900-1930: A REPORT

In the early spring of 1974 Robert Harney of the Department of History, University of Toronto, and I undertook an exploratory project designed to locate and, where possible, collect photographs and other related material on Toronto's immigrant history. Our undertaking grew from two related assumptions - that Toronto has long been ignored as a pre-Depression inland immigrant centre, and that much primary material relating to the history of immigration in this city continues to escape the attention of professional archivists and historians.

There are signs that this longstanding neglect is ending; the National Ethnic Archives in Ottawa and organizations such as the Canadian Jewish Archives have shown interest in Toronto's early immigrants. We feel, however, that important primary material, largely in the hands of a dwindling number of survivors from the first immigrant cohort, will be lost forever unless projects like our own achieve a measure of success.

The failure to gather materials on the history of immigrants in Canadian cities is endemic to all centres. This may be especially true for Toronto. If the reasons for this remain unclear, a clue probably lies at the nexus of urban history and immigrant studies. Until recently Canadian historians have generally overlooked urban immigrant history or, at best, regarded it as an adjunct to the history of national economic, developmental or administrative themes. Immigration was seen as but one of many variables which might or might not have influenced the direction of urban growth or change. Accordingly, the role played by immigration in the history of ports of entry such as Halifax, Montreal and Vancouver or in centres of immigrant processing for the labour consumptive agro-mining industries such as Winnipeg, Edmonton, Sudbury and the Lakehead area has been examined. Looking at the urban immigrant experience in its own right, exploring the nature of the city environment upon immigrant and ethnic communities has, unfortunately, remained until the last few years, largely outside the purview of the Canadian urban historian.

In the case of Toronto before the Depression, historians have generally not regarded the immigrant's presence as a crucial factor in explaining the city's development. As a result, the history of immigration in Toronto and the Toronto immigrant experience during this period have been almost completely unexplored. This has left untouched the common yet incorrectly held impression that Toronto remained a city of British stock and manners untouched by immigration until the great post-1945 influx of peoples from eastern and southern Europe.

In all fairness it might be argued that immigrant history and especially the history of the urban immigrant experience requires a degree of sensitivity in the field that has generally been outside the scope of Canadian historians. More recently, a new generation of urban social historians, some of them descendants of the twentieth century immigrant streams, have begun entering the profession. The familiarity they bring to issues of immigrant concern, their application of newer historical method and, often, their fluency in relevant third languages or regional dialects makes possible a new approach to the dynamics of urban growth.

This new interest in the urban immigrant and in ethnic studies has spurred demand for primary research materials. Professor Harney and I undertook our project in the hope that it would not only be a step toward meeting this demand for Toronto, but that it would also offer a model for similar and expanded efforts in other centres.

We deliberately restricted our focus as to historical time period, subject matter and type of material sought.

Our time frame and particular subject meshed without difficulty. We confined ourselves to the period between the turn of the century and the Depression while acknowledging that earlier or later material relating to our subject would, of course, also be acceptable.

We limited our subject to foreign immigrants and their life experience. Conveniently, the term foreigner had a recognized, almost legal, definition during the period under consideration. The term was used to designate

non-British and non-Anglo-American immigrants. For all practical purposes foreigners were the immigrants who did not speak English as a mother tongue, and their children - a crude rule of thumb, but workable nevertheless.

Our decision to concentrate on photography, as opposed to other forms of primary material, was motivated by several factors: little had previously been done to gather photographs on the urban immigrant experience as a phenomenon; the photograph is a common personal document likely to have been preserved; it required little in the way of third language skills for the preliminary assessment of its value in a primary resource collection; and the camera as a portable and outdoor tool achieved popular acceptance just before and during the period under consideration.

Our choice of photography now seems obvious in retrospect but it was not obvious at the time. Post-Confederation Canadian historians have generally overlooked the photographs as a primary historical source. Photography has usually been regarded as a supplementary tool, useful in illustrating or detailing text, but seldom as a primary resource in any way equivalent to more traditional sources. Interpreting the past through photographs has been left largely to the professional nostalgia buff or film maker. In their hands, romanticism masquerades as historical objectivity.

More recently historians, especially social historians, have begun taking a more serious look at photography -- not just as a means of illustrating a text but as an aid to recreating the past. On the most elementary level the photograph captures an image of a specific social and physical reality, allowing a later generation a glimpse of forms, structure, fashions and group interactions of an earlier period. To the historian, however, the photograph can offer another more important perspective. It can be analysed and read much the same as the written word -- not to replace the written word, nor as an alternative to the written word, but as yet another dimension by which the historian might document his analysis of the past.

For our examination of the urban immigrant experience we expected that photography would give us the visual evidence necessary to reconstruct the patterns of immigrant life in Toronto. It might be useful here to comment on our methodology and to outline several of the issues which have surfaced out of our preliminary analysis of materials gathered.

Our initial approach was very broad; we sought to gather relevant photographs from any available source. We began with publicly accessible picture collections in archives and libraries. These photographs were seldom catalogued in a manner that made the search easy. Our knowledge of Toronto's urban geography, the immigrant work experience and the nature of immigrant social organisation and structure led us to relevant material. This description should not imply the existence of a systematic research plan, for photography does not seem to lend itself to ordered examination. In reality our book learning became the base on which a hit and miss search for material took shape, punctuated by periodic intuition and luck (and likely a large number of never to be known oversights).

The bulk of our collection in quality if not in quantity was uncovered outside public collections. Through personal contacts and some careful detective work we were able to locate and explore private collections, including those of several business establishments, public service and ethnic organisations and, most importantly, a series of family albums. Where possible important photographs were borrowed, re-photographed and the negatives added to our collection. In a few months our collection has grown to over 3,000 items. A photo-essay tentatively entitled The Foreigner in the City: Images of the Immigrant in Toronto, 1890-1930 is being prepared for publication by Van Nostrand Reinhold in late 1975.

Thus far the most exciting aspect of our work has been the reading of photographs. As a basis for our analysis four basic types of photographs have been classified according to the photographer's intent rather than photo-content.

Many of the photos in our collection were taken without any overt purpose of capturing immigrant life. For example, a city staff photographer

assigned to record a new road paving process might inadvertently capture an Italian road gang, a Macedonian popcorn man and a kosher butcher store in his background. This image preserved on film may now tell the historian more about the life of the foreigner than it ever told anyone about road paving.

The photographer was not always so neutral. The photographer on the public payroll or working for a social service agency sometimes employed his camera to generate our second major category. These photographs were specifically taken to capture the foreigner's situation - to illustrate a government investigation of sub-standard housing conditions, a church review of its local work or as part of a hospital's public promotional work. The Department of Health might have used photographs to demonstrate the need for new housing regulations, the Baptist Church to illustrate the need for missionary work among Papist and Jew or a local hospital to assess the operations of its out-patient department. For the historian these photographs can now detail something of foreign home life and the confrontation between immigrants and agents of wider Canadian society.

The foreigner had his own reason for hiring a photographer. In many instances the professional photographer was called upon to record rites of passage, weddings, Bar Mitzvah graduations, organisational events and even deaths. These posed, often stiff photographs so characteristic of the period, flowed back to the old country in an unending stream and made their way into family albums and collections of immigrant organizations.

The final division of photographs in our collection were taken by the foreigner himself or by groups in which he was a member. These photographs, often less staged than those of professional photographers, unlock the private world of the immigrant, a world from which historians have usually been excluded.

As with any historical source, photographs must be approached with some caution. One must be careful, for instance, not to read more into the photograph than can legitimately be proven. Depending on the source from which a photograph is recovered it is not always possible to know the exact date, location or photographer of any given item. Indeed, with

some items it is impossible to know the exact identity of individuals in the photograph or their ethnic origin. While there may well be methods available to fill in the missing information or legitimate basis for an educated guess, there is always the danger that a photograph can be misinterpreted as easily as a written text.

The major issue with which we continue to grapple is that of typicality. It is not always enough to accept a particular photograph as an exact image of what once was, even if only for an instant. One must consider to what degree the image represents a general condition or conversely to what degree it was an exception -- an exotic image which attracted one photographer's attention and might now re-enforce visual misconceptions or stereotypes of the past.

There seems to be no foolproof method for evaluating typicality. Nevertheless, as our collection grows we hope to better differentiate between the varying reasons why photographs were taken. In this way we will better understand the photographer's motive, the way in which any one item conforms or conflicts with the image reflected in other primary sources and, perhaps most importantly, the degree to which those who lived through the period regard a photograph as representative or not representative of their own life experience.

In this last regard, we have already discovered that showing photographs from our collection to persons who lived through the period, foreigner and non-foreigner alike, often produces additional items from family, institutional or business collections. Almost without exception photographs also unlock a stream of memories which add yet another dimension to the photographs. Unfortunately, we have yet made no concerted effort to coordinate our limited photo research project with a systematic oral history project. Although we remain bound by time and financial constraints, we are nevertheless considering a move in this direction.

Our project has been kept small. We recognise however, that a great deal must still be done in analysing existing material, gathering additional

items, extending the limited bounds of the project and organising an effective catalogue/storage system which would allow continued and open access to the collection. Plans for consideration or alternatives for each of these steps are currently being examined.

Harold Troper

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