

**THESE SIXTY YEARS:
THE LORD READING LAW SOCIETY
1948 – 2008**

The Earlier Years: A Prologue

Any discussion of the Society and the “giants” among its early members must acknowledge the enormous influence of the Montreal Jewish lawyers, many of whose reputations went far beyond the city, who pre-dated the Society. Immigrants or the sons of immigrants, and more than likely poor, these men had to be better, to overcome the overt and covert constraints they faced as Jews and as Jewish lawyers.

Samuel Jacobs, who became the Jewish member of Parliament for the essentially Jewish riding of Cartier, and was admitted to the Bar in the late 1890’s, is certainly such a titan, and was outstanding both as a political figure and as a lawyer. His success advanced the many younger Jewish lawyers he took under his wing – Lazarus Phillips, H. Carl Goldenberg, Louis Fitch, Henry Weinstein, Marcus Sperber, Nathan Gordon, Maxwell Goldstein, and Henry Weinfeld among them...

Benjamin Robinson, Joseph Shapiro, Philip Meyerovitch and Harry Batshaw were links to the “new generation” of lawyers like Philip Vineberg and Lazarus Phillips, who became leaders in tax law, a world that was then expanding. Considered “The Father of Criminal Law”, Joseph Cohen’s career as lawyer, politician and teacher lasted into the ‘60s. He and Philip Vineberg, who lectured in corporate law, are well-remembered by students of the day as spell-binding teachers who spoke eloquently and authoritatively without a single note, beginning each class precisely where the previous one had ended!

Louis Bercovitch, also a politician, and Jack Spector, were leading labour lawyers when labour law was first beginning. And H. Carl Goldenberg, then establishing himself as a neutral player, would

become an outstanding labour mediator. Especially in the societal aspects of the law, the Jewish leaders of the Bar were leaders in labour law, in tax law and, to some extent, in criminal law. Marcus Sperber was a great civil lawyer and Louis Fitch an extraordinary litigator as well as a politician.

The lack of appointments of Jewish Judges can be attributed to the fairly overt anti-Semitism of the ‘20s, ‘30s and ‘40s, as well as to the tradition of balancing the appointments of French and English-speaking candidates. Indeed, while the first Jew appointed a Judge in Canada, in 1914, was Samuel Schultz (to a county court in Vancouver), there wasn’t another Jew appointed for a long time. In 1931, there was not a single Jewish magistrate or Judge anywhere in Canada, although there were 350 Jewish lawyers. “The rarity of Jews in judicial positions was all the more notable in view of the fact that Jews held very prominent positions in the judiciary and the administration of justice in Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand and the Crown colonies, where Jews formed a much smaller portion of the population than in Canada.”

During the Great Depression, some of Montreal’s Jewish lawyers had given up hope of practicing law, and had turned to business or, as in the case of Saul Hayes, to Jewish communal advocacy.

The impact of World War II and the establishment of the State of Israel and Charter of the United Nations did have a felicitous impact, and some light appeared. Jewish lawyers were increasingly to act to open the doors that had effectively been closed to them and to further their own interests...

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1948**

A well documented incident is the catalyst for founding the Reading Society. In the Fall, it is decided to hold the annual convention of the Quebec Bar Association in Mont-Temblant Lodge, a facility in Quebec’s Laurentians owned by Joseph Ryan. At that time, the Lodge, like many other

establishments in the Laurentians and elsewhere, had a policy of “no Jews and dogs”. When representation is made to change the venue, Ryan’s reply is that it being off-season, there would not likely be many gentile guests around to be offended by a Jewish presence!

N.L. Rappaport confers with Bâtonnier Gustave Monette, K.C., who is visibly upset and asks to address a Montefiore Club meeting of Jewish lawyers. He apologizes for his ignorance about the Mont-Tremblant Lodge’s discriminatory policy, and for the Bar Council’s as well, but indicates that it is too late to change venue. He urges Jewish lawyers to attend.

But Montreal’s Jewish lawyers meet and decide to boycott that Mont-Tremblant Quebec Bar Association Convention. Indeed, the affair galvanizes the city’s Jewish lawyers to unite to advance their objectives. Society meetings are held at the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, Hillel House, the Young Israel Synagogue, the Windsor Steak House and The Stage Coach Restaurant. The Montefiore Club soon becomes the Society’s regular meeting place, even its unofficial home.

To prevent the recurrence of incidents like the unfortunate Mont-Tremblant affair, Gustave Monette also assures the group that the Bar of Montreal would amend its constitution whereby one member of the Jewish faith would be on the Council at all times. Arrangements are made with the English-speaking Section of the Bar of Montreal that one of the Anglophones be a Jew.

And so the Reading Society is born, its mandate to lobby for fair representation of Jews on the Bar and the Bench. It also constitutes a social group for Jewish lawyers and provides a forum for learning about new and evolving legal matters. As well, since the Society’s inception, it is recognized that the Jewish representative on the Council of the Bar of Montreal is a nominee of the Reading Society. All Jewish members of the Bar are members of the Society.

Benjamin Robinson becomes the first President. He is also the first Jewish representative on the Council of the Bar of Montreal, nominated for the period of 1948 to 1950. (Before this, Jewish representatives had been elected to the Council of the Bar of Montreal – Maxwell Goldstein, Q.C., in 1922, and Peter Bercovitch, K.C., in 1930.)

One of the responsibilities of the Reading Society is to recommend to the Executive Committee of the English-speaking Section of the Bar of Montreal the name or names of members of the Jewish faith who would be worthy candidates for the English-speaking Section to nominate to the position available to English-speaking members of the Council of the Bar of Montreal.

The Reading Society is named to honour Rufus Daniel Isaacs, a brilliant and accomplished British jurist and statesman. Born in England in 1860, this little-educated seaman and fruit-broker “took refuge in the study of law” when financial trouble struck his business ventures. His was a remarkably successful and diverse law practice that covered finance, labour, libel, divorce and criminal matters. His second career was as a parliamentarian: Isaacs served as Solicitor-General, Attorney-General and Foreign Secretary. He was the first Jewish member of the Cabinet. He was made Lord Chief Justice of England and took the title of Lord Reading. Isaacs also had a third career as diplomat, acting as Special Ambassador to the United States and Viceroy of India. He was eventually given the title of Marquess of Reading.