

Arts & Travel

College Street's immigrant/Jewish past celebrated in a book of essays and photos

By **SHELDON KIRSHNER**
Staff Reporter



Louis Rasminsky

College Street is to Toronto what St. Lawrence Street is to Montreal – a vital thoroughfare that reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of an ever changing, pulsating city.

A newly published book, *College Street – Little Italy Toronto's Renaissance Strip* (Mansfield Press), edited by Denis De Klerck and Corrado Paina, explores this colourful artery through the medium of thoughtful essays and nostalgic photographs.

One chapter, *The Jewish Experience*, charts the important historic Jewish presence on College Street.

It is written by Richard Menkis, a professor of modern Jewish history at the University of British Columbia, and Harold Troper, a University of Toronto historian and the co-author of that Canadian classic, *None Is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe 1933-1945*.

Until about World War I, as they point out in their lucid essay, the vast majority of Jews in Toronto lived in the densely populated St. John's ward, bordered on the east by Yonge Street, on the west by University Avenue, on the south by Queen Street and on the north by College Street.

The area north of College was a bas-

tion of Anglo-Protestant institutions that, they say, "might just as well been a million miles away" from the neighbourhoods familiar to Jews.

But after 1918, there was a shift and College Street and environs replaced St. John's Ward as the heartland of Toronto's Jewish community.

By that point, Jews were the largest non-Christian minority in Toronto, and they retained this status until the end of World War II.

Pulsing with activity, College Street, rolling westward from Spadina Avenue and including such streets as Major, Markham, Euclid and Palmerston, morphed into the centre of Jewish Toronto.

Among its residents were J.B. Salsberg, the trade unionist, politician and raconteur; Sammy Luftsprung, the professional boxer and winner of the Canadian welterweight title in 1938; Nathan Phillips, the alderman who would be Toronto's first Jewish mayor; and Louis Rasminsky, the Harbord Collegiate graduate who, in 1961, became the first Jewish governor of the Bank of Canada.

Holocaust survivors gravitated to the College Street hub, but as the 1940s and 1950s wore on, Jews moved northward to Davenport, St. Clair West and beyond.

Jewish institutions and synagogues, and Jewish-owned shops, cafes and restaurants joined the exodus.

College Street is all but bereft of Jews today. Italian, Portuguese, Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants have taken their place and made their respective contributions to what is arguably Canada's most cosmopolitan metropolis.

Yet, as the authors observe, a new generation of Jews – young, upwardly mobile professionals – is returning.

"Perhaps College Street may not only have a Jewish past," they write. "Maybe it has a Jewish future as well. And perhaps, then, it may yet be too soon to say *kaddish* for the Jewish presence on College."

Exactly.

Fan learns about being Jewish from Streisand

By **KRYSTYNA LAGOWSKI**
Special to The CJN

When Barbra Streisand rose up through the stage at Toronto's Air Canada Centre last week, an uncontrollable surge of raw happiness bubbled up inside of me and I squealed, "Bar-bra." And so did 19,000 Streisand fans who just happened to be there with me.

To most of her fans, Streisand is a musical phenomenon with a golden throat, whose magnetic presence lights up every inch of film she inhabits. That she is also one of the most visible, in-your-face Jews in the entertainment business, is secondary.

But to me, Barbra Streisand is my rabbi.

When I was 12 years old, my mother took me to see the movie *Funny Girl*, in which Streisand portrayed Jewish comedic songstress Fanny Brice. Completely taken by Streisand's charms, I strolled my high school halls sporting winged black eyeliner and long tapered fingernails, and spoke with my best Brooklyn accent.

This was in the 1970s, in Oakville. At home, I would answer the phone with "Hello, gorgeous." My speech was peppered with Yiddishisms like meshugene.

I didn't know just how much I really had in common with Streisand. I didn't know I was actually Jewish.

Our family was Polish Catholic, my parents having emigrated from Poland

after World War II. My first brush with anti-Semitism came when Ted Lewiecki, a Polish Catholic family friend, was having Christmas dinner with us. "She is just like all those ugly Jewish girls I went to school with," he sneered.

Then I put Streisand's Christmas album on the family stereo. "Now, if Barbra Streisand could sing a song like that," he said, pointing to the stereo where Streisand was belting out *Ave Maria*, in Latin, no less. I giggled and told him that it was Streisand. He turned beet red and ignored me for the rest of the evening.

I was only 15 and unaware of my Jewish heritage. I also didn't know what anti-Semitism was.

Then, a little over 10 years ago, I found out my mother was a Holocaust survivor who had sat on her secret for more than 40 years. That meant I was Jewish. It's safe to say most of what I knew about being Jewish was from being a Streisand fan.

Funny Girl was as much about Streisand as it was Brice. Streisand refused to change her name or her nose to fit convention. (Ironically, Brice was born Fania Borach, and had plastic surgery – as Dorothy Parker famously put it, "she cut off her nose to spite her race.")

Right away, I learned that to be Jewish is to be different, and that it was not only okay to be different but you could also win an Academy Award for it. I watched Streisand serenade former Israeli prime

minister Golda Meir on Israel's 30th birthday, and saw how powerful Jewish women could be. Where else, in the 60s and 70s, was a woman the leader of her country?

In *Yentl*, I saw how Jewish women were once forbidden to study Talmud. Now Jewish women study Talmud and are respected as rabbis and scholars.

I learned about Jewish generosity, giving back to community, in Streisand's charitable foundations, and concerts where ticket sales go to causes like the Human Rights Campaign Foundation.

Streisand received death threats before her June 1967 open-air concert in New York's Central Park, just weeks after Israel's Six Day War. The show went on. In 1996, the now-defunct *George* magazine quoted her as saying, "I'm a liberal, opinionated Jewish feminist – I push a lot of buttons." Recently, she made headlines around the world for cussing out a heckler at her New York concert who objected to a skit in which she hosted a U.S. President George W. Bush imitator onstage to whom she posed questions.

Here at Toronto's Air Canada Centre, 19,000 Streisand fans had to pass through metal detectors one by one. Bottled water had to be poured into cups before it could enter the stadium. It may be de rigeur south of the border, but unusual in Canada. Is this the price of being a liberal, opinionated Jewish feminist?

I hope not.

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