

## On Teaching, Thinking and Living with Canadian Residential School History

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Points of contact between Residential School history and ourselves are often nearer than we think. In my present research into the later years of Jewish European arrival on the Saskatchewan prairie, I came to recognize shared ground, in the Qu'Appelle Valley, between Jewish prairie farmer colonists and village dwellers and the Indigenous population that had already confronted the calamities brought by smallpox, the disappearance of the buffalo and the arrival of the cross-continental railroads. In 1930 my maternal grandfather was hired at Dysart, not far from Qu'Appelle, as a ritual slaughterer, teacher and de facto rabbi, serving the far-flung local Jewish farmers and the main-streeters who had shops in town. He came from Vancouver but had only been there a short time following his arrival from Poland.

Not far from Dysart was the File Hills Residential School, along with its sister institution, the File Hills Colony, aimed at training Indigenous men to farm European-style, in a plan, related to residential schooling, to Europeanize and assimilate local bands into the mainstream patterns of western European-style agricultural life. For a time, the agricultural aspect of the school was deemed a "success," and the Canadian government trumpeted it as representative of its efforts to change Indigenous traditional ways. This approach to young men's lives was not different from the Residential Schools' goal of taking the "Indian out of the Indian." It simply focused on a different age group, a single gender, and lacked the missionizing cruelty built into the Residential Schools.

Deaths at the File Hills Residential School were noted by government authorities in the early 1920s, with tuberculosis being the lead killer, but running away and suicide also contributed to the children's mortality rate. Even men and women who took up farms in the File Hills colony did not want their own children at the nearby Residential School

I've learned a great deal about my grandfather's time near Qu'Appelle, and I see it as revealing certain patterns of contact with Indigenous life in the area, however unaware he might have been of these. To assert himself, to be useful, and to earn a living, he applied his wealth of traditional Jewish knowledge, including his training, done not long before he left Poland for Canada, as a ritual slaughterer. Certain modernizing and Polonizing tendencies in his pre-Canadian life gave way to more traditional Jewish ways of living, dressing and interacting with his community, as he undertook the role of small-town prairie ritual handyman. This transformation – the reverse of what we often think of happening to newcomers – took place as the population of medicine men on his part of the prairie dwindled. It had become much more difficult to undertake a Sun Dance; medicine bundles were collected and bought by visiting American anthropologists; men with spiritual and healing power were aging and dying; while the economic and social networks that had supported traditional Indigenous life were coming apart.

Still, there were a few well-known medicine men attached to bands not far from Qu'Appelle, and they attracted the interest of journalists and academics.

I am haunted by my lack of any knowledge of how my grandfather appreciated these presences, communities, and ritual experts, on the nearby plains. What had he understood about Indigenous life when he arrived in Saskatchewan? What did he see as he rode by cart and by train to serve different communities? Did he recognize his own transformation into a traditional Jewish ritual expert in the shadow of the File Hills Residential School, while the local men of traditional ritual power were fading from the scene, robbed of the cultural wealth and variety that had supported them?

This context makes me recoil when I hear well-meaning reports of Canadians “reeling” as they learn of the unmarked grave on the grounds of what was the Kamloops Residential School. Canadian lives, at least those on the lands where Indigenous life was most directly met with the impact of settlement, have been lived in view of these places, the policies that supported them, and the people whose lives they transformed. If my grandfather caught sight of the priests and nuns at the Residential School near where he lived, he might have recognized a link with the powerful Catholic Church orders and priests in his Polish birthplace. The buildings associated with the school dominated the landscape, just as elaborate convents, monasteries and churches gave the Polish landscape its distinctive character.

I would be disappointed to learn that he was incurious. I would feel – knowing his other capabilities – that this was a mark against him. And surely, if he was thinking about the country to which he had come to make a second life, the idea that these activities on the landscape were not of interest would strike me as obtuse and without excuse. The school building was unusual for the area, long and many-windowed like other residential schools, built in 1910.

So, “reeling” seems to be the kind of word that covers for the reality of these places’ dramatic and long-term presence as part of Canadian life, whether on the prairies, in the B.C. interior or in Ontario. The life of these places, as it touched all that went on around them, and as an expression of Canadian government and church activity, must come to be seen as a part of the broader cultural outlook.

Our Department of Religions and Cultures at Concordia is devoted to the idea of changing courses and curriculum with a focus on Indigenous experience, knowledge and contacts. From the above one can see how such goals can relate to a range of materials one might not think of adapting to new contexts and knowledge. The obvious course is to rethink the way Christian traditions are taught, but Jewish Canadian history stands to be reconsidered as well. The same goes for approaches to ritual study or anthropological approaches to religious traditions.