

OPINION

The Jews of my generation thought they would be exempt from history. They were wrong

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A man walks by Stars of David tagged on a wall in Paris on Oct. 31.

MICHEL EULER/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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I was born in Riga, Latvia, when it was still part of the Soviet Union. The forest behind the apartment complex where I lived with my parents was called Bikernieki forest. From a very young age, perhaps as early as 4, I knew that Nazis had shot Jews in that forest.

In a different part of Riga, my grandparents lived in a house also inhabited by a Latvian couple of their generation. During the Nazi occupation, the husband had served in the auxiliary police and killed Jews. When my grandparents and this man passed one another coming and going, they exchanged greetings.

At the time of the Doctors' Plot, an antisemitic conspiracy against Soviet Jews that was intended to lay the groundwork for a pogrom and mass deportation of Soviet Jews to Siberia, my father was a high-school student. He remembered seeing articles in the papers demonizing Jewish doctors and Jews in general. Stalin died in 1953 and the campaign was abandoned, but not before many Jewish doctors lost their jobs and Jews across the Soviet Union experienced the dread of some inchoate, impending catastrophe – this time to be perpetrated by the country that had defeated Hitler.

For as long as my parents lived in the Soviet Union, to be a Jew was some kind of liability. Certain schools and occupations were either closed to Jews or possessed an implicit quota. Communists who had led a revolution against czarist oppression, including the oppression of Jews, in time became oppressors. Many Jews in the Soviet Union tried to conceal their inconvenient Jewishness. Some changed their names and denied any affiliation. This was the country where I spent the first six years of my life. I don't remember all that much about those years. My general sense of them was a happy one. But one of the few concrete things I do remember is an instance when a Russian boy my age told me I should go to Israel, where I apparently belonged.

We did not go to Israel. We went to Canada.

In the weeks since Hamas massacred some 1,400 Israelis and abducted more than 200 others into Gaza, Jews around the world, including in Canada and the United States, have come to the shocking realization that a significant number of their fellow citizens are indifferent to their pain, openly celebrate it or, under the right conditions, would inflict more. Not only Jews have come to this realization, but all people of conscience who had believed that antisemitism was a stale anachronism – not entirely vanquished but practised by a depraved minority of extremists. Evidence to the contrary, offered up at university campuses, public marches, and in statements made – or conspicuously not made – by various groups and institutions, has revealed that many people one did not expect to detest Jews seem to detest Jews. This has been particularly painful for Jews who align themselves with the political left, since much of this animosity has come from people whom they considered friends and allies.

I was not shocked. Part of it must be because of where and when I was born, and part of it must be the education I have put myself through to write the kind of books that I have written – dealing extensively with Jews of the former Soviet Union. Calamities struck repeatedly. Every generation had to contend with some existential threat, sometimes more than one. This is the larger history of the Jews the world over, at least since their expulsion and dispersal from biblical Israel by the Romans some 2,000 years ago.



A man holds up a placard reading 'For Israel – against anti-semitism' as he attends a rally in solidarity with Israel in Berlin on Oct. 22.

JOHN MACDOUGALL/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The past isn't necessarily predictive, but it is instructive. It taught me that I would be naive to expect that my generation would be exempt from history. This doesn't make the unpleasant awareness less unpleasant, but it does provide a mooring, a helpful sense of perspective. Many Canadian and American Jews are wary and frightened in a way they have never been before. They are afraid to go to synagogue or send their children to Jewish parochial schools. They are conscious for the first time about having typically Jewish-sounding names on their credit cards or passports. They talk about removing from the doorposts of their homes the amulets called mezuzahs, so as not to be obvious targets of attack. There is an inclination to close ranks or hide.

It's hard to condemn people for their fears, but historically hiding hasn't worked. Fighting hasn't worked particularly well either, though it is more dignified than

hiding. The only thing that has worked is running away, if there is some place to go.

The great lesson of Jewish history is that those who run away first stand the best chance of survival. Jews are in Canada because when they needed to flee persecution from some less hospitable country, Canada took them in. (Not always, but sometimes.) The possibility – however abstract – that they might need to flee again is infuriating, disorienting, terrifying. But that is the nature of antisemitism: It is like a vapour that circulates everywhere, here diffusely, there in higher concentration. It moves like weather, unpredictably if not entirely inexplicably – or vice versa. Or, to try another analogy, it is like energy, and obeys the first rule of thermodynamics: It cannot be created or destroyed, it merely changes forms. Sometimes people with one kind of politics hate Jews, sometimes people with the opposite kind of politics. The point is, when this happens, it is time for Jews to move on. Israel was created so that Jews would always have a place to go when they needed one.

Of course, not only Jews, but people from all over the world have come to Canada to escape persecution and misery. Some of these people have come to Canada to escape Israeli persecution and misery. If this is a historical irony, it is a painful one. Far more painful for Palestinians, but also painful for Jews. What we witness happening in Israel and Gaza – even from afar – is haunting, horrifying, disturbing. But how we have responded to it seems to me perverse. From the perspective of Jewish history, the worst abuses have been visited upon Jews not by spontaneous eruptions of their fellow citizens, but by the regimes under which they lived. The Inquisition was a creature of the Catholic Church and the monarchs of Portugal and Spain. Russian pogroms were sanctioned by czarist or other authorities. Nazi Germany persecuted its Jewish citizens and implemented the Holocaust in every territory that came under its control. After Israel was established, Jews were driven out of Arab countries by Arab rulers.

The threat Canadian Jews feel is not from their governments but from certain segments of their fellow citizens. The threats that Muslims in Canada feel are the

same. We fear each other, not the authorities. We have done it to ourselves. We have fled autocracies, dictatorships and failed states to seek the safety of liberal democracies where many different kinds of people are supposed to adopt democratic values and live together in peace. But when there is conflict far away, we behave as if we are there and not here. We take as a given that there will be rival marches and demonstrations. A rally in support of Israel one day outfitted with Israeli flags and predictable slogans. A march in solidarity with Palestinians outfitted with Palestinian flags and predictable slogans. We replicate the hostility from hostile lands, as if there is no other option. Yet, we still live each day in another, Canadian reality. Why we don't see that reflected in the demonstrations on our streets is bizarre. Where is the march or campaign that recognizes the pain of the other? Where is the march that calls not for ground invasions or a free Palestine from the river to the sea, but for peaceful co-existence?

If we cannot do it here, how can we expect it to happen there? And if we don't want it to happen there, what are we doing here?

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