

## A Memory of Irving Abella

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## OBITUARY / NÉCROLOGIE

### A Memory of Irving Abella

**David Bercuson**, University of Calgary



**Irving Abella (third from the right) with Canadian Jewish Congress National Archives staff and project workers, 1983. Abella was the first chairperson of what is now known as the Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives.**

Photo by Howard Kay. Reproduced by permission from the Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives, PC1-5-1A.

MY OLD FRIEND AND CARREL NEIGHBOUR at the Sigmund Samuel library of the University of Toronto died on 3 July 2022, a day after his 82nd birthday. His carrel was next to mine at the old library as we both worked our way toward a PhD in history at the U of T back in the tumultuous days of the late 1960s. He was studying the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) in Canada and I was working on the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919. He was much farther along in his thesis than I was and graduated several years earlier than I did. But I will never forget his even-tempered, even humorous, approach to academia and to his studies and his welcome to a younger, aspiring labour historian. It

was there that I first met his fiancée, Rosalie Silberman Abella, who was later named to the Supreme Court of Canada.

Irving was passionate about labour history in those days, particularly the structures and aspirations of labour unions. He believed that much could be learned by studying the evolution of unions – their organizations, aspirations, compromises, successes, and failures – in the growing field of Canadian social history. In effect, Irving was the leader of a new generation of labour and working-class historians who were beginning to make their mark in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As such, he was the successor to Harold Logan and Eugene Forsey, two early historians of the Canadian labour movement.

Irving went on to publish his PhD thesis (*Nationalism, Communism and Canadian Labour* [1973]) about the founding and early life of the Canadian Congress of Labour and, later, was editor of *On Strike: Six Key Labour Struggles in Canada* (1973). He was the founding president of the Canadian Committee on Labour History and served on the editorial board of *Labour/Le Travail* from its first issue in 1976 until 1983.

After the launch of his teaching career at Glendon College, York University, Irving moved away from labour history to focus on the history of the Jews in Canada. His foremost contribution to Canadian scholarship and public policy was his co-authorship of *None Is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933–1948* (1982), with Harold Troper. It is the story of Canada's anti-Semitic policy of excluding Jewish refugees from Hitler's genocidal campaign to destroy European Jewry before and during World War II. It is not too much to say that the book brought about a change in Canadian refugee policy that ushered tens of thousands of refugees from Vietnam, Africa, Haiti, and other countries into Canada – and that Canada today is still welcoming of refugees from Lebanon, Syria, Ukraine, and other places from which people seek sanctuary.

Irving earned many plaudits and awards in his life. He never stopped working to make Canada a better place. But more important than his many accomplishments is that those who knew Irving thought of him as a *mensch* – a human being in all the good senses of the Yiddish word.