

Ben Lappin's Reflections on May Day Celebrations in Toronto's Jewish Quarter

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Volume 49, 2002

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt49not01>

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Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Tutchinsky, G. (2002). Ben Lappin's Reflections on May Day Celebrations in Toronto's Jewish Quarter. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 49, 211–215.

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

Ben Lappin's Reflections on May Day Celebrations in Toronto's Jewish Quarter

Gerald Tulchinsky

WHEN BEN LAPPIN wrote this article for *Commentary* in 1955, he was working for the Canadian Jewish Congress as executive director of its Central (Ontario) region. In that capacity he knew the Toronto Jewish community, therefore, extraordinarily well, especially the multitude of political organizations, labour unions, sick-benefit societies, synagogues, and family associations that were affiliated with the Congress that styled itself “the parliament of Canadian Jewry.”

Born in Kielce, Poland, in 1915, Lappin moved with his family to Canada in 1924. His parents, Leibish and Sarah — Leibish was a Hebrew teacher — gave Ben and his four siblings a sound Jewish education. During summer vacations, Ben went to work running messages between the Spadina Avenue clothing factories, and, for a while, as an operator in a shop producing socks —an experience from which, according to his Congress colleague Ben Kayfetz, he garnered some humorous stories. On the Avenue he witnessed, first-hand, the bitter strikes, lockouts, and bankruptcies that plagued this tumultuous manufacturing sector during the 1930s. He saw the pain inflicted on workers by its low wages, sweatshop conditions, seasonality, and the long hours they were forced to work during the rushed production runs.

Between the wars, Toronto had a substantial Jewish working class, mainly in the clothing trades. In 1931, 27.42 per cent of all “gainfully employed” Jews worked, mainly in the Spadina Avenue area factories, in the production of men’s and women’s ready-to-wear, custom tailoring and dressmaking, millinery, hats and

Gerald Tulchinsky, “Ben Lappin’s Reflections on May Day Celebrations in Toronto’s Jewish Quarter,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 49 (Spring 2002), 211-21.

caps, and other clothing items ranging from shirts to undergarments; in associated sectors considerable numbers of Jews worked in laundry, cleaning and dyeing, fur processing, boot and shoe, metalurgy, printing, baking, meat processing and sundry branches of manufacture. Of Toronto's Jewish population of 46,751 persons in 1932, nearly 3,571 men and 1,671 women laboured in clothing manufacturing alone and they constituted 46.04 per cent of all workers in that industry.¹ Thus, Jews dominated unions like the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, the United Hat, Cap, and Millinery International Union, the International Fur Workers Union, and the Industrial Union of Needle Trade Workers. On the entrepreneurial front, Jews were prominent in the ownership of small firms in branches like the women's cloak and dress trade and the cheaper lines of menswear. In both of these sectors failure rates were extremely high, partly due to the predatory buying practices of department stores. Thus the Spadina area clothing industry had a distinctly Jewish character and it was not uncommon for business negotiations to be conducted in Yiddish, while many of the union locals employed that language for their internal affairs.

As a student at the University of Toronto in the mid-1950s, I frequently walked down to the Spadina and College area for some Jewish "soul food" at the Crescent Grill (for its special of weiners, eggs and beans), the Bagel (for various specials), Famous Dairy (for superb soup and blintzes), Quality (with its rude waiters serving excellent fare), Roumanian Grill (for delicious cabbage rolls), Becker's, Pancer's, Switzer's, and Shopsy's (for corned beef sandwiches), or one of the many other local Jewish eateries. Rubbing shoulders there with the area's "wise guys" (who were always expensively dressed, flush with cash, festooned with gold jewelry, and astride flashy cars), as well as worried-looking unemployed clothing workers, out-of-town buyers (like my father), importers, electioneering politicians (I once sat and chatted with Senator David Croll!), wholesalers, and other denizens of the area, I caught the fading light of the world so well described by Lappin. Much of that Jewish labour culture that in the 1920s and 1930s was so politically vibrant and culturally rich, had already slipped away. Interestingly enough, however, many of the most prominent vestiges of the Jewish presence on Spadina, the synagogues, are still standing and still in use.

Lappin took his BA at McMaster University and received his master's and doctoral degrees in social work from the University of Toronto. In between, he spent several years at the Training Bureau for Jewish Communal Service in New York and returned to the University of Toronto in 1958, where he was a professor in the School of Social Work until 1970 when he accepted an appointment at the School of Social Work at Bar Ilan University in Israel, later becoming its director. His PhD thesis was written on the Social Planning Council of the City of Toronto. He later published this thesis as *The redeemed children: The story of the rescue of*

¹See Ruth Frager, *Sweatshop Strife: Class Ethnicity, and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto 1900-1939* (Toronto 1992), 221.

the war orphans by the Jewish community of Canada (University of Toronto Press 1963), which remains the most thorough investigation of the extraordinary post-war effort by Canada's Jews to rehabilitate the 1,116 child Holocaust survivors who migrated to Canada after 1945, carrying enormous social and psychological problems. In the book's epilogue Lappin wrote presciently about Holocaust historiography that "the writer approaching this very difficult period in Jewish history will have to be fortified with remarkable motivation and inner strength." (173) His scholarly and comprehensive account evinces those qualities of commitment and fortitude. He later wrote a number of other books on community organization. Lappin also penned humorous pieces for the CBC and *Maclean's* and served for a time as editor of the Toronto *Yiddisher Zhurnal's* English-language page.

Whether on May Day and Labour Day, to honour workers' solidarity, on Balfour Day to mark the dawn of national redemption in Palestine, or to carry a deceased comrade to the grave, marches symbolized temporary Jewish claims for notice in the public spaces of Toronto. These May Day marchers can be understood to be making at least two quite different statements: one expressing their political and economic ideas within the Jewish world, and the other intended for the antisemites, local and foreign. Migrants, most of them, from Czarist Poland and Russia, Roumania, and Austria/Hungary, many had previously experienced multiple forms of antisemitism. By comparison, antisemitism in Toronto was mostly tame stuff, but nevertheless, blatant harassment by Toronto Police Chief General Dennis Draper's mounted "Red Squad" of meetings, demonstrations, and entertainments held by these Yiddish-speaking Jews (and other "foreigners") were extremely unpleasant. Meanwhile, fisticuffs and name calling at neighbourhood baseball games and at the Toronto Beaches — not to mention the bloody August 1933 riot at Christie Pits — must have reminded local Jews that the sobriquet "Toronto the Good" had a distinctly limited meaning.

Lappin's description of the speakers' mordant comments at the 1955 May Day observances in the Labour Lyceum on the youth abandonment of their parents' socialist ideals and adoption of bourgeois values, while broadly true, invite commentary and qualification. Aside from normal youthful rebellion against parental direction, children of Jewish immigrants generally wanted nothing more than acceptance and integration into their host society. The 1950s and 1960s offered that generation dazzling and irresistible opportunities: antisemitism seemed to disappear as the economy prospered as never before, and barriers to entry into the professions — even into university teaching — fell away. Even some old socialists succumbed, as Lappin notes, to economic opportunity: pressers and cutters metamorphosed into prosperous clothing manufacturers, carpenters became developers, and bakery workers opened their own shops. In the world beyond Toronto, the establishment of Israel in 1948 weakened the old pre-state Zionist ideology and organizational structures, while in the Soviet Union and in Czechoslovakia, blatant persecution of Jewish intellectuals drove many Canadian Jews out of the Commu-

nist Party —including stalwarts like Joe Salsberg — and soured them on leftist causes. At the same time, the complexion of Toronto's Jewish community was changing, with many Holocaust survivors and other immigrants, most of whom had little patience with ideology, stressing more traditional forms of identity and setting communal agendas that were in many respects markedly different from those of their predecessors.

What the late Ben Lappin observed was a Jewish world that was very much in transition. This wonderfully poignant vignette makes me regret that he did not write more about it.

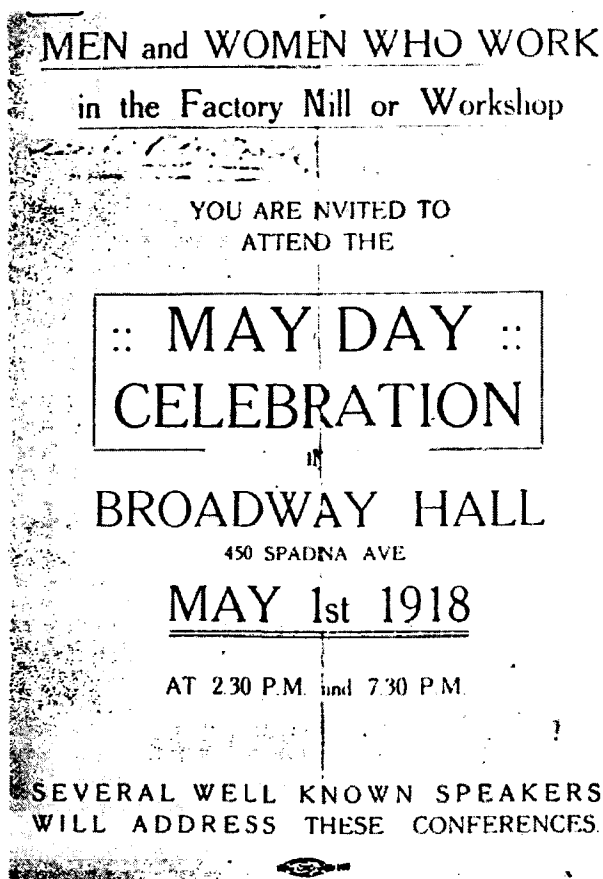


Figure 1. "May Day Leaflet, 1918." Kenny Collection, Box 11, 179, Fisher Rare Book Room, University of Toronto. As found in Rosemary Dunegan, *Spadina Avenue* (Toronto 1985), 157.



Figure 2. "May Day Parade, c. 1951." Kenny Collection, Fisher Rare Book Room, University of Toronto. As found in Rosemary Dunegan, *Spadina Avenue* (Toronto 1985), 147.

From the American Scene: May Day in Toronto

*Yesteryear and Now**

Ben Lappin

SPADINA AVENUE, the main street of the needle trades in Toronto, looks very much the same as it did ten, twenty, thirty years ago. The same kind of old-fashioned haggling still goes on between the employers and the handful of tense harassed business agents — former pressers, operators, and finishers — who guard the interests of Toronto's twelve thousand needle workers. And there is the same vigorous thumping on the cutting table when union agreements come up for renewal — to such good effect that wages and working conditions have been maintained despite the flooding of the labor market by the tide of job-hungry post-World War II refugees. There has been one change, however.

May Day, which before World War II was a mandatory holiday in every needle-trade union contract, has disappeared together with the parades that used to tie up Toronto's downtown traffic for an entire morning. This was no idle fanfare, but a demonstration of real militancy, and any needle-trade worker caught in a factory on the first day of May Day was fined by the union fifteen dollars on the spot.

Ask any of the union men (as I did) what happened to May Day and you get a kind of standard bellicose answer. "In case you think the bosses had anything to do with it, you're wrong, my friend," said the business agent of one of the large locals eyeing me as though I had no business remembering that far back. "It's just that we got mixed up with the wrong crowd. First, it was the Communists, and as if that wasn't enough we had the Nazis on our hands too. They declared May Day a National Socialist holiday, and sent their storm troopers out on parades. When Stalin and Hitler signed the pact we decided we'd had enough. The whole thing had become a bad joke." Then he added quickly, "The parade business I mean. The real spirit of the day, no amount of phonies can squelch. You come around here tonight and you'll see a real meeting, a small meeting maybe, but you'll find out what May Day really stands for."

I took his advice and came back the same evening to the Labor Lyceum, an old brick building which houses the needle-trade unions in Toronto. The fifty-odd men and women in the room were mostly middle-aged, long associated with the *arbeiter kreisn*, with labor circles. There was a quiet, studious quality about the group as if it had come together for a lecture rather than for a May Day *feierung* as

the poster on the door of the Labor Lyceum proclaimed. The chairman added to this impression with his patient manner and his cultured Russian Yiddish. With a touch of wistful humor he welcomed the *massn*. In a more serious vein, he went on to assure the assemblage that dwindling numbers did not matter so long as there remained a core of determined people prepared to carry forward the meaning of May Day.

He presented the first participant of the evening, an actor who had once been a minor member of the famous Vilner Trupe, but now makes a bare livelihood the year round through such odd jobs as camp directing, announcing chores on the Yiddish Hour, and producing an occasional *shule* concert. He launched out on a reading of Peretz's "*Amol Iz Geven a Malach*" (Once There Was an Angel). This dramatic recital, about a band of early revolutionaries ambushed by Cossacks in the midst of an illegal May Day celebration, was rendered with restraint but with intense artistry well attuned to the small, intimate audience. The artist beamed as he sat down and acknowledged the warm applause from his seat without getting up.

The chairman waited for the acclaim to subside. In glowing terms he then introduced a wizened man, who stood up and walked briskly toward the piano at the front of the room. He seemed quite indifferent to the outburst of clapping which had greeted him when he rose. He adjusted the stool and sat down, eyeing the battered, dusty piano with open displeasure, and went into a medley of labor songs. Each tune was banged out with an unshaded mechanical clatter as though by a player-piano. "*Tates, Mames, Kinderlach, Boyen Barricadn*" gave way to "*Ich Lieb Die Arbeit Ohn a Shier*," which yielded to "*Du Arbeitsman Zei Grayt*," which slipped into "*Hammerl, Hammerl Klap*," and so on and so forth. I found myself being relentlessly pulled back, by this conveyor belt of work songs, to the May Day parades that used to come bounding down Spadina in a glory of slogans and to the sound of a band, hired for the day, which alternated between "Arise Ye Prisoners of Starvation" and such martial stand-bys as the "Colonel Bogey March."

In the old days, Spadina Avenue and its small tributaries, St. Andrews and Cecil Streets, where the workers who had left the factories en masse lined up for the parade formations, took on a *yomtovdig*, a festive, air. Those who marched with the union locals gathered on St. Andrews, adjoining the Labor Lyceum, and those who chose to parade rather as members of the Left or Right Poale Zion or the Workmen's Circle would get together on Cecil Street, where a good many Jewish organizations in Toronto have their headquarters to this day. What with the fraternal orders, the youth groups, the schools, the sports sections, and other branches of these movements participating, police had to route traffic off neighboring Ross and Beverley Streets to accommodate the crowds that had turned out to parade on the labor holiday.

For the residents of the Home for the Aged, which until recently was on Cecil Street, this day was always exciting. Bundled in their coats and scarves, they flocked

to the curb and gaped with pleasure at the parade line forming across the road in front of the Jewish National Workers' Alliance, or Farband Institute, now also located in another section of the city. "Ay, di yugnt, di yugnt" (Ah, the youth, the youth), they'd sigh as they watched the youthful members of the Hapoel soccer team, shivering and goose-pimpled in their jerseys and shorts, hoist amateurishly painted placards into the chilly spring air.

Once the old-timers were even treated to a minor riot when a sign reading "Down with Jabotinsky" was included in the parade. The Revisionists, whose club rooms were only a couple of blocks away from the Farband Institute, got wind of what the Labor Zionists were up to. Headed by their own soccer team they descended on Cecil Street and charged into the group as it was forming ranks in front of the Farband House. They got hold of the streamer and tore it to shreds. But the sign painter in the attic of the Farband Institute, working with the frenzy of the Sorcerer's Apprentice, had another placard ready in a matter of minutes. Again the Revisionists charged, and again the banner was captured and ripped up. By the time the third sign was produced, the police had arrived. Order was restored, and with a somewhat tattered version of "Down with Jabotinsky," the Labor Zionists marched off toward Spadina Avenue, where they merged with the main parade winding its way toward a park about a mile and a quarter away known as Christie Pits.

Since none of these organizations would have anything to do with the "United Front," the Communists were forced to conduct their own marches every year. To avoid trouble the police always took elaborate care that the large right-wing parade, carrying their sizable quota of anti-Communist banners, never ran into the smaller left-wing group on its way to Queen's Park.

The front of the parade looked imposing, with the soccer teams of the Left and Right Poale Zion carrying their banners high and marching smartly in time with the drum and music. But the back ranks, far from the band, were made up of a weaving, awkward squad of chattering older men, their pockets bulging with the *Forward*, *Tog*, and the *Morning Journal*. The moment Christie Pits was reached all semblance of formation vanished and the crowd milled about a portable platform. Along with local speakers, there would invariably be an outstanding guest from New York such as Zerrubavel, Boruch Zukerman, the late Charney Vladeck, or the redoubtable Emma Goldman, who, by the way, eventually settled in Toronto and died here in 1940.

BUT the parade and the speeches were only a prelude to the main festivities, which took place during the evening in the auditorium of the Labor Lyceum. Here were the real speeches, here was the real enthusiasm, and here also were a few of the workers-turned-*baalebatim* who had gathered up enough courage to slip into the hall. These businessmen and shop-owners, who throughout the year were taken for granted as active members of one or another of the various labor movements, would by some implicit agreement be completely, crushingly, ignored at May Day rallies. They sat in the back rows of the auditorium, penitent and humble.

The gaudy banners which had been carried in the parade during the afternoon were trooped onto the stage by young men with the pomp and circumstance of centurions bearing Roman standards. A workers' choir sang the same songs that I had just heard tumbling out of an old piano, under the fingers of the very same man. Only then there was the nimbleness of a mountain lion about him. With terrifying grimaces, and cunning agitations of his arms and shoulders, he got harmony out of a hundred men and women. Then came speech after speech calling for an end to the exploitation of man by man extolling the dignity of *halutzit* in Palestine, decrying the cynicism of the Communists, and pledging the might of labor in the struggle against the dark forces of fascism. Among the speakers there were always representatives of the Labor Zionist and the Workmen's Circle Youth movements. In stilted *shule* Yiddish but with great feeling these eloquent youngsters pledged youth to fight for the working man's place in the sun amid approving roars from the adults. "*Unzer yugnt is unzer shtarkster koyach*" (our youth is our greatest strength), the chairman would proclaim and the *classn kampf* seemed permanent, and its coming leaders invincible....

THAT everyone in the small room had, like myself, been transported into the past was evident from the comments and wistful head-shaking which followed the applause after the old man finished playing. The chairman, under the enchantment of a nostalgic spell, ruminated among old glories recalled by the ancient choir leader; and the guest speaker, the last of the three participants, used the piano performance as a jumping off point for his address.

"What happened to the big choirs that used to sing these songs on May First?" the speaker threw out challengingly. He was a short, heavy-set man in his middle sixties with an aura of white fluff around his shining bald head.

What happened, he again demanded, to the teen-age revolutionaries who once spoke with such dedication on May Day platforms? "*Shreckt zich nit*" (Don't get alarmed), he assured the group with sarcastic emphasis: they were doing fine as professors, as scientists, as writers. There was only one thing wrong. "*Merste fun zei hobn unz farratn*" (Most of them have betrayed us). He pursued this theme for the rest of his address with the relish of a man finally able too unburden himself of a deep-felt complaint. The studies and creative writings of second-generation American Jews he conceded, occupy important places on the shelves of America's cultural institutions. As a Yiddish journalist he had long studied the curious output of these talented young people.

"And do you know what I find there?" he exclaimed. "That we are the simple-minded papas and blintze-frying mamas who cannot begin to fathom the *Weltschmerz* of our fine-cut intellectual offspring. Our children have become anthropologists and sociologists and psychologists and all other kinds of 'ologists.' They study us endlessly to see if they can find out *vos far min bashefenishn mir zeinen* (what sort of creatures we are).

"Tell them about the lonely years we spent for our ideals in Siberia or in the prisons of Poland, tell them about our revolt against a reactionary world with no more than a few torn pamphlets, talk to them about our revolt against the might of the Czar and against our very own parents, and they will nod politely and tell you that they know all about it; we are 'radicals of the East European *shtetl*.' A specific type indexed along with other types such as the *Hasidim* and the *Misnagdim*. The revolutionaries of other peoples have been accorded places of honor in the histories of their nations. This is true of the United States, of France, of Britain, of all the others. But we will be remembered as peculiar Old Country types.

"If not socialism what, you will ask, is the answer our cultured children have worked out for themselves? ... Religion!" he blurted out, revealing what to him must have been the ultimate ignominy. "Not the religion of the Ten Commandments our fathers preached, but of the ten polite suggestions of the psychologists. Religion, according to the modern generation, is good for the nerves. So here we are back in the *Bes Hamedrish*, only the *sh'liach tzibur* now is Professor Freud. At least the religion of our fathers was something militant. Opiate though it was, it gave them something to live for. But what is this new God you read so many polemics about ... peace of mind ... a nerve tonic!" he thundered.

"The worst of it," he continued, "is that the institutions we spent our very lives building up on this continent have not escaped this God of theirs. They have brought back Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur t'fillos (prayers) into our own buildings; they have introduced the Bar Mitzvah and other religious practices into schools we created and fought to keep secular. Yes, we have been betrayed."

With this, the speaker's castigations came to an end, and he left one final thought with his audience before he sat down. "At our time of life," he said, more calmly, "we should be handing over the reins to a younger group of leaders, but we have been ignored by our youth as we were despised by our parents. If our generation is not to be suspended in mid-air, if it is to survive this rejection and leave the imprint of its ideas on the course of human events, there is no alternative than for us who have become old in the struggle to uphold our socialist ideals with the vigor of youth."

The speaker's sustained outcry against the younger generation ignited the entire group with righteous indignation. When the old choir conductor struck up the first chords of the "Internationale," the fifty men and women sang out "*Shtay't oif ihr alle verde shklafn*" with defiance. They were not going to take the desertion lying down.

During the closing moments of the hymn, the caretaker came up and stationed himself beside the light switches with that janitorial determination that will not be denied. The gentle chairman wilted under the caretaker's passive gaze, and he closed the meeting in a halting, abstracted way as though some final announcement preyed on his mind but he couldn't quite recall what it was. He fumbled away the

defiant mood created by the speaker. As soon as the people left their seats, the janitor started dousing lights.

Outside, a cold, driving spring rain needled into the marrow of the old people huddling under the small marquee as they came out of the Labor Lyceum. Every few moments three or four individuals would brave the elements and charge for another automobile, angle-parked against the curb. As each car pulled away, it left a dry patch of asphalt that was quickly blackened by the rain. Spadina Avenue was deserted. Store awnings flapped in the wind and neon signs blinked lurid and futile out on the abandoned street, their reflections quivering in wind-swept puddles on the sidewalk. As one looked northward, one could follow the journey of the cars from the Labor Lyceum to the Famous Dairy Restaurant, two blocks away. Through the rain, figures could be faintly discerned bolting cars and running into the restaurant for coffee and Danish.

*From Ben Lappin, "May Day in Toronto: Yesteryear and Now," *Commentary* (May 1955), 476-79.

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