

Research Note / Note de recherche

**“There is a definite limitation imposed”
(Robin Ross to Claude Bissell, December 4, 1959)**

The Jewish Quota in the Faculty of Medicine, University of Toronto: Generational Memory Sustained by Documentation

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In December, 2001, months after the formal conclusion of the University of Toronto History Project and days, indeed, before the final proofs for the book were submitted by Professor Martin Friedland, I accidentally discovered, in the papers of the Office of the President at the University of Toronto Archives, a remarkable letter from Robin Ross to Claude Bissell. It appears here as an important step in the ongoing debate as to whether or not there was a quota system in the University of Toronto Faculty of Medicine, and when and how that system was administered.

One of my first assigned tasks when I joined the University of Toronto History Project in 1998 was to collect evidence on discrimination against Jews in the Faculty of Medicine in the 1930s. Bob Gidney and Wyn Millar had already argued conclusively in their article “Medical Students in the University of Toronto: A Profile” that there could not have been such a quota, because the university was required to admit as many students as possible for political reasons.¹ Further, the mathematical evidence from surviving admissions records showed that percentages of Jews admitted each year fluctuated too wildly for there to be a strict quota, and in some years the Jewish admission rate was well over double, if not triple, the proportion of Jews in the population of Toronto.

The argument from numbers and politics was very convincing, on the surface, but it should come as no surprise that Jewish scholars were troubled by it. The Jewish tradition in Canada

¹ See R.D. Gidney and W.P.J. Millar, “Medical Students at the University of Toronto: A Profile,” *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History* 13 (1996): 29-52.

remembers and celebrates, in a somewhat perverse way, a series of events and trends which establish that Canadian society was antisemitic in formal and informal ways, and indeed remains so today.² Any argument to the contrary is met with suspicion. The general feeling among certain Canadian Jewish scholars was that the Gidney and Millar argument ran contrary to anecdotal evidence about exclusions in medicine, and could not be allowed to stand.

The only problem was that there was no evidence to be found of a quota system, either in the 1930s or at any other point. For the 1930s the data seemed clear, and the only evidence in the University of Toronto Archives pointed to policies in the 1920s which excluded blacks and Americans, and especially American blacks.³ Only one case was found that seemed suspicious, relating to Etta Taube, a Russian Jewish woman who was refused admission in the late 1920s because she could not speak English.⁴ There may have been more to the Taube case than was revealed in the papers, but one case is not a quota.

If there was not discrimination in the 1930s, how about the 1940s? In 1942, the Faculty of Medicine changed its admission policies to limit enrolment in the first year. This would have been an ideal point to begin a quota system, since the principle of limitation had already been established. Nineteen forty-two was also two years after Gidney and Millar's statistical profile of medical students ended, and there was no chart of formidable percentages to argue against. Gidney and Millar have stated that discriminating against quality students in wartime didn't make sense.

For the post-World War II period there were many scholars who believed in the quota. Lesley Marrus Barsky had declared in her history of Mount Sinai Hospital that there was such a quota after World War II, and she was supported by Gerald Tulchinsky's

2 For the use of "antisemitism" versus "anti-Semitism," see Alan Davies, ed., *Antisemitism in Canada: History and Interpretation* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992), 2-3.

3 For Americans, see E.S. Ryerson to James Brebner, Jan. 9, 1929, University of Toronto Archives (UTA), A73-0051/14, "Medicine." For blacks, see Dr. E.S. Ryerson to James Brebner, May 25, 1923 re: Lean Elizabeth Griffin, UTA/A79-0023, Dean of Medicine, Box 5, "Registrar." Ryerson informed Brebner, "When she [Lean] wrote for an application we did not realize she was colored. Colored students are a problem when they get to the hospital and we would be glad if you could avoid accepting her application."

4 See Registrar to Ryerson, Nov. 23, 1928, UTA/A73-0051/11, "Medicine"; Registrar to Ryerson, July 5, 1929, UTA/A73-0051/14, "Medicine."

Branching Out and Edward Shorter's *A Century of Radiology in Toronto*.⁵ Who could argue against such a trio?

On closer examination, however, these claims disintegrated. Barsky quoted no source (and her comments were in parentheses in the text).⁶ Tulchinsky appeared to base his statement on Shorter's work, and Shorter didn't cite a source in his text. What, then, was behind all these claims?

The statistical evidence, where it existed, was also poor justification for a quota. Stray documents surfaced: 21 per cent of Jews were admitted in 1942 and 1943,⁷ 14 per cent in 1950, 20 per cent in 1953.⁸ The numbers were not consistent enough to prove a quota. In 1949/50, 57.8 per cent of all non-Jewish applicants were admitted, and only 45.5 per cent of Jewish applicants, and in 1951/52 the non-Jewish acceptance rate was 44.7 per cent while 38.3 per cent of Jews were accepted.⁹ These calculations took a great deal of time to make and were not always clear from the documents located, but they were something. What that something was, however, continued to be a point of debate. The statistics were a dog's breakfast and the scholars all quoted each other and no primary sources. The proof seemed to be that "every Jew knows this is true." There was nothing else.

As the project wound down, I spent more and more time combing through the papers of the Faculty of Medicine looking for the quota. That I was looking in the wrong place I never considered. The best thing in the Faculty of Medicine papers was found very late in the project, about the same time Professor Jacalyn Duffin found it. It was a report of the Committee on Admission to First Year Session, 1944-1945. The committee noted the "formidable array of Jewish applicants," declared it was a "serious problem" that only 6 per cent of Jews in the previous year had failed (the total failure rate was 27 per cent), and also noted

⁵ Lesley Marrus Barsky, *From Generation to Generation: A History of Toronto's Mount Sinai Hospital* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1998), 17; Gerald Tulchinsky, *Branching Out: The Transformation of the Canadian Jewish Community* (Toronto: Stoddard, 1998), 275; Edward Shorter, *A Century of Radiology in Toronto* (Toronto: Wall and Emerson, Inc, 1995), 129.

⁶ When contacted, she could not provide a source.

⁷ "Report of the Committee on First Year Students," Oct. 2, 1942, UTA/A86-0027/23, 32; "Report of the Committee," 1943, 223.

⁸ John Evans to Sidney Smith, Oct. 20, 1950, UTA/A65-0013/77; B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation Annual Report (1953), UTA/A68-0007/097(07). Jewish enrolments from 1929 to 1942 ranged from 19 per cent to 27 per cent; see Gidney and Millar, "Medical Students," 39.

⁹ See UTA/A86-0028/14.

"the almost vitriolic criticism from parents and others on three points, namely: the large number of Jews, the large number of women, and the failure to admit the sons and daughters of medical men."¹⁰ Duffin used this as part of her presidential address to the Canadian Society for the History of Medicine, May 2001.¹¹ The 1944 document disturbed me, but it didn't prove a quota against Jews.

It did lead to a softening of the rhetoric. Wyn Millar's opinion on the subject, in her article on Jewish medical students, was "Though after the second world war they [Jews] faced discrimination as a result of biased admissions policies, that may have been a short-term reversal."¹² This, however, led to more questions. When after the second world war? For how long? What was the quota? How was it administered? There were hard answers to none of these questions. Even those in positions of power in the faculty didn't seem to remember. Jan Steiner, in an oral interview, stated that when he took control there was a dim memory that there might have been a quota against Jews somewhere but no one remembered if there was or how it had worked.¹³

I knew some things by the end of the history project. There was discrimination against Jews in the hospitals, and in getting internships and permission to do graduate work in medicine. The documentary proof of this is overwhelming. There were quotas against women in medicine well into the early 1960s. It is clear how this worked and the university admitted the practice to the

10 "Report of Committee on Admission to First Year Session 1944-1945," Oct. 6, 1944, UTA/A86-0027/24, 26-27.

11 Jacalyn Duffin, "The Quota: 'An Equally Serious Problem' for Us All," *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History* 19, 2 (2002): 339-40.

12 W.P.J. Millar, "'We wanted our children should have it better': Jewish Medical Students at the University of Toronto 1910-51," *Journal of the CHA*, n.s., 11 (2000): 109-24.

13 Jan Steiner Oral Interview transcript, UTA/B87-0044, 57-59. In 1981, Steiner informed his interviewer, "There was also some kind of quota on Jews. I don't know. I cannot numerically express it because when I started challenging this, there was such double talk about what really happened that I had never found out the true facts." Jan Steiner has since embellished the story he told during his oral interview. While the oral interview is clear on the selection methods which excluded women, Steiner was reticent about the means taken to exclude Jews. In 2001, he told Jacalyn Duffin a longer story: see "The Quota," 341-43. Steiner is now settled in the United States and perhaps no longer sees the need for the reticence he had in 1981.

Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1965.¹⁴ I also knew, more than I knew anything else, that there was no quota on Jews at the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto, at any time, ever, and that it was only a reflex tradition of Jewish scholarship that insisted there had ever been one. Professor Friedland, to his credit, did not agree with my firm view that there was no evidence of discrimination. He stated cautiously in his history, “It appears reasonably clear from both the anecdotal and the statistical evidence available that discriminatory practice prevailed for a period of time – a least a dozen years – after the new policy was introduced (in 1942).”¹⁵

I moved on to other projects – a short stint at Ontario March of Dimes and then a magazine article for the University of Toronto Magazine to coincide with the release of Martin Friedland’s *The University of Toronto: A History*.

It was December 14, 2001 when I called up box 33 of the Office of the President (Bissell), A71-0011. I was looking for another set of documents relating to the Barbara Arrington case (of which more below). While looking through the box, I had a research intuition that there might be something else of interest. I knew that Robin Ross, the University Registrar, wrote great memos and I thought that there might be something neat in the folder of his correspondence with Bissell in 1959, something of a transition year in the university’s history.

When I read the letter, my jaw dropped. It was a smoking gun memo, the sort that can eliminate any trace of doubt. Ross informed Bissell that “there is a definite limitation imposed by the Selection Committee on the number of Jewish students whom they are prepared to accept in the pre-medical Years...In most cases it was quite unrealistic to argue that the rejected candidates were refused on any other grounds than that they were Jewish. Whatever the practical difficulties may be, I think that this should stop.” Ross gave numbers to back up his case. He explained how the process was administered. There could be no doubt that for the three years he mentioned, 1957-59, there was a quota.

Immediately I informed Professor Friedland by e-mail, and my e-mailed verbatim transcript is now in the on-line footnotes to the

14 D.F. Forster to Mrs. Bird, chairman of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, Oct. 22, 1968, UTA/B83-0040/15. See also Jan Steiner Oral Interview transcript, 59.

15 Martin Friedland, *The University of Toronto: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 352.

book. It was too late to add this to the proofs, just too late. The letter was also sent to Wyn Millar, who encouraged this article you are now reading.

II

Some situational information on the memo will help those unfamiliar with the history of the University of Toronto in the 1950s. Claude Bissell had just returned to the university in 1958, after a stint at Carleton College. He was no stranger to antisemitism at the university. In 1948, while assistant to President Sidney Smith, he was forced to intervene in an investigation conducted by the Students' Administrative Council. SAC was investigating charges that the Dean of Women at University College, Marion Ferguson, was a rabid antisemite who prevented Jews from getting into residence and then persecuted them if they did get in. The investigation was abandoned without effect.¹⁶ Bissell's only record of his involvement was a cryptic reference in his diary and a copy in his papers of the underground newspaper which made the charges.

Robin Ross was also relatively new to his position. He arrived in 1958, after a few years in the Indian Civil Service, the Commonwealth Relations Office of the United Kingdom, and then the Canadian Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation, before taking up his job as Assistant Registrar. By December, 1959, he was Registrar proper.¹⁷ One can speculate as to what opinions he had formed on issues of discrimination during his service in India and in Commonwealth Relations. It was clear that he arrived in his position as a trained civil servant in the British tradition.

During his career as Registrar, Ross wrote many memos each week to Bissell on various issues relating to his position and the University. Bissell hardly had the time to respond to all his correspondence. This memo was one of dozens in file 7 of Box 33 of the papers, and there is no way of knowing if the file is

16 Charles Levi, “‘Decided Action has been Taken’: Student Government, Student Activism, and University Administration at the University of Toronto and McGill University 1930-1950” (Master’s Major Research Paper, York University, revised version, 1994), 65-67.

17 Robin Ross, *The Short Road Down: A University Changes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 2-6.

complete. There is no evidence that Bissell replied to, or acted on the memo.¹⁸

If there was a time to mention discrimination at the University, the winter of 1959 was that time. In the fall of that year, a black student named Barbara Arrington was the centre of a controversy. Arrington was offered a place at a sorority, and then the offer was abruptly withdrawn during a “walk around the block” with a senior sorority member. Campus activists gave the matter much publicity, and SAC was brought into the matter.¹⁹ The University of Toronto, with Bissell in the lead, formally disavowed recognition of fraternities and sororities.²⁰ The University did not discriminate, so no discriminatory institution could remain part of it.

Was Ross being mischievous, then, by writing this memo of December 4, 1959, at the height of the Arrington controversy? Or was he simply applying the consistency of civil service rules? Whichever is the case, his statement was clear. “The University can be charged – and rightly so – with exercising the very kind of discrimination that we disavow publicly.” That would be bad for the institution, bad for Bissell, and – Ross might have thought – bad for the Commonwealth.

III

Ross, however, gave the Faculty of Medicine some benefit of the doubt. “There are,” he stated, “solid practical reasons for this restriction and I am the first to sympathize with the Council in what is an awkward dilemma.” Ross did not give the reasons. They were either the same sorts of criticisms levelled against the admissions committee in 1944, or a reflection of the reality that there were no jobs for these Jewish students once they graduated, given the antisemitism of the hospitals.

18 Martin Friedland has discovered an ambiguous entry in the Bissell diary of Dec. 11, 1959, related to a “long talk with Robin Ross”; see Friedland, *The University of Toronto*, chap. 27, n. 152. Bissell referred to his policy of keeping his distance from medical school issues in his memoirs, and stated, “I decided not to get deeply into the internal politics of Medicine. That would mean a drain of time and energy at the expense of neglecting basic university programs”; see Claude Bissell, *Halfway up Parnassus: A Personal Account of the University of Toronto 1932-1971* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 103.

19 See *Varsity*, Oct. 13-16, 1959; SAC Minutes, Oct. 14-15, 28, 1959, UTA/A70-0012/14(01).

20 Caput minutes, 1959-60, UTA/A68-0012/reel 23; Minutes of the Board of Governors, Jan. 28, 1960, UTA/A70-0024/reel 19.

Another key point to note in the memo is that the practice which Ross wanted stopped was not the discrimination, but rather his involvement in it. Once the Faculty of Medicine made its decision, the Office of the Registrar had to make the offers of admission. Ross clearly found his involvement in the process distasteful. His solution to the problem of discrimination in pre-medical years was to abolish the pre-medical years, and make the Faculty of Medicine responsible for admitting students to the medical program.

The solution which Ross suggested was bureaucratic, not moral. It is not clear whether the Faculty of Medicine was asked to comment on the issue. The memo stands as a one-time mention of an existing quota.

The memo, however, is not the final answer to all of the questions which have been raised about the possibility of a quota system in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto. Ross only mentions three years, from 1957 to 1959. There is still no indication as to when the process began. Was it 1942, 1944, or 1952? Whose idea was it? When did the Office of the Registrar become involved? What did Bissell think of all this?

All of these questions will be answered in time. Since December 14, 2001, I have believed that there was once a quota system at the University of Toronto for admission of Jews to medicine. Not because every Jew knows it to be true, but because it is now documented in a way it never has been before.