

J.B. Salsberg: Communist or Communitarian?

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Nathan Lev

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Unidentified election campaigns, [ca. 1938]-[ca. 1943]. Ontario Jewish Archives, fonds 92, series 3, file 6.

When discussing J.B. Salsberg, there are two main associations that instantly surface: Jew and Communist. Salsberg was a dominant figure both politically and socially for the twentieth-century Toronto Jewish labour movement. But these words hardly do justice to the depth of this man. It is true that for many decades Salsberg was a loyal member of the Communist Party of Canada, aspired to socialist ideals, and even encouraged militant activism on behalf of working-class people. However, by no means were his intentions subversive or harmful. He was simply a champion of ordinary people who, as the title of Gerald Tulchinsky's insightful biography of Salsberg suggests, committed his life to fighting for their rights. The purpose of this essay is to forward that Salsberg's thirty-year tenure in the Communist Party was not driven by a desire to achieve a socialist society as an end. Rather, in socialism, Salsberg saw a means to achieving the eradication of anti-Semitism and ameliorating the dire working conditions of the working-class. As this paper will later clarify, these two goals were inextricably linked through what was historically (and arguably continues to be) known as the "Jewish Problem." In the ensuing discussion, this paper will track the following: Salsberg's humble origins and how his religious family atmosphere fostered a commitment to social justice; his exposure in the labour force that pushed him away from traditional religion to secular Judaism and the labour movement; domestic and international events that led to his "radicalization" in joining the Communist Party; his turbulent political career as both a public servant and labour organizer; and finally his decision to drop the Party based on his experience that led to his ideological reform, or as I would call it, catharsis.

Born on November 5, 1902, to Sarah-Gitel and Abraham, Joseph Baruch Salsberg spent the first decade of his

childhood in his hometown of Lagow. [1] Lagow was territorially part of the Pale of Settlement, a demarcated area where Jews were forced to live throughout lands under the jurisdiction of Imperial Russia. [2] Salsberg's father was a devout Jew, both in belief and practice. Educated in a *heder* or Jewish boys seminary, Abraham was influenced by an orthodox movement known as *Hasidism*. [3] This philosophy preached the strict religious observance of Judaism, which in turn would bring about the Messiah and end the Jewish exile that began nearly two thousand years ago when the Romans sacked Jerusalem and initiated the global Jewish diaspora. [4] Abraham was also a working man who came from a long line of bakers, but living through a time when industrialization was ubiquitous, he thought to modernize. [5] With the dowry money he received through marriage, he attempted to establish a grain business. [6] The failed venture acted as a decisive factor in his immigration to Canada in 1911. Two years later, in 1913 he was joined by his wife and children because he believed that "Poland held no future for a Jew," given the rise in anti-Semitism spurred by the failed Russian Revolution of 1905. [7] Salsberg's mother was a traditional housewife who managed their Cecil St. home while Salsberg's father became a junk peddler. [8] Abraham often brought out young Joseph on the job and passed on his teachings of canonical Jewish writings. [9] Salsberg stated that moving close to the Spadina Garment District was a "natural choice" because it was the "heartland of a small Jewish community." [10] Ruth Frager expands on this idea by stating that many immigrant Jews "tended to congregate" around this area because of the cheap pricing and availability of work in the needle trades that dominated Spadina Avenue. [11] Salsberg grew up in the "traditional religious atmosphere" that was present both at home and his surroundings. [12] He reminisced, "my parents got along beautifully, the only time they would quarrel was when my father wasn't sure that my mother would not be able to strictly follow the religious observance, such as turning off the stove before the beginning of Sabbath at sundown" [13]. Such was the piety of his family, that so profoundly shaped young Joseph's attitudes. His mother participated in a charity called "malbish arumim" (literally, clothing the naked) that entailed making clothes for infants of poor parents. [14] Young Joseph was also encouraged to practice benevolence towards his fellow Jews, when he would go around collecting charity to buy Sabbath meals for the needy. [15]

In 1913, Salsberg also began his secular education at Landsdowne, only to drop out three years later in 1916. [16] At the age of 14, Salsberg went out into the work force to supplement the "modest income" of his father in order to help support the family of nine. [17] The following years that he spent in the labour force were perhaps the most impressionable on Salsberg and prepared him for his "radicalization." The Toronto Jewish labour movement was unique because the experience of the Jewish immigrants differed markedly from that of other ethnic groups. [18] Unlike Jews who lived on foreign lands for millennia, other ethnic groups usually emigrated from their home countries. In some instances those groups were not previously oppressed. Many of them moved simply to seek economic opportunity. However, anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe was not limited to pogroms and violence, but also existed in more subtle forms. Aside from restrictions on owning land, which already precluded them from being farmers, there were limitations on higher education and occupations. [19] To this end, Jews adopted skilled trades as a means of supporting themselves, but saw these anti-Semitic restrictions as the reason they were subjected to such impoverished conditions. [20] Socialism was also gaining momentum in Eastern Europe around the turn of the century and many Jewish immigrants were exposed to it before arriving in Toronto. [21] In Toronto, this knowledge translated into a strong working-class culture, which reared itself in the predominantly Jewish-led unions that were significantly more militant than that of non-Jewish labour groups. [22] In fact, many employers even preferred non-Jewish workers because they were more likely to be less resistant to the working conditions. [23] Salsberg exhibited this militancy from a young age when at the age of 12 he led his Jewish classmates in a "strike" against the compulsory singing of Christmas carols in public schools. [24]

Salsberg worked his way through several factories until he earned a position as a skilled position as a cutter for Cooper Cap Company on Spadina. [25] Despite the fact that he was earning more than he should have been, it did not take long for him to join the United Hatters, Cap and Millinery Workers' International Union. [26] He joined as a response to the realities of the harsh working conditions of the factories, but also for a higher purpose, which is captured by the Union's constitution: "not only to improve working conditions but also to take a very active part in all

important socialist campaigns.” [27] In 1918, his decision to get involved and take a stance against the economic exploitation of workers was solidified and he announced to his parents that he was turning away from their orthodox path in favour of pursuing one rooted in social justice. [28] “I wanted to be guided by reason, not faith. I wanted to know... to understand.” [29] As one could imagine, his father was not very excited about his son deviating from the path he had set out for him, which was to become a rabbi. He claimed, that his mother was more open-minded, and although his father held his peace, he asked that he did not drag along his younger siblings. [30]



United Cloth Hat, Cap, and Millinery Workers' International Union, [ca. 1920]-1927. Ontario Jewish Archives, fonds 92, series 2, file 4.

Once Salsberg was derailed from his religious roots, he found his first set of answers in Labour Zionism. [31] As Salsberg later said: “I stopped relying on supernatural forces to bring about an ideal society and found the answer in Poale Zion.” [32] Salsberg joined Poale Zion (literally, workers of Zion), a youth movement, in which he saw, at the time, the solution to the Jewish Problem. Instead of “believing the Messiah would come and solve all problems of Jews and Gentiles alike” Salsberg was captivated by the idea of the “self-liberating process, through human effort, of the establishment of the Jewish homeland in Palestine based and governed by Socialist principles.” [33] Like many Jews at the time, Salsberg responded to the “egalitarian promise of Socialism.” [34] He continued to be involved in the Union, eventually climbing the administrative ranks to strike organizer, and in 1921 Salsberg earned himself a post in the Poale Zion movement as National Secretary. [35] Shortly thereafter, there was a dramatic break from the movement in 1923, the urgency of which can be observed in the telegram sent to Salsberg on June 2, 1923: “Your failure to return created a very dangerous situation in our movement... You must return immediately to settle junior affairs.” [36] It was at this time that the “Russian experience began to take effect.” [37] Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, it took several years to re-establish the new Bolshevik government. News reached Toronto around 1920-22, which caused a fissure in the Jewish left, making room for a further Jewish left, the communist supporters. [38] The news of the living conditions of Soviet Jewry spurred debate about what it meant for the future of international Jewry and what model to follow. The “moderate” left (for a lack of a better word) did not appreciate the implications of the Russian revolution, while the new far left, praised and aspired to it. Salsberg was of the latter. He explained that the first of these developments was Lenin’s outlawing of anti-Semitism, making it punishable by death. [39] Subsequently, minority rights were granted, including official state recognition of the Yiddish language in schools and courts, among other institutions. [40] Universities started to have Yiddish departments and the barriers on education and occupations were lifted. [41] There was an influx of Jewish intellectuals and writers who were sponsored by state publishing houses that distributed their Yiddish literature [42]. Salsberg described it as a time of “Jewish cultural

flowering.” [43] It was truly remarkable. This was Salsberg’s “radicalization” that he saw, in communism, which was simply the Soviet model of a socialist society, the solution to the Jewish Problem, such that it eradicated anti-Semitism and made way for a just and equitable society.

By 1925, Salsberg was deeply involved with his union, organizing strikes through a Toronto office and he eventually became a national organizer after joining the Communist Party of Canada in 1926. [44] As a party man, he had to adjust to (or at least not “publicly oppose”) party ideology, much of which came from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union via Moscow. [45] One departure from his prior reasoning was that the CPSU, and thus the CPC, did not support Zionism. The Soviet Union even set aside a plot of land for a Jewish settlement known as Birobidjan [46]. This settlement was planned to be semi-autonomous with aspirations of eventually forming a Jewish Republic [47]. Communism dictated that it alone could achieve the egalitarian conditions that many minority groups, including the Jews, desired; there was no need for a separate Jewish state in Palestine. Additionally, the CPSU viewed the Balfour Declaration as an “Imperialist Enterprise” that was driven by self-interest of the British Empire and therefore in opposition to the communist movement [48]. In hindsight, Salsberg claimed that he never opposed Zionism, but did see eye-to-eye with the Party on the fact that there were still resistant Arab nations and that even if established the new state would do nothing to solve the problem of Jews who would continue to live abroad [49]. Thus for Party politics, he slightly adjusted his position to a Jewish cultural nationalist and never publicly opposed them on the question of Zionism.

Salsberg did, however, oppose the party on other questions, which led to his first expulsion (in hindsight, suspension) from the CPC in 1929, [50] To avoid having to delve into the intricacies of union politics, simply consider that Salsberg’s efforts to strengthen the unions were constantly hindered by the Party’s attempt to centralize and Bolshevize. As a result, he resigned his post and after a squabble with leader Tim Buck, he was expelled. This is evident by the statement issued by the political committee of the CPC on November 1929: “[Salsberg] repudiated party leadership as being incapable of carrying out the policy it had advocated and was not able to reconcile on theoretical differences.” [51] Salsberg replied on May 10, 1930 with the following: “a leadership which tried to Bolshevize our party... are harbouring dangerous illusion.” [52] He did, however, attempt to appeal his case for reinstatement, which only occurred several years later. Clearly then, Salsberg was not fond of the idea of a Bolshvized (centralized) party subservient to Moscow. Ian McKay explored this question further. The ‘Moscow Rules’ hypothesis stipulates that the CPC was fully subservient to the CPSU and that there was no room for interpretation for the rules that they received from Moscow. [53] Salsberg was opposed to this, further supporting that he was not wholeheartedly committed to the logistics of Communism. Rather, as McKay proposed, Salsberg showed signs favouring, what is known as “depression era democracy” [54]. The left gravitated toward this idea and differed from the Soviet-type of communism. [55] For Salsberg, in particular, communism was about “central ideology and rhetoric, or the politics or economics... it was about the peoples’ involvement to champion their rights. [56]

In 1932, Salsberg returned to the party and continued his work as a national labour organizer under the popular slogan, “organizing the unorganized.” [57] He applied his beliefs in local democracies through his organizing tactics. According to Gerald Tulchinsky, “He operated as a good trade unionist rather than a Bolshevik, modifying and adapting to every locality.” [58] His impressive career as an organizer throughout the 1930s led to some monumental feats, such as the 1937 autoworkers’ strike. [59] Although his Jewish identity was paramount, he always empathized with other minority groups and those struggling to achieve working-class rights. In the late 1930s, Salsberg decided to enter electoral politics. It is not exactly clear why, but perhaps by witnessing the plight of the working-class for so many years he realized the problem was systemic, and thus believed he could be more effective in the legislature. Salsberg went up for election on all levels. He lost municipally in Toronto for Ward 4 in 1934, 1935, and 1936; he lost provincially for St. Andrew in 1937. [60] His platform was based on accommodations for working-class people such as

unemployment assistance, better housing, and cheaper prices for necessities such as coal, which was consistent with his socialist ideals. [61] However, the constituency he ran for, spanning the predominantly Jewish, working-class area of Spadina and Kensington Market made his loss questionable. One proposed explanation is that the left vote was split with the CCF candidate. A further look by Tulchinsky revealed that “as much as the community loved Salsberg as a person, they detested his communist politics.” [62] Despite the small concentration of Jews living in the Garment District and for the most part sharing the same interests, the Jewish community was fragmented. This is because not only were many workers and union leaders Jewish, but many manufacturers and factory bosses were Jewish as well. The interplay between class-consciousness and ethnicity had an unpredictable way of working out. [63] Sometimes ethnic bonds trumped class-consciousness and this served as a mitigating factor, other times class lines trumped ethnicity and this served as an exacerbating factor. [64] It was not uncommon for working-class Jews to accuse their fellow Jews, who harboured entrepreneurial ambitions and could more accurately be labelled as middle-class, as betraying their ethnic interests or being sell-outs. [65] Conversely, it was not uncommon for middle-class Jews to reprimand the working-class Jews that they were inciting anti-Semitism by their militant resistance to the substantially better living conditions than of those that they experienced in the Old World. [66] Thus much of the vocal resistance against Salsberg’s candidacy came from within the community, perpetuating the fear that if Salsberg won, then Jews would have been labelled as communist supporters, which in the eyes of the greater community was viewed as something deplorable. [67]



Salsberg was eventually elected alderman in 1938 and again in 1943. [68] During his time in public office (both municipal and later in the provincial legislature) he committed himself to fighting for human rights and against discrimination. He was of course still affiliated with the Communist Party, which due to some laws that banned communist activities slightly reformed, but mostly just changed its label to the Labor-Progressive Party. [69] A 1938 *Toronto Star* article even commended him for his “excellence in council” and went further with a very powerful

statement that his “interest in the underprivileged classes... is not communism but humanitarianism.” [70] In 1943, Salsberg was also elected MPP, a tenure that lasted until 1955. He was instrumental in passing several pieces of landmark legislation. [71] Inside the Legislative Assembly, Salsberg was a fierce critic of the government, commenting on its “unchanged pattern of resistance, procrastination, and unenthusiastic yielding to overpowering public pressure.” [72] His first accomplishment was bringing to the attention of Premier George Drew and compelling him to enforce legislation that banned the “publication of discriminatory matter referring to race or creed” [73]. This of course referred to the offensive signs that existed across Toronto, among other places, commonly on beaches that posted messages of segregation such as “only whites allowed.” This eventually culminated in the passing of the *Racial Discrimination Act* of 1944. [74] But the narrow mandate of this legislation was inadequate and Salsberg continued to fight. In November 1945, a young Black man was refused entry into a skating rink in Toronto on discriminatory principles. [75] His father, Harry Gairey, brought this address to Salsberg because he knew that “the Jews will fight.” [76] This is another example, for better or for worse, of the widespread recognition of the militancy and activism of Jewish culture throughout the twentieth century. In turn, Salsberg brought this to city council and led a demonstration, which on January 1947 culminated in a Toronto by-law that “banned discrimination at public recreation and amusement places.” [77] Salsberg tied in both his interests in tackling anti-Semitism and helping the working-class when he joined the Canadian Jewish Congress’ effort to abolish discrimination in employment. The CJC, an advocacy group representing the interests of Canadian Jewry, was not an ardent fan of communism. But it put its differences aside in favour of mutual interests. [78] Salsberg, being an MPP, even contributed his own draft of an “Act Respecting Fair Employment Practices in Ontario” on April 7, 1948. [79] Although it was not passed presumably, partially for political reasons of not wanting to support an incumbent communist, and partially for legal reasons, it was an important stepping-stone for the eventual 1951 *Fair Employment Practices Act*. [80] His career in the legislature can be best captured by Tulchinsky’s words: “No records exists of Salsberg mentioning... nor extolling the Soviet Union or communist beliefs... But rather he showed signs of a reformer or progressive... with a genuine concern for the public interest – regardless of party affiliation.” [81]

To understand Salsberg’s final break from communism, it is necessary to examine his life during the Second World War. During the late 1930s, Salsberg was receiving word from his comrades across the pond in the USSR of a gradual resurgence of anti-Semitism. [82] This first started with the dissolution of state sponsorship of all of the Jewish support that the Soviet state was providing since the early years of Lenin, such as the Birobidjan project, and Yiddish cultural institutions that Salsberg valued so much. [83] He secretly travelled to the Soviet Union and met with the leadership to press them for answers. [84] The responses he received were evasive and once he returned to home soil, he brought this up with Tim Buck. Buck was unwilling to support his accusations and before anything could be resolved the war broke out. At that point the CPC leadership agreed that it was best to wait because “the War would settle things.” [85] During the early years of the War, Salsberg again broke from the party over dismay of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of non-aggression that was signed between Soviet Russian and Nazi Germany. [86] However, during this time he kept his peace for the sake of party unity and support for the war effort. [87] In his continued work as a union organizer he strongly opposed striking during this time because manufacturing had to be at maximum capacity for the war. [88] Of course once Hitler broke the pact and invaded the USSR, pushing them to retaliate and join the Allied nations, he laid his concerns to rest, at least for the time being. The immediate post-war years showed some overt signs of alleviation for Soviet Jewry, but it was short-lived. [89] Salsberg continued pressing the CPC leadership to press the Soviet leadership for answers. Eventually in the mid-1950’s, Buck agreed to accompany a delegation with Salsberg to meet with Khrushchev [90]. During this meeting, Khrushchev exposed the full extent of Stalin’s purges, but worst of all he was “unapologetic, justified these actions, and was further evasive on future concerns” so much so that even Tim Buck was forced to admit that, “Khrushchev is an anti-Semite” [91].

On January 9, 1957, Salsberg made his final address and parted ways (resigned on May 6) with the LPP and communism, never to be renewed again. [92] His final message stated that he could no longer support the movement that was so anti-Semitic and autocratic. [93] The failings of the Soviet Union to keep the promise of egalitarianism and

even any degree of democracy finally pushed Salsberg over the edge. [94] He did not believe that the LPP could recover due its “history and crippled ability to think independently.” [95] He suggested that the Party be dissolved and a new Social Democratic movement be created, based on domestic needs. [96] Although this seems like a lifetime, Salsberg only peacefully passed away on February 8, 1998. He continued to be very active in the Jewish community for the latter part of his life and gave many interviews that helped provide a window into the events of the twentieth century, marking him as an ever-important figure of history. This essay hardly scratches the surface of the profound ideological journey of a man who, with such conviction, sought out social justice. His only hubris was that he so adamantly stuck to what was working for the moment without considering the greater implications. In hindsight he admitted that when he parted with the Poale Zion movement in the 1920s because of favour for the Soviet Union and what it meant for the future of Jewry that he was wrong. [97] He was, in retrospective, a product of his environment. Ed Hammerstein, another active member at the time, “stressed the radicalizing impact of sweatshop conditions in Toronto – the world situation radicalized people.” [98] On a further note, it is simply impossible to write on Salsberg without reference to Tulchinsky’s uncanny biography, for which he spent a decade writing. But this paper does make something obviously clear. Salsberg’s pursuit of social justice through trying to alleviate the tough living conditions of the working-class and the Jewish community led him to communism. But to simply label him a communist is misleading and ignorant. His political involvement as a union organizer helped many working-class people, Jew and gentile alike, earn better conditions for their work. His legislative involvement assumed a completely democratic process in which he tried to address human rights and discrimination issues. His involvement with communism was strictly dependent on using Jewish welfare as a measure. As a result, he parted several times with the Party. He also opposed Bolshevism and centralized authority because it did not entail a sufficiently democratic and locally adaptive approach. In later interviews, he stated that his experiences caused him to reform his ideology and consider himself a progressive Zionist and social democrat. [99]

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