



An old Jewish cemetery in Vilna, Russia, is pictured in 1922. In his latest book, historian Jeffrey Veidlinger writes that the word 'pogrom' entered the international lexicon in the 1880s and was derived from the Russian word 'gromit,' which means smash or destroy, and is related to the Russian word for thunder. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

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OPINION

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The word pogrom. A word I've known my entire life, but one you might be unfamiliar with. "An organized massacre of helpless people," specifically "a massacre of Jews," according to Merriam-Webster. The word is found throughout the history books that litter my desk. It is simply not something that still happens, but instead a terrible remnant from the darkest parts of Jewish history. Until last weekend, when Hamas terrorists stormed into Israeli villages and indiscriminately slaughtered men, women, children and the elderly, and this disconsolate word was spoken back into the present.

"A pogrom in Israel. It defies comprehension," British-American columnist Hadley Freeman wrote. She was right. What happened in each of these kibbutzim was a pogrom. A massacre of Jews. Here. Now. Not 100 years ago. In Israel of all places, a country created after the Holocaust to prevent such atrocities from ever happening again. It was beyond comprehension.

For the past year, I've been writing a novel. It's partly set in 1880s Vilna (modern-day Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania), birthplace of this painful and evocative word. "The word 'pogrom,'" historian Jeffrey Veidlinger writes in his latest book, *In the Midst of Civilized Europe: The Pogroms of 1918-1921 and the Onset of the Holocaust*, "derived from the Russian *gromit'*, to smash or destroy, and related to the Russian word for thunder, entered the international lexicon in the 1880s." It entered my own at a young age. Most of your Jewish friends in North America whose families arrived before the Holocaust? Their great-grandparents escaped pogroms.

In my research, I've come across incredulous stories about the origins of pogroms. These antisemitic tropes painted Jews as scapegoats for a potpourri of political and economic instability in the Russian Empire. None is more prevailing than the fabricated story of the "blood libel." The Yad Vashem website describes a Polish woman who claimed that her Jewish neighbours in Vilna had tried to murder her. The reason? To use her blood to bake bread for Passover. I was struck by the power of fear-mongering, how rumour and disinformation fuelled antisemitic lies which led to normal people to commit atrocities.

This one rumour about blood and bread led to subsequent riots in Vilna, an urbane, scholarly city with 76,000 Jews before the First World War and caused thousands of Jewish citizens to immigrate abroad. The thrust of Dr. Veidlinger's book is these murderous riots, perpetrated by ordinary citizens and the military, created a continental indifference in Europe that sowed the seeds for the international community

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to turn their backs on Jews when genocide arrived in Germany in the 1930s. Canada, infamously, is remembered for its "None is too many" policy under Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie, whose government turned away more than 900 Jews aboard the MS *St Louis* and accepted only 5,000 Jewish refugees between 1933 and 1945, one of the weakest responses in the developed world.

While I can't speak for all Jews, I know that we - Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Ashkenazi, Sephardic - feel deeply hurt. When the people of Israel are murdered, our collective memory thrusts into high gear and we remember the hundreds of villages and thousands of pogroms our ancestors escaped from. The looting, the maiming, the raping, the beard-ripping, the burning of synagogues and Torah scrolls and countless other indignities.

I spent a day in the Toronto Reference Library this summer flipping through mounds of fraying, smelly newspapers. An 1860 article titled "The Jewish Relief Fund" caught my eye. It is a letter from Moses Montefiore, a British Jewish philanthropist who fundraised around the world for newly established Jewish communities and ones in crisis. In the letter, printed in

The *Globe and Mail*, he thanks Senator William McMaster, for whom the Hamilton university is named, for a contribution made from "the citizens of Toronto towards the Morocco Jewish Relief Fund" after the 1859 Hispano-Moroccan War that raged in North Africa after Spain invaded Northern Morocco and demolished the Jewish community of Tetuan. It is a reminder that decades before "None is too many," Canadians were friends to the Jewish people.

This has been the heaviest of weeks. My heart hurts in places I'd forgotten about. I was reminded of Marsha Lederman's *Kissing the Red Stairs*, which details the intergenerational trauma her parents, both Holocaust survivors, passed on to her family. Growing up, I listened to oral testimony from survivors every year in elementary school. "Never Again," we say on Jan. 27, hoping ignorant schoolchildren will stop painting swastikas on schools and desecrating our cemeteries, that radicalized men will stop shooting up synagogues. Well, never is now, again, as Canadian Jews collectively share in Israeli families' grief.

The Jewish people have long memories. Throughout the centuries, whether it was a knock on the door in the middle of the night, the smashing of glass on Kristallnacht, or a Facebook post politicizing first and empathizing second, we've asked ourselves: *Who among you can we trust?* Unless you say so, we don't know. Righteous gentiles such as Oskar Schindler and Chiune Sugihara saved thousands of lives in the Holocaust. Now, descendants of those saved lives, your Jewish friends, are telling you that we need your help to challenge the same antisemitic tropes that existed a century ago, ones that push hateful agendas and destroy democracy. "Your Jewish friends are not okay," is a plaintive, haunting cry in my social-media feeds.

As you read this, Jews will be attending services with heavy security outside the synagogue doors. They will be reciting the names of the dead over Kaddish. Like Moses Montefiore did in 1860, they will be asking Canadians for help in combatting oppression and rebuilding communities. My father's family immigrated to Canada in October, 1905, aboard the *Pomeranian*, eventually settling in Winnipeg for half a century. They anglicized their names, assimilated. The family scattered, mine to Vancouver. One family photograph survived: 16 faces, every single one born outside Canada. We recently reunited with long-lost cousins in Toronto thanks to genealogical history. When we met, I asked them: how did you know we're related? My father's second cousin, now 85 years old, produced the same photograph, one she'd carried her entire life. This weekend I will have breakfast with them, in a very Jewish diner with some very Jewish food, and we will all pray for Israel, and that we never see another pogrom in our lifetime.