

**J.B. Remembered:  
The Life and Career of  
J.B. Salsberg**

# Immigration and Early Life

Joseph Baruch Salsberg was born in Lagov, Poland in 1902, and immigrated to Toronto, Canada with his mother and two sisters in 1913. From the start, J.B.'s Jewishness played an integral role in shaping the Salsberg family story in Canada. J.B.'s parents were Orthodox Jews, and it was their commitment to Judaism that almost prevented them from bringing their eldest son to North America. Only with the blessings of their trusted rabbi in Poland were Abraham and Sarah-Gittel Salsberg able to confidently bring their son – a promising Talmudic scholar – out of the traditional Jewish world of Poland to North America. With a pinch to his cheek, the rabbi assured Sarah-Gittel that young Joseph would get along just fine in Canada.



Portrait of young J.B. with his mother.  
Courtesy of Queen's University Archives, J.B. Salsberg fonds, box 9.

Abraham settled in Canada in 1910 and began to prepare for the arrival of his wife and children. A baker by trade, Abraham decided to switch occupations and began work as a peddler. After some false starts, Sarah-Gittel and her children endured the long trip across the ocean. When at last they arrived in Toronto, they took a horse and buggy to the home that Abraham had purchased at 73 Cecil Street. In Toronto at that time, most Jews lived in St. John's Ward, the poor neighbourhood between Teraulay Street (now Bay) and University Avenue. Although the Salsbergs lived just west of "The Ward", in 1913 there were already a few Jewish families in the neighbourhood around Cecil Street. Yiddish could be heard in many of the shops and factories along Spadina Avenue and some Jews had already begun to move into Kensington Market. By the 1920s, Kensington was known as the Jewish Market; home to the Jewish community, it was the hub of Jewish life in Toronto.



Landsdowne School manual training class, 1915.  
Ontario Jewish Archives (OJA), fonds 23, series 1, item 9.

J.B. attended Landsdowne Public School for two years, but around the time of his Bar Mitzvah decided that he must make a financial contribution to the Salsberg family. Against the wishes of his parents, he left school and took a job in a leather goods factory for which he was paid \$3.00 a week. However, despite his full-time employment, J.B. continued his Jewish studies in the evenings and after Shabbat services, learning Talmud with the scholars at the little synagogue on Centre Ave. He would often enjoy tea with apples and pears with these learned men, whose families were a world away in Europe and for whom J.B. represented a surrogate child.

# Labour Zionism and Union Work

It had always been Abraham and Sarah-Gittel's great hope that their eldest son Joseph would one day become a rabbi. However, when J.B. was 15 years-old, two key events changed the course of his life and threatened his parents' dream for their son. Influenced by the signing of the Balfour Declaration and the Russian Revolution, in 1917, J.B. was introduced to the ideas of Zionism and Socialism. Determined to pursue these interests, J.B. became very involved in establishing the Young Poale Zion organization, a Labour Zionist youth group dedicated to secular aims. Although he was no longer interested in pursuing a rabbinic career, J.B.'s commitment to Labour Zionism was firmly connected to his identity as a Jew. Unfortunately, the secular activities of the youthgroup were a cause of great tension in the Salsberg home.

The youth group met regularly at the Poale Zion building at the corner of Spadina and St. Andrew. One evening, young J.B. was given the honour of introducing the renowned Jewish poet, David Pinsky. As he was preparing to address the group, J.B. was suddenly warned that his father, Abraham, was looking for him outside the building. In an attempt to prevent his father from learning about his involvement with the youth group, J.B. was forced to hide under a desk until Abraham left. It was this event that led to a final ultimatum from his father. In order to prevent any of the other children from abandoning traditional religious Jewish life, Abraham asked him to leave the family home. Only through the intervention of his great aunt were J.B. and his father able to come up with a compromise, allowing the family to remain intact.



Photo of the executive members of the Cloth, Hat, Cap and Millinery Workers Union, ca. 1923. OJA, photo #6023.

J.B.'s efforts and dedication to Young Poale Zion were soon recognized. He was appointed to the position of Secretary General of the Young Poale Zion of America in New York, where he worked for one year. However, J.B.'s rise in the world of Zionist labour politics was just a starting point for a remarkable career as a union organiser and labour leader. Shortly after his return to Toronto, he was invited to become the organiser for the Hat, Cap and Millinery Workers Union of North America in Chicago. While in Chicago, around 1925, Salsberg wed Dora Wilensky, his sweetheart from Toronto.

A founding father of trade unionism in Canada, J.B. was involved in the creation of the major Canadian industrial unions, such as the Canadian Auto Workers, the Steelworkers, and the Canadian Seamen. Renowned for his abilities to organise workers and manage strike actions, Salsberg played a key role in labour struggles across the country; miners, lumberjacks, garment workers and others all called on J.B. for help securing their rights as workers.



Composite portrait of the members of the Poale Zion Youth Club, 1918. J.B. is second from the left in the bottom row. OJA, 2004-5/28.



Members of the Canadian Committee of Headgear Workers, 1924. Salsberg is located in the front row, second from the left. OJA, Accession 2004-5/28.

# Political Life

Motivated by the British General Strike and moved by a deep concern for issues of social justice and equality, in 1926 J.B. decided to join the Communist Party of Canada (CPC). The CPC was founded in 1921 as the Canadian section of the Comintern, the international communist organization created in Moscow after the 1917 Russian Revolution. Based on the ideas of Soviet communism, the CPC's mission was to represent the interests of Canadian workers. Like many Jews in Toronto at that time, J.B. was drawn to communism after the Russian Revolution, in which the Bolsheviks (revolutionary workers, many of whom were Jews) wiped out the corrupt autocracy of the Tsarist government (the ruling monarchy) and gave the working people control over production and politics. Communism was empowering and inspirational to many Jews. Not only did it aim to help the poor working class in a time of economic difficulty, it also represented a potential antidote to antisemitism in Europe; in post-Tsarist Russia under Lenin, Jewish rights were institutionalized and Yiddish life and culture were thriving.



Photo of J.B. giving a political speech, ca. 1942. OJA, 2004-5/28.

For 30 years, J.B. was an active member of the Communist Party, and served as the head of its Trade Union Department for 2 decades. It was as a member of the Communist Party that he made his first foray into electoral politics. In 1938, he was elected Alderman of Ward 4 in Toronto, the area that included his own Jewish working class neighbourhood around Kensington Market. In the midst of the Depression, the Jewish immigrants were living hand-to-mouth. Issues relating to social welfare were of prime importance and J.B. made the battle for his constituents' well being his



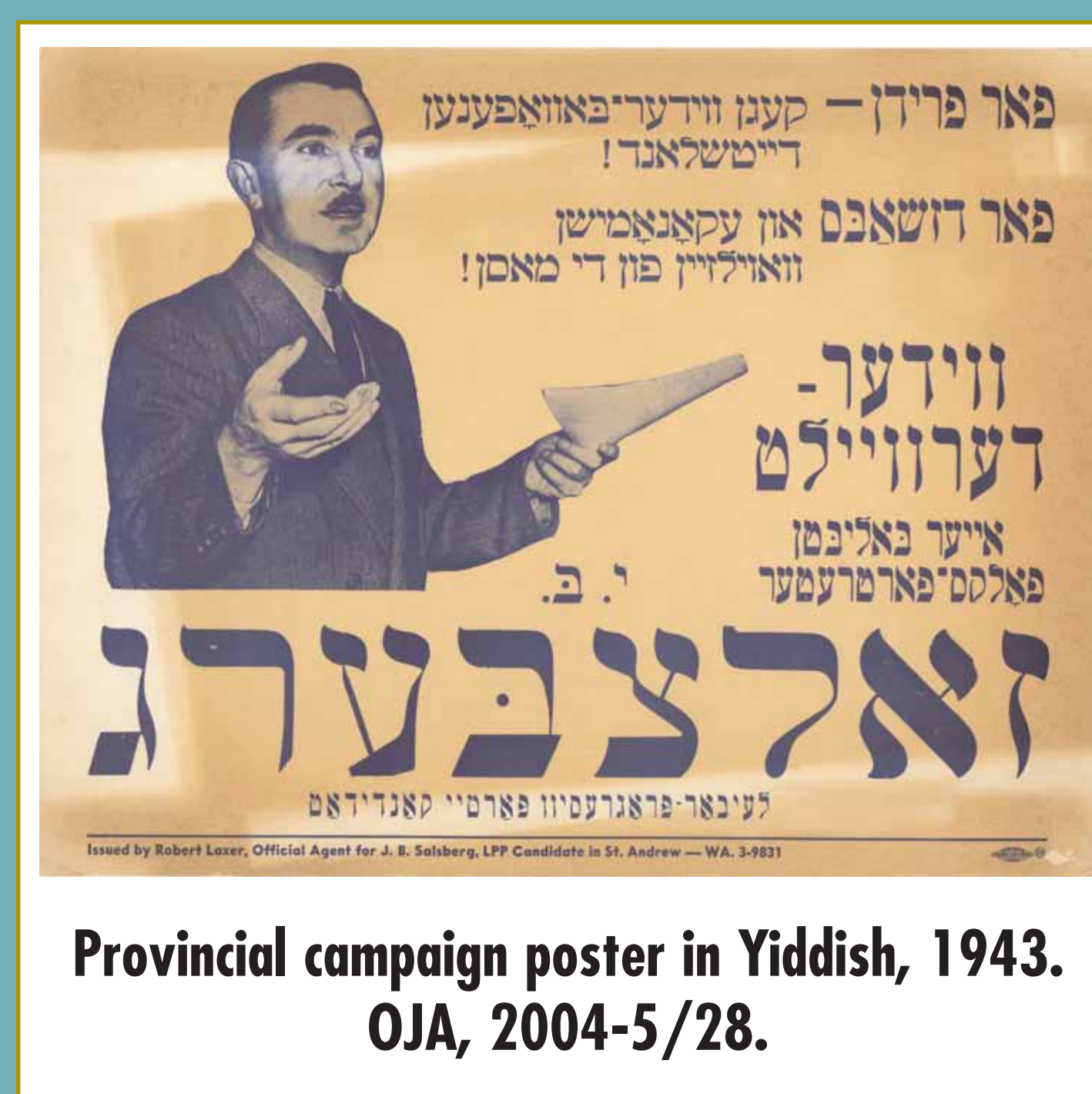
Political button used during his campaign for the municipal election with the slogan, "make the rich pay", 1938. OJA, 2004-5/28.

first priority. He fought on behalf of the poor, hungry and unemployed, and as a result, he won the respect and support of not only the Jewish population, but also the bulk of destitute people who comprised Ward 4.

In 1943, J.B. was elected to the Ontario Legislature as the representative for the St. Andrew riding. On the evening of his election victory a spontaneous parade formed outside his headquarters at Brunswick and College Street. Hundreds of his loyal supporters marched with torches down Spadina Avenue while they cheered for their new Member of Provincial Parliament. J.B. sat as MPP for the Labour-Progressive Party – the provincial wing of the Communist Party – for 12 years. For several years, he had the distinction of being the only elected communist in North America.



Campaign poster promoting "Jobs, Security and Peace" that J.B. used when running for the provincial election in 1943. OJA, 2004-5/28.



Provincial campaign poster in Yiddish, 1943. OJA, 2004-5/28.

As a passionate supporter of the underdog, J.B. was not only concerned with labour issues, but also fought tirelessly against discrimination in Ontario. During his tenure as MPP, he assisted in the creation of legislation that banned discrimination in public places and introduced a bill that would ensure fair employment practices throughout the province. An eloquent and witty debater, he was well-respected by members of all political parties. Out of admiration for J.B., Conservative Premier Leslie Frost named Salsberg Township in Northern Ontario in his honour.

# Soviet Antisemitism and the Break with Communism

Despite the official lifting of anti-Jewish policies in post-Tsarist Russia, as early as the 1930's, J.B. began to have doubts about the Soviet government's stance towards Jews as Russian Jewish institutions were being shut down and Jewish cultural life was being restricted. He was so troubled by the situation that in 1939 he decided to travel to Moscow to find some answers. J.B.'s concerns were confirmed, and upon his return he battled with party leaders to pursue the issue of Jewish suppression under the Soviet regime.



A SCENE BEFORE the tragic events of 1948: Benjamin Zuskin, leading member of the Moscow Jewish State Theater is seen here (right) taking a class in the drama school operated by the theatre. Zuskin perished with other Jewish artists.

Article by J. B. Salsberg, "We Were Always Concerned, But We Did Not Act", *Vochenblatt*, November 1, 1956, p. 3.



NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV, (I) Soviet party first secretary, was among those who conferred with Canadian delegation. He is seen above greeting U.S. General Twining in Moscow last summer.

Article by J. B. Salsberg, "We Ask for a Statement on the Past - They Reply", *Vochenblatt*, November 15, 1956, p. 3.

Although he publicly remained a loyal member of the Communist Party of Canada, within the inner circles of the Party leadership, J.B. continued to press the question of Soviet antisemitism in the hopes of improving the Jewish situation in the USSR. In 1956, when Soviet First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev exposed the transgressions of Stalin's regime, the Canadian Communist Party leadership agreed to allow Salsberg to embark on another investigative mission to Moscow. After meeting with Khrushchev himself, it became clear to Salsberg that antisemitism was indeed a problem in the USSR and that his efforts to probe the situation of Soviet Jews were being stonewalled. For J.B., Soviet antisemitism was unacceptable and was a symptom of all that had gone wrong with communism.

In the fall of 1956, Salsberg publicly expressed his deepening concerns about Soviet antisemitism in a series of 9 articles in the local Yiddish communist journal, the *Vochenblatt*. His argument struck a chord across the communist world; condensed versions of the series were reprinted in New York, Paris and Tel Aviv. By 1957, J.B. could no longer abide by the antisemitism that was endemic to the Soviet regime. When he broke with the Communist Party, many other members left with him, leaving the party powerless as a political force in Canada.



TWO MEMBERS of the delegation, Mr. Salsberg (fourth from right) and William Kardash (second from right), together with Sam Lipshitz (extreme left, back row) photographed together with Soviet Yiddish writers in Moscow.

Article by J. B. Salsberg, "What Nikita Khrushchev Told Us", *Vochenblatt*, December 6, 1956, p. 3.

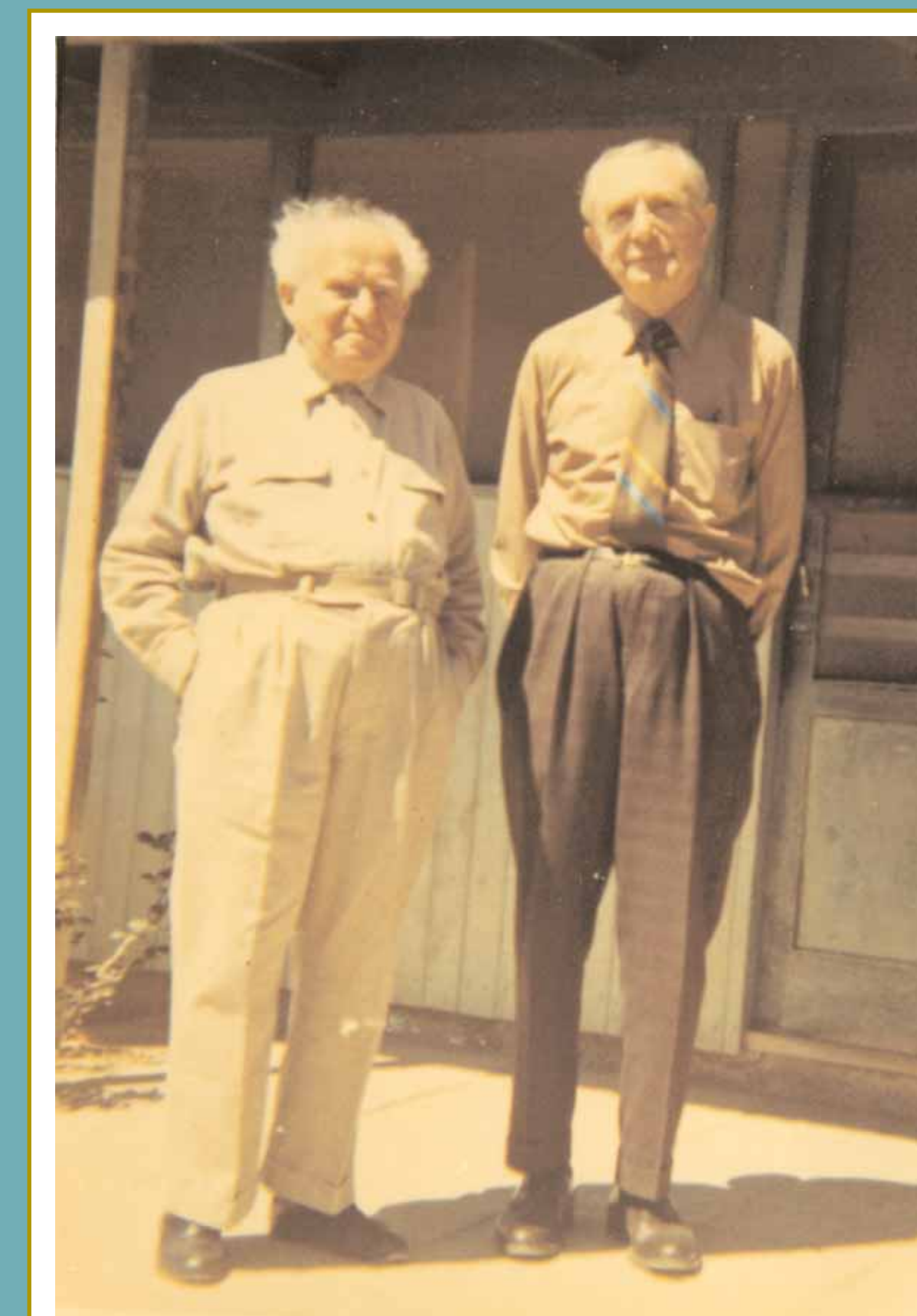
# Life after Politics



Portrait of J.B. and Dora, ca. 1950.  
OJA, fonds 33, series 4, item 9.

After over a decade in the provincial legislature, J.B. was finally defeated in the election of 1955. Applying himself to the world of business, he established the Model Insurance Agency, where he served as President for several years. Sadly, in 1959 his wife, Dora Wilensky, passed away. Dora, a prominent figure in the field of Canadian social work, had pioneered and eventually became the Executive Director of Jewish Family and Child Services in Toronto.

Although his political career had come to a close, J.B. never abandoned his commitment to communal service. After his break with communism, he played an instrumental role in the establishment of an alternative, non-communist left-wing Jewish organisation, the New Fraternal Jewish Association, where he served as President for several terms. J.B. was also active as an executive member of organizations such as the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) and the Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care. He was also chairman for the Ontario CJC's Soviet Jewry Committee and the Committee for Yiddish. J.B. was awarded the CJC's Samuel Bronfman Medal for distinguished service, and the Jewish Federation of Greater Toronto's Ben Sadowski Award of Merit. A strong supporter of Israel, he was involved in the creation of two Israeli medical centres that are named in his honour. Throughout his life, J.B. had a passion for Jewish culture, history and Yiddishkeit. In order to preserve and sustain Jewish cultural life in Canada, he helped establish the J.B. and Dora Salsberg Fund and the J.B. Salsberg Fund for Yiddish at the Jewish Foundation of Greater Toronto.



J.B. with Israeli prime Minister Ben Gurion during one of his many visits to Israel, 1970. OJA, 2004-5/28.



J.B. giving a speech at a Kupa Holim event, ca. 1980.  
OJA, 2004-5/28.

In the 1970s, Salsberg began yet another career, this time as a journalist. For over two decades, J.B. was a regular columnist for the Canadian Jewish News. His award-winning weekly column was a unique mix of commentary and historical musings. Often written as dialogues with the fictional Uncle Eliezer, the column allowed J.B. to express his venerable wit and wisdom about everything from geopolitics, philosophy, current events, to life in the shtetle.

Joseph Baruch Salsberg passed away in 1998. Known as a larger-than-life figure, Salsberg was a renowned labour leader, political legend, and one of those rare people who are admired even by their opponents. Driven by a deep sense of personal ethics, J.B.'s life was a testament to his commitment to Jewishness, public service and social justice.



Photograph of group taken in front of the plaque at the Israeli medical centre named after J.B. and funded by the New Fraternal Jewish Association of Toronto, 1970. OJA, 2004-5/28.