

The Feminist Pioneer: Anna Raginsky and Her Impact on Canadian Jewish Activism

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Volume 20, Number 1, 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1113779ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/wij.v20i1.43955>

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Publisher(s)

Women in Judaism, Inc.

ISSN

1209-9392 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Barda, K. (2023). The Feminist Pioneer: Anna Raginsky and Her Impact on Canadian Jewish Activism. *Women in Judaism*, 20(1), 1–12.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/wij.v20i1.43955>

Article abstract

Anna Raginsky (1891-1981) was a transformative figure in Canadian Jewish activism. Raised in a family steeped in social causes, she became a leader in Zionist efforts at a young age. By 17, she held a leadership position in a Toronto Zionist council, and by 20, she was the first woman deputy president of the Toronto Zionist council. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Raginsky secured significant donations for pre-state Israel and championed groundbreaking projects. During World War II, her focus shifted to supporting European Jewry and the war effort. Her involvement in numerous organizations and lifelong commitment to Canadian Jewry and Israel cemented her place as a pioneer. Importantly, her leadership paved the way for a more prominent role for women in Canadian Jewish activism.

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Abstract

Anna Raginsky (1891-1981) was a transformative figure in Canadian Jewish activism. Raised in a family steeped in social causes, she became a leader in Zionist efforts at a young age. By 17, she held a leadership position in a Toronto Zionist council, and by 20, she was the first woman deputy president of the Toronto Zionist council. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Raginsky secured significant donations for pre-state Israel and championed groundbreaking projects. During World War II, her focus shifted to supporting European Jewry and the war effort. Her involvement in numerous organizations and lifelong commitment to Canadian Jewry and Israel cemented her place as a pioneer. Importantly, her leadership paved the way for a more prominent role for women in Canadian Jewish activism.

Key Words

1. Anna Raginsky, Hadassah Canada, Canadian Jewish Feminist Activism



The Family and Early Years

Anna Raginsky (also known by her Hebrew name Hana, and surnames Kovel and Selik or Slick) was the fourth daughter of Mendel Kovel and Rebecca (Becky) Kenen. Understanding her family background is crucial to appreciating the environment that shaped her and the ideas that fueled her extensive and pioneering work for the community and Israel.

Anna was an infant when her father, Mendel Kovel, died tragically at the age of 27. According to various accounts, he suffered a fatal mishap in a Turkish bath where the extreme heat caused burns that led to his death.

Widowed in her twenties, Becky, a young and resourceful woman, uprooted her family from their Rochester, New York home and moved to be near her brother in Boston. However, seeking more independence, Becky decided to relocate again, this time to

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Portland, Maine. There, she established a restaurant to support herself and her four daughters: Frida, Esther, Augusta, and Anna.

Emanuel Kenen, whom Becky knew from their time in New York, reconnected with her and decided to join the family in Portland. As Isaiah L. Kenen describes in his book, Emanuel showered the girls with warmth and love, becoming a devoted partner to Becky.¹

After persistent courtship and with the encouragement of her daughters, Becky finally agreed to marry Emanuel Kenen on July 3, 1904. That summer, the family relocated to the town of St. Stephen, Canada, a community with a negligible Jewish presence. Despite this, activism remained a family hallmark.

In 1905, following the birth of their son Isaiah Kenen, who would later become the founder of the influential pro-Israel lobby AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee), Emanuel entrusted 14-year-old Anna and her older sister Esther with a critical task. They traveled 225 miles back to Portland, Maine, to acquire a Torah scroll for Isaiah's circumcision ceremony.

This ceremony marked a pivotal moment. Their home transformed into a makeshift synagogue, welcoming the small Jewish diaspora in St. Stephen. The entire town was even invited to celebrate the establishment of the first synagogue in the community.

Seeking new opportunities, the Kenen family embarked on another move on April 1, 1911, this time to the bustling metropolis of Toronto. This relocation proved to be a significant step, further fueling the family's commitment to activism and Zionist causes.

Anna's Early Zionist Activism

Anna Raginsky's foray into Zionist activism began at the age of 17 (in 1908) when she was elected vice president of a Toronto branch of the Zionist Council.² Her dedication shone further in 1910 when she was among the signatories who secured a record-breaking donation of 500\$ (about \$12,000 today) for Jews in Palestine.³

By 1911, at the young age of 20, Anna made history by becoming the first female deputy president of the Toronto Zionist Council. This marked her first foray into public office.

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While actively involved in the Zionist movement, Anna married Joseph Slick in 1911 and gave birth to their son, Leo Slick, in 1913.

Anna's connection to Hadassah blossomed during a trip with her sister Esther to the inaugural Daughters of Zion conference held in Rochester, New York, on June 29-30, 1914. This pivotal conference witnessed the official founding of Hadassah. After extensive discussions, the participants adopted a resolution outlining the organization's purpose: "to promote Jewish institutions and entrepreneurship in Palestine, and to cultivate Zionist ideas in America." This resolution marked a turning point, leading to the official adoption of the name "Hadassah" – the Zionist Women's Organization of America.⁴

It seems that more than anything else, Henrietta Szold, the visionary founder of Hadassah, ignited Anna Raginsky's passion for the movement. At the inaugural Hadassah conference, Szold emphasized a key domestic goal for the organization in the US: establishing a school for Zionism to "educate American Zionist women to be effective leaders of membership clubs, "organizers, and propagandists."⁵

As described on the Hadassah history page in the Jewish Archives of Ontario, Anna returned from the conference "*fired up and determined*" to establish a Canadian branch of Hadassah.⁶ Undeterred by a few unsuccessful attempts to gather a group, she took the initiative and convened the founding convention of Hadassah in Canada in October 1916.

Despite sending out 300 invitations, only 14 women attended the inaugural Hadassah Canada conference. Yet, this small but determined group, led by the newly elected president, Anna Slick, wasted no time in making a difference.

Their first act of compassion was a fundraising drive to aid Jewish refugees in Egypt. Through dedicated door-to-door solicitations, they raised an impressive sum of \$500 (equivalent to roughly \$12,000 today) and collected 1,350 articles of clothing. These donations were then sent to Alexandria, Egypt, to assist refugees displaced by the Ottoman Empire's Operation Jaffa. While her work with Hadassah flourished, Anna's dedication extended beyond the organization. World War I provided the impetus for new women's activities including the Soldiers' Comfort League, headed by Anna Slick

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of Toronto, a social worker and pioneer Zionist. The League was established “to provide comforts for the members of the Jewish Legion who saw service in Palestine.” (North American recruits trained in Canada before being shipped overseas.) In Winnipeg, the Magen Dovid Society raised “funds for the relief and comfort of the Jewish Legionnaires.”⁷

In March 1917, Anna's tireless efforts to promote Hadassah bore fruit. She successfully organized a meeting in Toronto to host none other than Henrietta Szold herself. News of Szold's visit attracted a significantly larger audience of Jewish women eager to hear her speak. Szold's electrifying speech proved to be a turning point, inspiring a wave of new members to actively join the organization. This surge in enthusiasm coincided with another significant event for Canadian Zionism. From July 1-3, 1917, the 15th Congress of the Zionist Federation of Canada convened in Winnipeg. The gathering welcomed prominent figures like Menachem Ussishkin, Nachum Syrkin, and Ben-Zion Mintz.⁸ This 15th Congress proved to be a pivotal moment for Anna. She seized the opportunity to present a groundbreaking proposal: the establishment of Hadassah branches across Canada. Her vision resonated with the audience, and the proposal was overwhelmingly approved. Fueled by this momentum, the period leading up to the Balfour Declaration in November 1917 saw a surge in Hadassah activity. Four new branches were successfully established in Canadian cities: Hamilton, London, Brantford, and Windsor.⁹

The newly formed Toronto branch of Hadassah wasted no time making its mark. In June 1917, they tackled a local issue: rising kosher bread prices. Women organized a well-coordinated boycott, targeting bakeries, grocery stores, and restaurants that sold the bread. Their peaceful protests, documented on the front page of the *Sherbrooke Daily Record*, involved women voicing their concerns in front of these establishments. This three-week campaign proved successful. On June 17, 1917, the bakeries agreed to a significant price reduction – bread dropped to 10 cents, with a promise of a further decrease to 9 cents if wheat prices fell. The *Canadian Press Dispatch* hailed this as a “great victory for the Jewish women of Toronto.”¹⁰ By 1919, the groundwork laid by Anna and her colleagues bore fruit. At the 16th Zionist conference held in Toronto, the

official launch of "Hadassah Canada" took place.¹¹ The organization wasted no time in making its mark. Its first major initiative was the establishment of the "Supporting Hand Fund," with Lillian Freiman at the helm.¹² Freiman, who would later become the first president of Hadassah Canada, spearheaded fundraising efforts that amassed an impressive \$200,000 (equivalent to roughly \$2.98 million today). These funds were used for post-WWI relief efforts, proving to be a significant catalyst for attracting new members and expanding the organization's reach across Canada.¹³

1920s: Building the Bedrock of Hadassah Canada

The 1920s proved to be both a period of triumph and personal challenge for Anna Raginsky (Slick). In 1921, she faced the heartbreak of losing her husband Joseph at the age of 60. This personal loss came during a crucial period for Hadassah Canada, as the organization was solidifying its national presence. Despite this personal setback, Anna persevered, demonstrating her unwavering dedication to the cause. She was elected national vice-president, serving alongside Lillian Freiman, the newly elected president. Hadassah Canada's reach extended beyond its national borders. The organization formally joined the World Organization WIZO (Women's International Zionist Organization). This affiliation connected them to a global network of Zionist women.

Meanwhile, within Toronto, Anna's branch of Hadassah Canada thrived. They boasted a membership of 300 active members, spread across seven branches throughout the city. This period also marked a significant milestone for Canadian Zionism. A delegation from Hadassah Canada participated in the 12th Zionist Congress for the first time. During this historic gathering, a groundbreaking decision was made: to raise funds for the establishment of an agricultural school for girls.¹⁴

Hadassah Canada's commitment extended beyond membership growth. In 1922, they played a pivotal role in securing funding for a critical project: an agricultural school for girls in the Jezreel Valley settlement of Nahalal. While an initial allocation was made for purchasing 500 dunams (about 123.553 Acre) of agricultural land, additional resources were needed. Thanks to Hadassah Canada's intervention and

advocacy for increased funding, this vision became a reality. The school proudly opened its doors in 1923.

This dedication to the Zionist cause continued throughout the decade. By 1924, Hadassah Canada had grown to an impressive 4,500 members across various chapters. Their tireless fundraising efforts yielded significant results. They raised an annual sum of \$45,000 (equivalent to roughly \$650,000 today), which was then directed to support initiatives in Palestine.¹⁵

The 1920s witnessed a surge in Hadassah Canada's creativity when it came to fundraising. One innovative concept that emerged during this period was the "Bazaar." Pioneered by Anna Raginsky's Toronto branch in 1924, this event aimed to raise funds for Palestine in a way that appealed to the whole family.

The idea behind the Bazaar was twofold: to provide a fun and engaging family experience while simultaneously raising money for a worthy cause. Hadassah women across Canada enthusiastically promoted this concept, bringing the Bazaar to various communities. These events offered a festive atmosphere with practical goods for sale alongside delicious food options, making them a popular and successful fundraising strategy. In 1927, a special correspondent for the Hebrew newspaper "Hatzfira" reported on the success of the Montreal Hadassah Bazaar. The writer highlighted the event's ability to attract the city's Jewish community, noting: "Hadassah's concept captivated the Montreal public, drawing large crowds." Regarding the fundraising success, the correspondent used vivid language, describing how the "dedication of the women shone through," inspiring patrons to linger and contribute: "Every visitor seemed compelled to make a purchase, deeply moved by the women's unwavering commitment to their sacred work."¹⁶

1927 proved to be a banner year for Canadian Zionism, and Anna Raginsky (Slick) played a key role in its success. As a delegate to the Zionist Organization Conference of Canada held that July, she witnessed a momentous decision. The conference committed to a historic fundraising goal: securing a \$1 million donation to purchase land in Wadi Havarat (present-day Emek Hefer) near Netanya, Israel.¹⁷

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One of the most creative initiatives undertaken by the Naomi branch of Hadassah Toronto was the compilation of a cookbook titled "Naomi Cook Book." First published in 1928, this collection of recipes quickly became a bestseller. Its success spawned imitations and even garnered recognition in a book reviewing Canadian culinary history and cookbooks. Notably, Anna Raginsky was honored to contribute a welcoming message to the readers of that very book.¹⁸ Hadassah Canada's commitment to supporting healthcare initiatives in Palestine continued to grow throughout the 1920s. In 1928, they pledged their support for a significant project: the expansion of the convalescent home in Motza, established by the Gordana Group. This expansion involved the construction of a second floor and an administrative building, providing much-needed additional capacity for the facility, which already housed 60 convalescents.¹⁹

1930s: The Move to Montreal

Anna Raginsky's dedication extended beyond Hadassah. In 1930, she emerged as a unifying force for the diverse Jewish communities across Canada. Having spearheaded the successful unification of Jewish communities in Toronto, Anna Raginsky set her sights on Montreal.²⁰ In 1931, Anna Raginsky married Abraham Raginsky, a prominent Zionist activist in Montreal. Abraham served in various leadership positions, including treasurer of the "Ihud Talmud Torah" organization and the Federation of Polish Expatriates, president of the Bnei Yaakov community, and member of the National Council of the Zionist Organization of Canada.²¹ The couple did not have children together.

Anna Raginsky's leadership continued to propel Hadassah Canada to new heights. At the 24th Zionist Organization of Canada conference in 1935, she delivered a powerful address on behalf of the organization. Her speech highlighted Hadassah Canada's remarkable fundraising achievements. She proudly announced that a staggering 42% of all donations raised in Canada that year originated with Hadassah Canada.²² This wasn't the only impressive statistic. Raginsky also reported on Hadassah Canada's long-standing commitment to the agricultural school for girls in Nahalal. Over

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the period between 1923 and 1935, their tireless efforts had resulted in a significant contribution of \$160,000 towards the school.²³

In an interview with "Post Today" on March 27, 1935, Anna responded to the establishment of Hadassah by saying:

The Canadian 'Hadassah' is much older than WIZO. I organized the first 'Hadassah' in Toronto in 1916. You might find it interesting that our help was given to Jewish subjects from Russia who escaped to Egypt as refugees. Back in 1910, before the war, I organized the first women's Zionist organization in our area, which was called 'Daughters of Zion,' and I was the president.

When asked about her view of the country, her answer was somewhat indirect:

"It's too bad we can only stay here until the end of April. Yesterday, I wrote to my family in Canada and said, 'All my life I have dreamed and dreamed, and now I have woken up to the reality of life and work.'"

1940s: Leadership and Legacy

In the 1940s, Anna Raginsky was elected president of Hadassah Canada at the organization's 10th convention in Montreal.²⁴ She held this position until 1947 and remained honorary president until her death in 1981. During World War II, Raginsky focused on preparations for the war's end and the rebuilding of European Jewry in Palestine. In a Rosh Hashanah message to Canadian Jews, she advocated for the continued settlement of Jews in Palestine, beyond the 35,000 who escaped the Nazis.²⁵

At a conference in Winnipeg, Canada, Anna Raginsky presented plans to raise money for resettling European refugees.²⁶ An article summarizing her first three years as president reviewed the projects funded by the \$750,000 (equivalent to over \$13.12 million today) that Hadassah Canada raised during World War II. These projects included a convalescent home in Moza, an agricultural school in Nahalal, and contributions to the youth immigration enterprise's war services fund.²⁷

Hadassah Canada, along with other organizations, donated medical supplies to the Canadian Red Cross hospital in England. They also established a recovery center for the British Army's women's corps, where many Jewish women served. Additionally, ambulances were provided in both England and Israel. Notably, twelve ambulances donated by British and Canadian Zionist groups, including WIZO Canada, were driven by female Hebrew volunteers to assist the British army in Palestine.²⁸

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By the mid-1940s, Hadassah Canada boasted a remarkable network with over 9,000 members participating in activities across 203 branches in 68 Canadian cities. Anna Raginsky represented Hadassah Canada at the international conference held in San Francisco in April 1945. There, Jewish representatives advocated for allowing Jewish refugees to reach Palestine and securing a bill of human rights.²⁹ After completing her term as president at Hadassah Canada's 12th convention in Niagara Falls, Anna Raginsky was appointed honorary president in 1947. She held this title until her passing in 1981. Following Israel's independence, Anna Raginsky visited Israel for three months in 1949. During her visit, she toured villages in the Emek Hefer region to see the progress made on those established thanks to land acquisition funds raised by Hadassah in the 1920s. One of the most important projects during Anna Raginsky's time as president of Hadassah Canada was supporting the development of Be'er Sheva, a city envisioned to flourish in the Negev desert. During her three-month visit to Israel, Raginsky visited Be'er Sheva, a city adopted by WIZO Canada. WIZO Canada had purchased nearly 5,000 dunams of land near the city and participated in planting Ashalim Park.³⁰ As the guest of honor, Raginsky pledged continued support for Be'er Sheva's development. In her speech, she reassured the audience: "The State of Israel will not forget us. Despite its challenges, the diaspora needs the positive spirit and moral strength Israel brings."

Raginsky's visit also included a tour of the Haddasim Boarding School, established in 1944 with a donation from Hadassah Canada. The school aimed to support youth immigration during and after the Holocaust. The donation funded the purchase of nearly 400 dunams to provide a home for and educate children who fled the Holocaust.

Raginsky's Continued Work: 1950s to 1980s

After stepping down from her leadership roles at Hadassah Canada, Raginsky's dedication continued. She was chosen to chair the Canadian Foundation Fund. In 1954, Anna Raginsky made history as the first woman in Canadian Jewish history to be feted at a "Negev Dinner." This event is considered the largest and most important fundraiser for the Jewish community in Canada.³¹ The Negev Dinner, held in her honor,

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recognized Anna Raginsky's many years of contributions to various organizations. These included Hadassah, Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael (KKL-JNF), the Canadian Foundation Fund, and the Israeli Bonds. The event organizers praised Raginsky as "a woman who belonged to that Zionist school which never rests." They acknowledged her dedication to finding new ways to support Zionism, Canadian Jewry, and Israel. In July 1956, Anna Raginsky received recognition for her outstanding contribution. She became the first woman in Canada to be awarded the "*Woman of Valor*" for selling over \$100,000 worth of Israeli bonds.³²

Following her passing, Mariel Small, then-president of WIZO Hadassah, paid tribute: "Anna was a vibrant and dynamic personality who leaves a huge void in the Canadian Jewish community, especially in WIZO Hadassah, where her leadership was a privilege to experience for so many years."³³ Anna Raginsky's dedication extended beyond WIZO Hadassah. She actively participated in numerous organizations, including the Montreal Women's Council, the Jewish Congress of Canada, and the Women's Division of the Bonds in Montreal. Anna Raginsky's lifetime of service was commemorated in Israel at the WIZO Club in Ashkelon and through a building named after her at the Hadassah Youth Village.

Editor's note: Hebrew versions of this article are available at

<https://tinyurl.com/j633mp56>

and <https://tinyurl.com/5b37fvjb>

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