

Erin Corber may never have been to Halifax, but when she takes up her post as the inaugural Simon and Riva Spatz Visiting Chair in Jewish Studies at Dalhousie University this fall, it will be a homecoming of sorts for her.

That's because Halifax is home to Pier 21, the site of the beginnings of Canadian Jewish history, of which her own family is a part.

"The opportunity to return to Canada, my home, after so many years of study, research and teaching abroad is beyond attractive," says Dr. Corber, who has just completed a term as the Lydia and David Zimmern Memorial Fellow at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "The Spatz family history and the chair's stated goals of creating a fertile and interdisciplinary space at Dal for engagement with Jewish studies both with students and with the broader community is exciting to me. I am honoured to hold the inaugural chair."

Connecting heritage and identity

Describing her own family history as "a pretty typical Canadian Jewish story," Dr. Corber is a third-generation Canadian Jew, whose great-grandparents immigrated to Montreal at the turn of the 20th century from what documents at the time noted as "Russia-Poland" and "Austria."

"They rarely spoke of their personal histories to their own children and I never had the opportunity to ask them myself," says Dr. Corber. "So, growing up in a traditional but largely secular Jewish family in Montreal, I have always been intellectually fascinated, but also personally gratified, by my studies in Jewish history, which I began at McGill as an undergraduate student. Studying Jewish history has allowed me to fill big parts of my own history and Jewish identity that would have remained empty otherwise."

A scholar of modern French and Jewish history, Dr. Corber holds a PhD in Modern European History from Indiana University, Bloomington, as well as an MA in Modern European History from the University of Toronto and a BA in European History and Jewish Studies from McGill University.

In 2015-16, she was an international fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study at New Europe College in Bucharest, Romania, and in 2014-15, she was visiting

assistant professor of European history at the University of Maine, Orono. Throughout, her research agenda has aimed to re-imagine French and Jewish narratives of the inter-war years in Europe and France, in particular.

Delving into history

“I fell in love with the drama of modern French history during my early studies,” says Dr. Corber of her research focus. “The relationship was set in stone after my first trip to Paris 13 years ago.”

Given the French Republic’s history as a haven for immigration, as well as its character as a colonial power, Dr. Corber finds herself intrigued by France’s familiarity. “France’s Jewish community was not so different from the unique Jewish community of Montreal — made up of a variety of Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities of various linguistic, cultural and national backgrounds.”

But it was reading Marc Bloch’s *Strange Defeat*, in which he wrote about the fall of France to Nazi Germany that really inspired Dr. Corber to continue her graduate studies in this field. An important social historian of medieval Europe, Bloch taught for years at the University of Strasbourg, in Alsace. He fought in the First and Second World Wars, then joined the French resistance in 1942.

“In *Strange Defeat*, his last book before he was executed by the Gestapo in 1944, Bloch wrote that while he was born Jewish and had never felt the need to deny it, he felt, above all, a Frenchman,” says Dr. Corber.

“This piece — which so clearly displayed the deep love so many Jews felt, and the sacrifices Jews made, for a nation that ended up betraying its Jewish denizens by collaborating with Nazi Germany — moved me. It pushed me to look more closely into the history of the Jews of France, which I find to be one of the most exciting and challenging stories of modern Europe.”

Discovering the Maritimes

Always in pursuit of meaningful travel experiences, Dr. Corber says that her favorite part of being an academic is the opportunity it offers her to travel to interesting places and spend time in archives.

“I have been to all kinds of archives in big cities and small towns across France. I loved living and working in Paris, and researching at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. has been a highlight of my academic career. Strasbourg is my current top research spot, however. It is totally walkable, the archives there are magnificent and the food and wine is divine!”

In her role as the inaugural Visiting Chair in Jewish Studies, Dr. Corber says she looks forward to creating dynamic learning environments in Dalhousie classrooms, where students can actively participate in discussions and “really get a sense of how historians do what we do and how these skills can be used to look at any kind of source in their everyday life with a critical eye — a valuable tool for any responsible citizen.”

She also looks forward to immersing herself in Maritime culture. “I’ve never been to Halifax but I’ve always been intrigued by the Maritimes,” she says. “Halifax also has its own interesting Jewish community that I am excited to learn more about. This will be an unparalleled opportunity for me to build networks within and beyond the university in the service of enriching knowledge and engagement with Jewish studies and Jewish history.”

Dr. Corber’s term as Visiting Chair will last for one academic year, during which time she will teach one course and give one public talk in each of the two semesters.