

Penner traces a political dream

Cold War, politics and university life blend in memoir

Books by University Staff

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The Bulletin

Leave it to University of Manitoba law professor Roland Penner: nearly 20 years removed from the Manitoba Legislature and he can still cause a political ruckus.

In this case it was Tory leader Hugh McFadyen hefting a copy of Penner's new book *A Glowing Dream: A Memoir* earlier this month, pointing to the hammer and sickle on the cover and calling it offensive. McFadyen went on to say Penner had been an NDP minister in the 1980s and that today's governing NDP party needed to make a statement against the symbol of the old Soviet Union.

The government didn't take the bait and Penner, who knows how the political game is played, had a laugh over the incident.

Considering Penner was tailed by the RCMP is his youth because of his communist links, a little red baiting now by McFadyen some 50 years after those links have been broken isn't going to slow him down.

"The hammer and sickle is on the cover along with pictures of me being sworn into government in the province of Manitoba because they're intended to show my journey from being brought up as a red diaper baby to being a member of the New Democratic Party," Penner said.

In tracing that journey, Penner has written more than an autobiography; he's created a history that touches on North End politics, Cold War fearmongering and a good deal of the evolution of the University of Manitoba.

As it should, the story of the book begins with Penner's parents – their story, *A Glowing Dream: The Story of Jacob and Rose Penner* was documented by Cathy Gulkin, Penner's niece, as part of the History Channel's *Scattering of Seeds* series, which featured the life stories of immigrants to Canada. When the family sat down to discuss the movie, it seemed natural for Penner to follow it up with a broader look at the family – a project that morphed into *A Glowing Dream: A Memoir*. One of the founders of the Communist Party of Canada in 1921 and a Winnipeg city councilor for 25 years, Jacob Penner epitomized the North End political



Photo by Dale Barbour

***A Glowing Dream: A Memoir* says a lot about political culture in Winnipeg while tracing law professor Roland Penner's life.**

culture. That upbringing helped ensure that Roland Penner grew up proudly communist: a designation that also ensured that he, like his parents, came under RCMP surveillance. In producing *A Glowing Dream*, Penner tracked down his RCMP dossier – a file that included literally hundreds of pages of notes tracking his movements and activities. Some of the pages are blank, either for security reasons or to protect the identity of the people tracking him, but others reveal the commentary and opinions from the people watching Penner. A public meeting of the Labour Progressive Party, the equivalent of the communist party, at the Playhouse Theatre in 1949 earned this pithy comment from the RCMP agent on hand: "(Penner's) topic seemed to be very party organized and very poorly delivered." The same dossier would go on to note that Penner and a classmate won the Dominion Debating Championship a month later.

Penner's own links to the Communist Party began to break in 1956. He wasn't alone.

"It was following the Khrushchev revelations in the fall of 1956," Penner said. "It was difficult, because it was really like giving up your faith." The discussion at

the 20th Congress of the Communist Party in June 1956 unveiled some of the horrors of Joseph Stalin's reign. That was enough to make Penner reconsider the party's links to the Soviet Union. In the end, the lack of change in the local movement sealed his split with the party.

"Our meetings were a constant rehash of the same dogma and it was material that no longer made intellectual sense," Penner said. It wasn't a dramatic split out of respect to his father who remained a lifelong member, but Penner said by 1961 he had cut all links to the communist party and remained out of political life until joining the NDP in 1977 and running in the provincial election in 1981 where he'd go on to serve 6 and ½ years in government.

Penner said putting together the memoir has been an opportunity to explore the archives of his own life. Along with the RCMP dossier tracking his movements – which took two years to pry out of government hands – he also found records of his Second World War service and a written history of his regiment in the Canadian War Museum.

"I did find things that I had forgotten about, and with the military record I could track the movements of our regiment," Penner said.

The University of Manitoba figures prominently in *A Glowing Dream*, which should come as no surprise given how much of his life Penner has spent here.

"My relationship with the University of Manitoba goes back 64 years, if I don't have the record for the longest time at the university, I must be close," Penner said.

The relationship started when he joined the army in 1943 – the air force wouldn't take communists – and bunked at Tache Hall on the Fort Garry campus while completing his basic training. As the war came to an end and Penner waited in Europe to return to Canada, he took courses from Khaki University in London – a program set up to give soldiers a start on their education. He joined the U of M when he returned to Canada in 1946, earned an English degree and later a law degree before going on to work as a lawyer and Faculty of Law professor. He was instrumental in unionizing the university's faculty members in the 1970s, was dean of the Faculty of Law from 1989 to 1994 and remains a part time faculty member.

Penner was appointed as a Member of the Order of Canada in 2000, the appointment citing his contributions to Legal Aid, access to justice and human rights.

Exploring Dia de la Muertos

In Canada, the holiday is celebrated as Halloween. In Mexico, it's Dia de la Muertos, or the Day of the Dead. And while the celebrations have similar roots they've taken widely divergent paths.

"Nov. 1 is the Christian celebration of dead people – traditionally in Mexico, Nov. 1 is dedicated to the spirits of children and Nov. 2 is dedicated to the spirits of adults," French, Spanish and Italian department head Enrique Fernandez said. In Canada, All Hallows' Eve on Oct. 31 has moved from a celebration of spirits to a more commercial event with costumes and candy swapping that has little to do with the roots of the holiday.

"Here the component of death has been hidden," Fernandez said. But in Mexico, death and bridging the gap between the world of the living and the spirit world, is in full display and in a particularly Mexican way.

"You can see influences of Christian Catholicism and pre-Columbian cultures in the celebration," Fernandez said. "It's an example of the Syncretism of religions."

The University of Manitoba's Spanish Club celebrated the two-day event by making an altar to the dead. In Mexico the altars would be built in people's homes or workplaces and, along with decorations and sugar-skulls, include pictures of dead relatives. The moral is that death comes to everyone and is not something to be feared. The celebration includes special foods, such as skeleton shaped bread, and an evening in the cemetery.

"Families will go to the cemetery to clean the tombstones of their relatives and bring flowers and food for the dead," Fernandez said. The food is consumed by the living, but its presence in the cemetery is distinctive to the Mexican celebration. Fernandez said it reflects pre-Columbian worship of a God of Death when food would have been brought as a sacrifice. Similarly,



Photo by Dale Barbour

French, Spanish and Italian department head Enrique Fernandez with an altar dedicated to the Mexican Day of the Dead.

features of the Pre-Columbian God of Death linger in the design of skeletons and skulls that mark Dia de la Muertos in Mexico. In contrast to the anatomically correct versions that have been used in European countries for the same celebration, the Mexican skulls are stylized to create a caricature of death.

The blending of cultures continues today. In the southern states the Mexican influence shows itself with altars and distinct Dia de la Muertos symbols appearing in conjunction with Halloween decorations. In Mexico, Halloween is celebrated in some areas followed by the two day Dia de la Muertos celebrations. Halloween icons, such as the pumpkin, have also popped up in altars and other Dia de la Muertos displays.

Banner 7 is coming

Aurora Finance and Aurora Student are based on a database software product called Banner. Currently, the university uses Banner version 6. Staying compliant with the vendor, SCT Higher Education, requires an upgrade to version 7.

The upgrade brings a new look and feel to Banner and provides increased functionality for some areas of the system. There are a number of key points that are important to Aurora users.

The upgrade is happening Nov 17 to 18. System functionality will phase down during the afternoon of Friday, Nov. 16 and will be shut down to general users until Nov. 20. Users should review the full upgrade schedule which is available on the Aurora website at umanitoba.ca/computing/renewal/aurora/.

Users will notice a new look and feel with Internet Native Banner (INB) for Aurora tasks. The new application launches a window with a cleaner, easier to use interface. Almost all form names and basic functions remain the same. A new plug-in (Java Runtime Environment) will automatically load on your workstation; plus Banner 7 works with newer versions of the web browsers.

Visit the LDS website to register for Aurora sessions at umanitoba.ca/admin/human_resources/training/reg/. Visit the Aurora website for updated news, information and training resources at umanitoba.ca/computing/renewal/aurora/.

- For a detailed update or a refresher, updated core Aurora Finance courses are scheduled for the week of Nov. 26.

- New online help documents are being continuously updated.

- Updated inserts for Aurora binders will be available for download from the website.