
BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDUS

Belkin, S. *Le Mouvement Ouvrier Juif au Canada, 1904-1920*, Sillery, Québec: Septentrion, 1999. Translated from the Yiddish and introduced by Pierre Anctil.

Wolofsky, H. *Mayn Lebns Rayze: Un demi-siècle de vie yiddish à Montréal*, Sillery, Québec: Septentrion, 2000. Translated from the Yiddish and introduced by Pierre Anctil.

Over the past few years, Pierre Anctil has pursued his project of “re-reading Montréal’s Yiddish literary heritage”¹ with three new translations from Yiddish into French, published by Québec’s flourishing Éditions du Septentrion. The new translations make available a varied set of materials that document an immigrant community now fading from living memory, in a context where ever fewer people are able to read the original Yiddish. In addition to the light they shed on a unique chapter in Montréal’s history, the books offer a fresh look at Québec and Canadian society, a view from beyond either Anglophone or Francophone political perspectives. This review focuses on the historical content the books offer, on the analytical and political perspectives provided by their introductory essays and on some implications of Anctil’s work for the historiography of Montréal Jewry. A technical or stylistic critique is beyond the scope of this review, though the translations are widely regarded as highly competent and respectful of the Yiddish originals.

A review of the first in Anctil's current trilogy of translations from the Yiddish appeared in Vol. 6 of *Canadian Jewish Studies*² (Israel Medresh's *Le Montréal Juif d'Autrefois*, Septentrion, 1997). The Medresh journalistic chronicles, together with another Anctil translation, this one from the original English into French (Shulamis Yelin's *Shulamis: Stories of a Montréal Childhood / Une enfance juive à Montréal*) provide intimate portraits of day-to-day life in the Jewish community on and around "the Main," St. Lawrence Boulevard. The two new translations supply background on the ideologies and institutions that shaped this Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrant community. *Mayn Lebns Rayze: Un demi-siècle de vie yiddish à Montréal* is the personal memoir of Hirsch Wolofsky, founder of the influential Yiddish-language daily *Der Keneder Odler*. Simon Belkin's *Le Mouvement Ouvrier Juif au Canada, 1904-1920*, is a history of the Labour Zionist movement in Canada.

BELKIN

Di Poale-Zion Bavegung in Kanade, 1904-1920, was commissioned in connection with the 50th anniversary celebrations of the Labour Zionist movement in North America. The book first appeared in 1956. By then its author, Simon Belkin (b. 1889, Smolyanka, near Kiev), had behind him a lifetime of creative engagement as a community activist, in addition to having written literary texts for the Yiddish press, including a 1916 translation of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*. "Comrade Belkin's" achievement with this history is praised in Barukh Zukerman's Preface to the Original Edition as not just a history of "our movement," but also as the expression of an idea that "includes the superior interests of the Jewish people, Canadian society, the entire working class and even all of humanity." p. 53) Zukerman's rhetorical exuberance is echoed in historian David Rome's 1956 review, which speaks of what the Labour Zionists have done "for the welfare of all Canadian working men, for the education of Jewish children, for the

strengthening of Israel, in the making for Jewish libraries, for Jewish literature, for the organisation of Jewry in the Canadian Jewish Congress, for the moulding of Canadian consciousness ...”: (cited in Anctil’s Introduction, p. 15) As Anctil’s Introduction argues in detail, the powerful forces of ideals and identity that fuelled the Labour Zionists also gave community leaders the sense of historic moment that animates *Di Poale-Zion Bavegung in Kanade*.

Though the point of view from which Belkin’s history is written is lofty, the writing is by no means overblown. On the contrary, *Di Poale-Zion Bavegung in Kanade* is a concise, tightly organised work, packed with historical information. The book sets an ambitious program for itself and carries it through admirably. The first two chapters are devoted to panoramic overviews, first of workers’ movements in Canada and then of the development of Canadian Jewry. Belkin continues with chapters on the organisation of Labour Zionism in Canada, on the various socialist and communist parties of the time, on trades unions, on the Jewish Legion and efforts in favour of the new State of Israel. Also documented are the Jewish community organisations that the Labour Zionists helped to found in Canada, including reading rooms and libraries, mutual aid organisations, and the Canadian Jewish Congress. The longest chapter and the one written with the most evident pride is the one on the creation and development of the Jewish schools. Throughout, Belkin provides extensive documentation as to names, dates and events and also, in his own words, as to “the sphere of ideas, ideological discussion and ... competing tendencies both within Labour Zionism and with respect to its public pronouncements.” (p. 61)

Although proportionally more of the information contained in *Di Poale-Zion Bavegung in Kanade* relates to Montréal than to other Canadian cities, Belkin has included facts and figures for Toronto, Edmonton, Hamilton, Niagara Falls, Windsor, Saskatoon, Winnipeg and Lachine, as appropriate to the different topics he addresses. It is also intriguing

to note Belkin's perspective on the impact of French and English on his adopted country, on the cultural autonomy of the provinces, on legal systems and the division of powers.

WOLOFSKY

Wolofsky's memoir is a wonderfully rich account of a full and intense life lived at the service of the Jewish community. As a different perspective on the same community treated in *Le mouvement ouvrier juif, Mayn Lebns Rayze* offers a nice complement to Belkin's labour history, since Wolofsky was religiously conservative and a supporter of free enterprise.

The poet A.M. Klein, one of the many talented writers whose first moral and financial support came from Wolofsky's paper, prepared an English translation of his patron's memoir at the time it first came out. [*The Journey of My Life (A Book of Memories)* Montréal: Eagle Publishing, 1945.] Klein's translation edits down the Yiddish original. The whole comes to about half the length of Anctil's version and is written in a flowery and elevated style, as though to place its subject in a favourable light. Anctil's version is more direct and lively. Although Wolofsky repeats himself towards the end of his memoir, the earlier narratives are sharp and clear. Through them we get the strong sense of a man of character and determination, a born negotiator, a tireless fighter on behalf of his community in the outside world and within his community, working for solidarity among its disparate elements.

The earlier chapters in the Wolofsky memoir tell of shtetl life in Poland. There are touching stories of communal caring, highlighting the values that marked the young Wolofsky, values that he incarnated with character and determination in the new world. There are colourful anecdotes. Some, such as the following, show a delightfully incongruous blend of old world and new: "Know, then, that Shitlovtse gave the world this 'big man,' so big in fact that even the biggest store in Toronto would not have been able to find on its shelves a pair of shoes big enough for his feet." (p. 61) We also read of

Wolofsky's early encounters with Nahum Sokolow and Theodor Herzl, listening to their discussions on a Warsaw park bench, bringing the great men bottles of sparkling water. The later chapters recount the founding of the *Keneder Odler*, details of the political and philanthropic development of Jewish life in Montréal and across Canada, accounts of the founding of Montréal's Jewish schools, the hospital, orphanages etc. and also Wolofsky's travel tales, travel to Poland, Israel, and Soviet Russia.

ANCTIL

As was the case for the Medresh journalistic chronicles, the two new Anctil translations provide extensive explanatory footnotes and glossaries for the benefit of francophone readers unacquainted with Jewish life. Both books also have substantial introductory essays. Through these essays, Pierre Anctil pursues his project of re-reading the record of Montréal's Yiddish-speaking community, a project launched twelve years ago with his first major work, *Le Rendez-vous manqué* (Québec: Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, 1988).

Anctil's reading examines a community whose story has been told, when it has been told outside the Yiddish world, in English. Why, Anctil seems to be asking, should this be the case, when there was nothing inherently "English" about the community at the height of its creative development. On the other hand, the resonances are many and deep when the story of this community is read by francophone québécois who know how intimately language and culture can be interwoven, who know or have known what it is to come to the city from small country towns, where the strict practice of orthodox religion had become oppressive for some—but where the links to that rejected orthodoxy and to those towns remain a defining feature of an evolving identity. Anctil brings out the parallels and stresses the fact of the French setting of the Yiddish community in many small ways through his essays. He refers to the extremists of the Yiddishist movement with the same

phrase that has been used to characterize the “hard-liners” of Québec nationalism, “pur et dur.” French is referred to as “the language of [Québec poet Gaston] Miron,” Montréal as “the city founded by Maisonneuve.”

Ancil’s re-reading from the perspective of someone proud of and attached to francophone Québec culture is exciting. His sensitivity to language and culture and his evident fascination with his subject communicate themselves in the essays. The fact that his books are opening up a Yiddish-speaking world on the verge of being forgotten to new generations of francophone québécois is worthy of note. Ancil is also a leading actor in French Canadian/Jewish dialogue in Québec and is currently in the process of preparing an exhibition on St. Lawrence Boulevard “The Main” for the prestigious archaeology and history museum, Pointe-à-Callières. All of this, together with the work of activist scholars like Denis Vaugeois and his publishing program at Septentrion, make the local context of reading and writing the history of Montréal’s Jews unique. The possibility of examining a single object from multiple perspectives and in different languages is exactly the kind of challenge that historians in our pluralist societies should relish.

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¹ From Ancil’s address to the 8th Biennial Conference on Canadian Studies, held at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, June 2000.

² Canadian Jewish Studies, Vol. 6, pp. 117–120. An English translation of the same book has recently been published as: *Montreal of Yesterday: Jewish Life in Montreal, 1900–1920*. Translated from the Yiddish by Vivian Felson. (Montréal: Vehicule Press, 2000.)