

avec celui de la communauté juive qui, dans ses autres textes, constitue un incubateur ou bouillonnement divers courants d'idées modernes, libérales et progressistes. Anctil se réfère peu aux travaux récents sur l'américanité, le libéralisme et le radicalisme politique qui, sans faire du Québec une société résolument rattachée aux idéaux de la « Modernité », ne se caractérisait pas pour autant par un monolithisme idéologique. Hormis cet aspect, ce texte offre un survol fort pertinent des rapports entre les francophones et les Juifs en s'appuyant sur des sources historiques yiddish. Ce texte pose également un regard éclairant sur la nature de l'antisémitisme au Québec.

Malgré ces critiques qui n'entament pas la qualité générale de l'ouvrage, nous témoignons que la dernière publication de Pierre Anctil atteint ses objectifs en définissent les paramètres d'un objet d'étude, émancipé d'une vision qui pouvait être qualifiée auparavant de courte vue, qui donne la pleine mesure d'un potentiel de compréhension approfondie de la société montréalaise et québécoise et des rapports complexes entre la majorité francophone et les communautés culturelles, d'hier à aujourd'hui. Bref, la communauté juive en tant qu'objet d'étude se destine à un avenir prometteur.

Jean-Phillipe Croteau

Université de Hearst

Berson, Seemah C., ed. *I Have a Story to Tell You*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010. xxvi + 285 pp.

Seemah C. Berson's *I Have a Story to Tell You* consists of a series of detailed interviews with Jews who fled to Canada from Eastern Europe during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Berson interviewed these immigrants in the mid-1970s, and in this collection, she has kept herself in the background, enabling the interviewees' own stories to emerge virtually on their own. Their accounts are engaging, indeed fascinating, as well as informative.

As Berson explains in the book's brief introduction, when she began the whole project her main concern was to

determine why so many Jewish immigrants went into the clothing industry. But she became more concerned “to portray the panorama of Jewish life at the turn of the twentieth century, both in the Old Country and here in Canada.” Instead of regarding the interviews as a way to gather useful information, she “began to see [herself] as a funnel or channel through which the lives and struggles of [her] subjects could be written down.” (xix)

Berson provides us with the accounts of almost forty interviewees, many of whom eventually worked in the clothing industry in Montreal, Toronto, or Winnipeg. Many of these men and women have vividly portrayed the harshness of their lives in Eastern Europe, including their families’ struggles to earn a meagre living and the impact of rampant antisemitism. There are haunting tales of acute deprivation and desperation. Some individuals have described hiding during pogroms, and some have highlighted the harrowing effects of the massive dislocations of Jews and others during the First World War. The poignant accounts of the interviewees have invariably testified to the crucial importance of extended family ties amidst all the poverty and antisemitism. People struggled to provide shelter for those family members who were even less fortunate, and, when they could, they helped family members gain access to training and jobs. Jews who were fortunate enough to have family members in the New World might receive money and packages from them, but this also led to resentment on the part of non-Jews. Yet some of the interviewees have also stressed that non-Jewish neighbours helped them dramatically.

The pull of “America” was strong, and numerous interviewees declared that few of them distinguished between Canada and the United States. None of the interviewees have depicted a romanticized vision of the streets of the New World as paved with the proverbial gold. Instead, potential Jewish immigrants are portrayed as having had a more realistic view of the New World as offering both freedom from the more vicious forms of antisemitism and a better chance to earn a living.

When focusing on life in Canada, the interviewees repeatedly stressed poverty (especially inadequate food and over-crowded living quarters) that was often compounded by bouts of unemployment, particularly during the Great Depression. Many emphasized the difficulties of trying to eke out a living in the needle trades, including the incredibly low wages, long hours during seasonal peaks, and seasonal unemployment. More than one interviewee described working day and night for a contractor who then refused to pay his workers.

So why did so many immigrant Jews work in this sector? The interviewees have discussed many aspects of this question, stressing that, in the context of numerous antisemitic restrictions, many Jews had already become tailors in Eastern Europe. Others who needed to learn a trade in the New World found jobs in this sector through relatives who were already working in Canada's clothing industry. This was an area where one could start to eke out a living without much training, in a context where Canadian antisemitism sharply limited the availability of other jobs. Interestingly, more than a few interviewees have stressed that some immigrant Jews entered this sector because it was relatively easy to scrape together enough money to become a clothing contractor. As one woman explained: "A miner could never dream of becoming a mine owner... But a needle trades worker? Their psychology was not of a worker at that time. It was a psychology that *some day I'll get out and become an employer myself*—which is what a lot of them did." (244)

Nevertheless, this book stresses that, faced with such harsh conditions in the clothing sector, many workers fought back. Although a few of the interviewees were neither ardent trade unionists nor political activists, most were. In fact, many of these men and women were linked to the Communist Party, a fact that Berson should have made clear at the outset. Indeed her introduction should have explained how she had selected the particular individuals to interview.

These leftists spoke avidly about the tough struggles for better wages and working conditions in the needle trades. They

stressed the poverty that made it so hard for hungry strikers to hold out, and they described situations where Jewish bosses hired gangsters to beat up striking workers. They highlighted the building of unions and the concrete gains that they won over time. At the same time, a number of interviewees also focused on the battles between Communist Jews and anti-Communist Jews in the labour movement in this sector. The accounts of these internecine feuds are engrossing, but, given the Communist leanings of the interviewees, these accounts are one-sided.

The interviews also provide information about women's roles, and, in fact, almost half of the interviewees are female. While some of the interviewees have discussed women's paid labour matter-of-factly, suggesting that it was accepted among immigrant Jews, others have declared that at that time, "it wasn't the style for women to work" after marriage. (263) Clearly married women pitched in when their menfolk were not earning enough for the family's needs. Indeed one woman has described taking in sewing work when she was bedridden while trying to avoid a miscarriage. She also recalled that during certain strikes, the women would step in to drive scabs away "because the police would not do the things to girls that they would do to the men." (209)

This book is far less informative with regard to religion, for many of the interviewees defined themselves as progressive, secular Jews. Nevertheless, the dearth of material on religious issues is unfortunate, particularly since Berson has stated in the book's brief conclusion that one of her three main areas of interest focused on the adjustments immigrant Jews made in Canada.

In short, Berson's edited collection provides many fascinating and informative first-hand accounts of the lives of immigrant Jewish men and women in this period. Despite some limitations, this collection is very rich.

Ruth A. Frager
McMaster University