

Book Reviews

JEWISH LIFE IN CANADA

Paintings and Commentaries by William Kurelek.
A Historical Essay by Abraham Arnold.

Reviewed by: LIONEL STEIMAN

Résumé

L'ouvrage *Jewish Life in Canada* d'Abraham Arnold est passé en revue par Lionel Steiman de l'Université du Manitoba. Ce livre contient en outre des reproductions de peintures de William Kurelek ainsi que quelques commentaires du célèbre peintre Canadien. Steiman souligne, dès le début de son article, que le travail qu'il analyse constitue un bel exemple de coopération culturelle entre deux Canadiens: l'un Juif, l'autre d'origine ukrainienne. Mais, au fond, l'oeuvre d'Abraham Arnold, de même que les commentaires et les peintures de William Kurelek, indiquent que l'avenir des Juifs au Canada dépasse les limites nationalistes. C'est en effet au niveau de l'histoire mondiale qu'il faut s'interroger. Rappelant ainsi les mots de Moses Hess "Les Juifs sont le levin du monde occidental", Arnold se demande: "Jusqu'à quand pourra le levin juif faire son travail dans le monde d'aujourd'hui, dans lequel l'occident (et cela inclut le Canada) est seulement un membre, n'étant désormais plus le plus grand dans la famille de l'humanité?"

It is both instructive and heartening in this time of national doubt to encounter a book which is the fruit of Canada's national maturity and positive, multi-ethnic experience. The collaboration of William Kurelek and Abraham Arnold has produced a survey of the history of Jewish life in Canada written by a Jewish-Canadian historian and illustrated by a Ukrainian-Canadian artist. This, to my knowledge, is a unique event in the recording of Canadian cultural history.

The manner in which the work of these two distinguished Canadians is integrated — or, to be honest about it, not integrated — is for me the key to its strength and charm. For here is not a case of author or publisher commissioning an artist to provide a graphic dimension to a text. Nor is it

a matter of an artist having found a historian to provide background comment for his paintings. Both Arnold and Kurelek speak their own individual idiom and sing their own particular song. The one is a meticulous historian who writes as a Jew introducing his fellow Canadians to the main themes of the Jewish experience in Canada. The other, an artist, faithful to his creative vision, with the eye of a Ukrainian prairie lad who first saw Jewish life on the farm and in country towns and, later, in Toronto as an art student. It is the eye of a sensitive man who ponders the meaning of anti-Semitism and seeks, as a Christian, to achieve some measure of atonement for its evils through the understanding of Jewish life.

William Kurelek painted these pictures during a pilgrimage to Lourdes, the same little town in the southeast of France where, in 1940, Franz Werfel, a Jewish writer in flight from the Nazis, found temporary refuge. There, Werfel had become fascinated by the story of the town's most famous personage, St. Bernadette, the little girl whose simple innocence, he believed, had occasioned divine intercession through the miracles popularly associated with Lourdes. Subsequently upon his safe arrival in America, Werfel wrote what became a famous novel and award-winning Hollywood film, "The Song of Bernadette". This celebration of pure, Christian faith was a Jewish writer's call to a civilization about to destroy itself. Thirty-five years later William Kurelek, a devout Christian who remembered that the Mother of his Saviour was "a Jewish maiden", sojourned in Lourdes creating these sixteen scenes of Jewish life in Canada as his contribution toward "undoing some of the injustices Jews have suffered at the hands of Christians." (page 7).

Although Kurelek's paintings are "realistic" in that they represent the activity and detail of daily life, they in no way attempt to be a photographic record. The artist is not bothered by his little daughter's objection that his kittens look like mice; he includes power machinery in the same picture with an ox-drawn plough not in ignorance or defiance of reality but in order to include the widest historical experience within one picture; and he readily admits that he chose to portray an Orthodox Seder in Halifax not as an accurate representation of Jewish life there, but rather as a demonstration of how widespread and varied are Jewish settlement and customs. The commentaries Kurelek has provided to accompany his paintings enlighten the viewer on a variety of matters from turn-of-the-century agricultural techniques to details of Orthodox ritual. But his modest and engaging voice never competes with his pictures. His

words tell us only enough to forestall any inordinate perplexity that might hamper our enjoyment and appreciation of his art. Apart from that, his comments are personal and anecdotal. My favourite tid-bit was how the settlers along Carrot River solved the problems of what to name their colony. They favoured "Jewish Bridge" but thought that the postmaster might not. Observing from the postal guide that the name "Eden" was popular, and noting how similar it sounded to "Yidden" — a similarity the good postmaster would likely miss — they decided upon "Edenbridge", a compromise satisfactory to all.

For most of his pictures Kurelek relies on personal recollection, photographs, and the diaries and reminiscences of the people whose life he is depicting. Sometimes he combines recollection of some experience of his own with a corresponding Jewish experience he sees in a photograph. For example, the painting "Jewish Separate School in Winnipeg" is based on a 1922 photograph of the Talmud Torah School and the artist's own experience of a one-room schoolhouse in rural Manitoba. This blend of personal experience and creative empathy with that of others has given the artist, whose children attend a Catholic separate school, increased insight into the character of Jewish separate schools.

The comprehensive portrayal of Jewish life by Kurelek the artist is followed by an equally comprehensive survey by Arnold the historian. In view of the old quip about a picture being worth a thousand words, Arnold was working at an inherent disadvantage. In a half dozen chapters relating to the most crucial or characteristic themes in Jewish life — Immigration, Earning a Living, Peddling to Politics, Synagogue Development, Education, Community Organization, The Jewish Community Today — he provides the chronological and geographic framework, the intellectual, sociological, and political content necessary to add proper historical understanding to the aesthetic appreciation offered in the first half of the book. Arnold refers to his contribution as an 'essay', but it is not the impressionistic and discursive ramble too often bottled under that label. It is rather a sober and satisfying blend of fact, narrative, and interpretation. He highlights relationships that are significant and asks questions that are important, even if not always presuming to have answers to them.

The dominant impression left by Arnold's account of Jewish immigration and settlement is of the importance of two crucial factors: Jewish initiative and resourcefulness throughout the entire process; and the prejudices and stereotypes of Canadian authorities in hampering or directing that process. The organs and institutions of community self-government

which Jews had been forced to develop in Europe stood them well in Canada, even though they were not forced to recreate them here. Similarly, where in Europe Jews were legally excluded from high status occupations in land, government, or the military and had been forced into various marginal activities soon held to be “natural” to them, less formal, though not less effective, pressures on Jewish immigrants in Canada quickly swelled their numbers on that despised periphery of established commerce: peddling. But just as in economic life Jewish experience in Canada moved from peddling through store-keeping to all manner of large-scale commercial and industrial operations, so in political life Jews emerged from *de facto* proscription and have risen to an impressive prominence in all levels of government. Yet Arnold does not create myths or pander to the prejudices of the complacent. Canada was no simple haven for the oppressed. Traditional anti-Semitism has operated not least in the highest places, John A. Macdonald and Mackenzie King being only the most notorious examples. For their part, the Jewish immigrants were not always overflowing with solicitude for their persecuted brethren in Europe, and the secure and established were not always ready to extend a welcome to those who were not. As for the proverbial progression from peddler to politician, doctor, or entrepreneur, Arnold reminds us that almost 20% of Montreal’s Jewish population, the major Jewish population centre in Canada, are living below the official poverty line of \$5,000 per year for a family of four.

Jews have survived as Jews because of their devotion to something far more powerful than Mars or Mammon: their Book. The fundamental importance of the Book, which is the foundation of all the institutions of family and community life, of intellectual exercise and aspiration, of religious ritual and devotion, is sounded in the long and central chapter on Synagogue Development and is sustained throughout the succeeding chapters on Education and Community Organization. It is especially important for the non-Jewish reader to appreciate the role of ritual and belief, and Arnold makes this role clear as he surveys the establishment of congregations and the building of synagogues. Questions often asked about the meaning of Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform are answered not in abstract delineation of dogma, but in terms of the European historical context from which they derived and in relation to the altered conditions of their new environment in Canada. Testimony to the depth and centrality of religion in Jewish history is the fact that despite the freedom from persecution and the relative lack of external social con-

straints and political pressures experienced by Jews in Canada, “at least half of all observant religious Jews describe themselves as Orthodox to this day.”

Half of Arnold’s concluding chapter, “The Jewish Community Today”, recounts the frustrated efforts of Canadian Jewish organizations to persuade the government to open Canada to Jewish refugees from Nazi-dominated Europe. At first glance, this length appears disproportionate in view of the contemporary focus suggested by the title. It is not. Rather, it is a measure of the importance the author attaches to the trauma of the 1930’s and 1940’s in determining the political and cultural psyche of Canadian Jews today, and their relationship to a country whose actions indirectly consigned untold thousands of their brethren to perdition. With that as a basic fact in the relationship between Canada and its Jewish community, the question of the future security of that community should not be dismissed as academic. Not that Arnold is about to stir up dying embers. While acknowledging the historical justification for “the feeling of insecurity among many Canadian Jews”, he points to the political prominence attained by individuals such as Barney Danson and Senator Sidney Buckwold to suggest that that feeling is no longer warranted.

In any case, the question of the future of Jews in Canada is really part of a much larger and ultimately more important question. Here Arnold invites the reader to think beyond himself as Jew or Canadian and to consider a Jewish future in terms of the changing shape of world history. Recalling the words of Moses Hess that “Jews are the yeast of western humanity”, Arnold asks: “how long can Jewish yeast work in today’s world, in which western humanity (Canada included) is but one member, and no longer superior to any other members, of the family of humankind?”