

CANADIAN JEWS — EARLY IN THIS CENTURY

B. G. SACK

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(Canadian Jewish Archives New Series, Number Four)

Reviewed by: STEPHEN A. SPEISMAN

Résumé

Monsieur Stephen A. Speisman fait le compte rendu de l'un de nos plus importants ouvrages. Il s'agit du livre de Benjamin Sack: *Canadian Jews — Early in This Century*. Le texte couvre la période allant de 1900 à la deuxième guerre mondiale, donc les années qui virent la naissance de l'essor de la communauté juive au Canada. Mais l'érudit Benjamin Sack mourut en 1967 et cette traduction anglaise de son oeuvre, comme l'indique Saul Hayes dans son introduction, ne peut que constituer la meilleure approximation de la pensée du savant. Mais pour l'historien d'aujourd'hui l'étude est incomplète, se limitant souvent à la province de Québec pour n'aborder que superficiellement le reste. Cependant le livre est valide en tant que lecture générale, tout en ouvrant la voie à des recherches historiques plus poussées.

Benjamin Sack was a man of many talents. Self-educated scholar of high quality, playwright, translator of French classics into Yiddish, associate editor of the *Kanader Adler*, he is best remembered by the English-speaking public for his *History of the Jews in Canada* which appeared three decades ago and has been subsequently quoted and plagiarized by a generation of "historians". Sack's *History*, justly acclaimed as a major contribution to Canadian Jewish historiography, closed at the end of the Nineteenth Century, but there was the promise of an additional volume which would carry the narrative into our own time.

The present publication has some claim to be that second volume, at least in part. It covers the period from the turn of the century to the outbreak of World War I, formative years for the Canadian Jewish community. Here appear the major issues of the day: the impact of mass immigration from Eastern Europe and the reaction of the established community to it; the founding of Canadian Jewish religious, Zionist, cultural

and philanthropic institutions; the struggle for acceptance by non-Jews and the attempted defense against anti-Semitic attack; the gradual movement of Jews into the universities and the professions.

The volume is based upon Sack's unedited Yiddish manuscript and consequently presents a dilemma for the reviewer. It is perhaps unfair to offer a critique when the author has no opportunity to respond; Sack died in 1967. Indeed, as Saul Hayes remarks of Sack in his preface, "Meticulous as he was in his writing and acutely sensitive to what was published over his name, we find it hard to tell whether he would have wanted to have this incomplete draft appear".

A few comments, however, are in order. For one thing, this work exhibits many of the strengths and weaknesses of his earlier *History*. Considering that he worked under conditions which most researchers would have found overwhelming — his own illness which seriously reduced his physical mobility, the obscurity and scattered nature of the primary sources, the absence of reliable secondary material — Sack produced historical narrative that is astonishingly accurate. Few statements he made in his earlier work have been refuted by newly-discovered sources, and we might reasonably expect the same in this instance. Moreover, one cannot but be grateful to Anne Glass for her masterly work of translation and editing which makes the book eminently readable.

Nevertheless, as it stands, the volume is of only limited use to scholars. As in his previous work, Sack's almost total reliance upon journalistic sources, and his scanty documentation even of those, is irksome. So, too, are some generalizations which require substantiation in the text. For example, "Jews adapted themselves more rapidly to the democratic way of life than new arrivals of other ethnic groups" (P. 2) or his attribution of anti-Semitic incidents in Toronto during 1907-8 to the influence of Goldwin Smith (P. 53). The book, in addition, concentrates overwhelmingly on events in the province of Quebec, understandably so, considering that the sources most accessible to Sack were in Montreal. He whets the reader's appetite about events elsewhere in Canada, but leaves him in suspense. One would have liked to hear more, for instance, about the origins of the Kingston community.

In total, however, this is a book to be welcomed as a popular survey long overdue and as a basis for further research. One can read it with the assurance that much of what Sack described was part of his own experience and that his insistence upon accuracy has already been demonstrated. It is unfortunate that the final product did not have the

benefit of his own sensitive hand. And perhaps even more to be deplored is the fact that this incomplete work should come closest to being the definitive survey of the period. Its appearance points up the need for an expansion of Sack's capable pioneering work by trained historians, utilizing primary sources at government and Jewish archival institutions across the country.