

A GOOD PLACE TO COME FROM MORLEY TORGOV

Kasrilevke On Lake Superior: Morley Torgov's Memories Of
Jewish Life In Smalltown Ontario
Toronto: Lester and Orpen, 1976

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Résumé

Dans ce livre Morley Torgov décrit son enfance et son adolescence à Sault Ste. Marie avec beaucoup d'humour mais aussi avec beaucoup d'humanité. La petite communauté juive de cette ville de l'Ontario devient vivante et nous partageons ainsi les aspirations et les petites jalousies, le besoin de pouvoir et de notoriété de certains de ses membres.

Torgov nous montre aussi que la vie dans un centre rural ne fait qu'augmenter l'impression d'isolement qu'éprouvent les personnes d'origine juive car ils sont non pas seulement coupés de leurs racines mais ils sont aussi loins des centres tels que Toronto, Montréal etc. où leur judaïsme est encore fort et vivant. Par contre la petite communauté juive de Sault Ste. Marie ne peut compter que sur elle-même.

Le livre de Morley Torgov est très intéressant et amusant et sa seule faiblesse est peut-être un élément d'optimisme que l'écrivain ne parvient pas à cacher.

The romanticizing of the small town or village as a "good" place to be from originates in a pastoral tradition whose echoes go back as far as Virgil and Homer. This myth received a special boost with the worship of Nature which developed during the Romantic Age, and increased in intensity as a result of the problems which arose with industrial development — in particular the problem of urbanization, the growth of the dirty, exploitative, alienating "Big" city. No doubt the more recent American political disillusionment and the publicity involving the insurmountable problems of the big cities, especially New York, have added to this tendency. In recent years, the ability of Hollywood, Broadway, and the TV networks to exploit what one might call "the romance of the commonplace" in films and programs like *The Last Picture Show* and "Green Acres", or in musicals like Rodger's and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma*, has clothed the small town with an almost sacred aura. The small town has

become part of the nostalgic escape to the “good old days”: the fact that those days may never have existed somehow makes their hold on our imagination all the more powerful.

However, this recently re-invigorated desire to go back to the land, to the simpler, presumably healthier, life in the small town runs contrary to the main current of the last hundred years. Indeed, the trend, accelerated since the Second World War, has been toward the development of ever larger urban concentrations, especially the massive megalopolis with its endless industrial and residential suburbs.

Thus it is not surprising that a critical literature satirizing the mindless nostalgia for the small town and the idealized past has concurrently developed. Its main technique is the dousing of these popular myths with liberal cold showers of realism. From Sinclair Lewis’ Gopher Prairie in *Mainstreet* to Grace Metalious’ vicious society in the hugely popular *Peyton Place*, the narrow-minded, soul-destroying horizons of the small town, with its bigotry, sexual repression, and frequently vicious competitiveness, have been challenged as a good environment to grow up in. Increasingly it has been pictured as a good place to *come* from — that is, to escape from.

It is in this tradition, although more gently than the abrasive Lewis, that Morley Torgov presents the recollection of his childhood and youth in Sault St. Marie in *A Good Place to Come From* (Totem Books, 1976). This satiric tradition is particularly comfortable for the author because the Jewish experience in the small town was usually contrary to the popular mythology of a return to endless youth, innocence and virtue. For the conscious, practicing Jew the small town was a kind of special hell, an exile on top of the great exile from Jerusalem, a *galut* within the profounder *galut*. It meant deprivation in all those communal Jewish activities which made exile bearable in the security of the larger communities like New York, Chicago, Montreal or — even fifty years ago — Toronto. Thus, perhaps echoing Dr. Johnson’s famous remark to Boswell that the brightest prospect a Scotsman could have was the highroad that would lead him to London, Torgov tells us that for the small town Jew, Queen Street (Sault Ste. Marie’s main street) was “a one way street heading eastward to Toronto.” “There could be,” he stresses, “no stops in between.”

As the dedication indicates, the book is a memorial — “in lieu of candles” — to the author’s father. But it is a rather ambiguous memorial because the figure which emerges is an unflattering portrait of a

quarrelsome, bigoted and embittered old man who felt he had wasted his life and was determined that his only son would not suffer the same fate. He felt himself in exile from Russia — a land “he loved passionately” and then from Winnipeg, never quite making it to Toronto except occasionally to buy stock for his Sault Ste. Marie store from those “whores on Spadina.” Having left a fiancée behind in Odessa, he contracted an unhappy marriage to a girl from an established, anglicized Winnipeg Jewish family, which looked down on his poverty and his European Yiddish background. With the premature death of his wife, he now found himself a widowed father of an eight year old boy, stuck in what seemed the end of the world. “I dug a grave for myself in this town,” he concludes. The result is the small town Jew’s sense of a wasted life, whose single available redemption is the ability of the next generation to escape. This explains the father’s persistent campaign, very humorously portrayed, to convince the son to go to medical school by exposing him to graduation pictures in the Sunday edition of the *Forward*. The father is understandably desperate when he realizes that young Torgov wants to enter that “luftmesh” world, the insubstantial, insecure — or, as Richler once described it in an essay — uncertain world of the writer. The son eventually becomes a lawyer, an interesting compromise not quite to the father’s liking, due to the latter’s experience with lawyers, in particular the anti-semitic, drunken WASP who serves as the local example of success in one of the more bitter satiric vignettes in the book.

Most of the other scenes evidence the gentler method associated with the self-deprecating humour of a Sholem Aleichem. The main exception is the small Jewish community’s own bigotry against the Chinese who runs the sleaziest of the local restaurants. He is defended by Torgov’s father because he recognizes in him the wasted life of the “outsider”, the total stranger he feels himself to be. The result is a quarrel with the rest of the Jewish community. This eventually culminates in the elder Torgov’s battles with the other major sponsors building the first synagogue in Sault Ste. Marie. It is this sense of fragmentation that is perhaps the underlying statement about Jewish small town life. This “Kasrilevke on Lake Superior” exhibits all the foibles of the original. The quarrelsomeness, the jealousies, the jockeying for social and community position are nowhere more effectively described than in the pathetic attempt to strike local roots by building a synagogue and moving the services from the rented Foresters’ Hall, or in the chapter which describes the plot to foist the thankless job of President on a fresh victim.

All this frantic effort only underlines the community's precariousness. The Jews are left alone because the WASPS are too busy denigrating the other ethnic groups, especially the Italians and the Slavs, who in turn are intolerant of each other. But the potential threat is there and helps to counteract the internal fragmentation. On the other hand, the paradoxically concurrent threat of assimilation is less effectively drawn in the chapter describing the dating of gentile girls. The obvious temptations are described humorously and well, but the conclusion is unfortunately too optimistic. Rabbi Stuart Rosenberg (*The Jewish Community in Canada*, Vol. I, p.104) tells us in his general historical survey of the Canadian Jewish community that in the early 1950's "intermarriages had taken place in ten out of thirty-seven Jewish households in Sault Ste. Marie."

There has been a partial revival. Television, better transportation, decentralization of industry to provide a greater variety of jobs, and the creation of new universities and community colleges have made the small town more livable. This is attracting a new generation of Jews to places like Guelph, Kitchener-Waterloo and Kingston, all of which have increased their Jewish population in recent years, and accounts for the fact that there are still more than ten thousand Jews living in small communities in Ontario. Nevertheless, the trend is clearly in the opposite direction as more and more of these communities are suffering attrition or are disappearing altogether. The new professionals who arrive tend to be even more mobile than Torgov's generation so that the community's rootlessness is hardly alleviated. As in the past the small town Jew is in transit, and so Morley Torgov's account of a vanishing era in Ontario Jewish life is a very welcome addition to the record. The fact that it is also entertaining and enjoyable reading, and well deserved the prestigious 1975 Leacock Award for Humour, only enhances its value to our social history.