

Pioneers, Pedlars, And Prayer Shawls

CYRIL LEONOFF

*Sono Nis Press, Victoria, B.C. 1978 -

Reviewed By: B. G. Kayfetz

Résumé

Dans le livre "Pioneers, Pedlars, and Prayer Shawls", l'auteur Cyril Leonoff a réuni une série de photographies mettant en relief, l'histoire et l'évolution de la Communauté juive de la province Pacifique du Canada. Un détail à souligner: "la naissance de la Communauté juive dans cette province arrive en même temps que la toute première année de l'histoire de la colonie".

"Vivant isolée du reste du monde, la Communauté juive de la région du Pacifique ne dut compter que sur ses propres ressources. Il lui fut impossible de se tourner vers New York, Philadelphie ou Boston pour obtenir des conseils et un service spirituel quelconque".

On peut voir à ces signes, que les débuts de la Communauté furent très difficiles. Cependant en parcourant ces photos, on peut percevoir une sorte de force de caractère et de cohésion qui transparaissent si l'on feuillette l'album de Cyril Leonoff. Selon l'auteur, "les êtres qui entreprenaient pareil voyage au milieu du XIX^e siècle, devaient être dotés tant d'une puissance physique peu commune que de la volonté de persister pour atteindre le but". Un des aspects délicat dans la réalisation d'un volume pareil vient de ce que, "lors de l'analyse de l'oeuvre, le critique ne sait trop s'il doit la considérer comme un simple album de photos ou comme une oeuvre d'histoire. D'après M. Ben Kayfetz qui a fait la recension en anglais du volume, il y a des passages où les rôles se confondent et où l'un prend le pas sur l'autre". En fait, les photos constituent l'essentiel du livre de Leonoff. Elles sont révélatrices d'une époque qui est révolue; toutefois, grâce à l'oeuvre de C. Leonoff il nous est permis de retracer l'état d'esprit qui régnait à l'époque.

Cyril Leonoff et la Société d'Histoire Juive de Colombie Britannique se

méritent des félicitations et notre encouragement pour cette réalisation.
N.T.: La recension de l'oeuvre a été faite en anglais par M. Ben Kayfetz.

Pioneers, Pedlars, and Prayer Shawls is a collection of photographs reflecting the history, background and development of the Jewish community of the Pacific region. That province's Jewish community is unique in at least one respect which distinguishes it from *yishuvim* of other Canadian provinces: its birth coincides with the very first year of the colony's history. When the city of Victoria sprang up overnight in 1858 in the wake of the Fraser River gold rush there were Jews from San Francisco and other centres among the first comers. Within several years a synagogue was built at a time when Jews in larger centres in the more populated and settled East were still worshipping in rented temporary quarters. And within a very few years Victoria had elected a Jewish mayor and by 1870 was sending a Jewish assemblyman to the colonial legislature, re-electing him soon afterwards to the newly established Parliament of the Canadian Confederation in far-off Ottawa — both events regarded then, as now, as the ultimate symbols of Gentile "acceptance".

Living as they were in isolation, they were thrown upon their own resources unable to look to New York or Philadelphia or Boston for guidance and leadership. Throughout *Pioneers, Pedlars, and Prayer Shawls* this sense of self-reliance comes through. Whether pedlars from Roumania or sons of settlers on the prairies, or acculturated Englishmen or West Europeans, there is a solidity and strength of character that is tangibly perceptible in the photographs. Perhaps anyone who persevered in the travel conditions of the mid-nineteenth century to penetrate that far west must have had inner physical and spiritual stamina to persist and reach that goal.

Glancing through the pictures of personalities and looking at the names from time to time, one sees family names that the reader associates with eastern communities: Rabbi Samuel Cass, later to be Hillel director at McGill, served in Vancouver; Rabbi J. L. Zlotnick, known to philologists as Yehuda Elzet and later in his Jerusalem period as Yehuda Avida, was a Talmud Torah principal in Vancouver in the mid 1930's; David Rome, whose valued opus *The First Two Years* — an account of the origins of Victoria Jewry, came to Vancouver as a child from Russia; Annie and Ephraim Sugarman, who moved to Toronto in the 1940's, left their mark on Vancouver's Jewish institutions. An early spiritual leader in the 1920's

is a Wohlgelernter of the aptly named Toronto family. Despite the basic isolation there was a give-and-take of individuals, a transmontane cross-fertilization.

Part of the problem in reviewing this book is that the reviewer cannot determine whether to deal with it as a photograph album or as an historical work. There are points where the role is confused and the one encroaches on the other.

The glossary of “unfamiliar” words at the end could bear some editorial improvement. A *gabbai* is not “a synagogue beadle” but a more exalted species — an elected officer of a congregation. One wonders why the Biblical identity of Miriam has to be given in a listing of a camp by that name, why six lines of text are devoted to an explanation of Hebrew as a language, why the word *Ghettos* is listed and defined and why we need to be told in the listing on *Sholem Aleichem* that “his stories of Jewish life in Eastern Europe formed the basis for the musical production *Fiddler on the Roof*?” Sholem Aleichem’s reputation does not rest on the Broadway musical adaptations of his writings. Nor is the Histadrut’s fame due to its being “the largest Jewish Labour organization in the world” but to other aspects of its program and structure.

The essence of the book, however, are its photographs. There we see Jews at work, Jews at play, Jews in the Yukon and in the Rockies, Jews at college and young people at play in *Purimshpiel* and masquerade. A gem of serendipity is to find out that it was in Vancouver in 1922 that Bennie Kubelsky attended a family Passover Seder with his vaudeville colleague Zeppo Marx at the home of the slightly differently spelt Marks’es. Of the three Marks daughters, Kubelsky (Jack Benny the comedian) was attracted to the youngest, 14 year old Sadie. They married five years later and she was to be Mary Livingstone, the other half of his comedy team and his script writer.

One sees a picture of a community where the contrasts between what used to be called the *yahudim* and the later immigrants who stemmed more directly from the East European shtetl were perhaps sharper than other cities (certainly more than in Winnipeg which had a more pronounced *amcho* tradition), a community where Jews were more outward looking. Vancouver and Victoria provided “firsts” or close seconds in their Jewish mayors, judges, MLA’s, MP’s, and in our own time a Jewish premier, a Chief Justice and a university chancellor. There were no great Judaic scholars, no founders of yeshivot but simple, unpretentious Jews who worked hard to establish a community and whose community is

their monument.

Cyril Leonoff and the Jewish Historical Society of British Columbia deserve a *yasher koach* for their achievement.

CORRECTION

The photographs illustrating Part II of Paula Draper's paper "The Accidental Immigrants: Canada and the Interned Refugees," which appeared in the Fall, 1978 issue, were erroneously credited to the Public Archives of Canada. The correct citation should have been:

Figure 1: This sketch courtesy of Mr. Harry Seidler

Figures 2, 3 and 4: These photographs by Marcell Seidler

The editors regret these errors.