

Journey Into Our Heritage

HARRY GUTKIN

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Résumé

Journey Into Our Heritage de Harry Gutkin, oeuvre inspirée de l'exposition itinérante tenue sous la direction de H. Gutkin en 1976 et parrainée par la Société d'Histoire Juive du Canada de l'Ouest se déroula de Vancouver jusqu'à Ottawa soit l'Ontario et l'Ouest canadien. Dans ce volume, il est fait mention des premiers agriculteurs qui vinrent au cours des décennies suivant 1882, établir des colonies agricoles dans des lieux tels que: Moosomin, Wapella, Lipton et Edenbridge. Dans ce volume, l'auteur parle également des Juifs qui travaillèrent à la construction de la ligne de chemin de fer Canadian Pacific Railway (C.P.R.) soumis à des actes d'antisémitisme et qui par la suite provoquèrent sympathie et respect; l'auteur parle également du camelot nomade, du négociant Juif d'Allemagne florissant de Victoria et de Vancouver qui contribua à la vie de la communauté juive en général pendant la période allant de 1850 à 1860, longtemps avant qu'une telle importance ne soit réalisée par des Juifs dans l'Est. A la lecture de ce volume, on assiste à la naissance de cette vie religieuse et culturelle variée, vie qui a caractérisé les communautés juives au cours des âges mais qui est à tout le moins un signe du sentiment de réalisation né du contexte sauvage du XIXe siècle dans l'Ouest Canadien.

L'oeuvre de Gutkin est un heureux mélange d'ordre chronologique géographique etc. . . . Elle est mise en relief par la nature des illustrations qui sont bonnes et vont même jusqu'à être excellentes. On y voit donc plusieurs scènes tant rurales qu'urbaines, Canadiennes et Européennes, des tableaux de familles, des cérémonies religieuses et des occupations; richesse à pauvreté. Cette oeuvre est en grande partie écrite à l'intention d'un public non-Juif ainsi qu'aux non-initiés.

Cette oeuvre vient s'ajouter à la littérature juive du Canada et l'enrichir.

Difficult economic times seem to generate nostalgia. This, together with such phenomena as the "Roots" television series, has resulted in the appearance of a spate of exorbitantly-priced historical picture books of questionable quality both in terms of text and of pictorial content. Harry Gutkin's *Journey Into Our Heritage* falls into altogether another category.

Based upon a travelling exhibition produced under Gutkin's direction by the Jewish Historical Society of Western Canada in 1976, which delighted visitors in Canadian cities from Vancouver to Ottawa, *Journey* tells the story of the development of Jewish life in the Canadian West. Here appear the early agricultural settlers who arrived in the decades after 1882, establishing farming colonies in such places as Moosomin, Wapella, Lipton and Edenbridge, some to succeed for a time and others to vanish as Jews sought a fuller cultural life in urban communities. Here, also, are those Jews who worked on the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, at first subject to antisemitic attack and eventually eliciting sympathy and respect; the itinerant peddler; the lonely shopkeeper along the isolated railway line; the prosperous German-Jewish merchant of Victoria and Vancouver, who contributed to the life of the general community in the 1850's and 60's, long before much similar prominence would be achieved by Jews in the East. And, of course, here is the emergence of that varied religious and cultural life that characterized Jewish communities through the ages, but that demonstrates all the more a sense of achievement, having arisen amidst the virtual wilderness of the 19th-century Canadian West.

Gutkin's narrative is a happy amalgam of the chronological, the geographical and topical, an approach no doubt dictated by the types of photographs available and by the kaleidoscopic nature of his subject. The illustrations, which vary in quality from fair to brilliant, are chosen well and cover a multitude of subjects—places, both rural and urban. Canadian and European; family portraits; ceremonies and occupations; wealth and poverty; famous individuals and common folk—and are complemented by a text rich in anecdote, humour and pathos, written with sensitivity and with the facility of one who uses the English language as a tool of his trade and has learned to do so well.

Although the reader who is conversant with Jewish culture will find *Journey* informative and enjoyable, it is apparent that the book is directed largely to the non-Jewish public and to the uninitiated. In this area it is an especially valuable addition to the literature of Canadian Jewry. Gutkin

does not consider Western Canada in a vacuum. In fact, he provides a brief introductory section of Jewish life in ancient and medieval times, then describes that life in the *shtetl* of Eastern Europe which so much shaped the culture and attitudes of Canadian Jews. The chapter on Jews in Eastern Canada is useful, as well, in providing a better perspective of the totality of Canadian Jewry. The story is carried into our own time with a moving chapter on the Holocaust, enhanced by the personal reminiscences of survivors who are now Canadians. The non-Jew will come away with a better understanding of the Canadian Jewish community as a whole, and in that, Gutkin has done us all a service.

The volume is handsomely produced, pleasing to the eye and to the hand. Although coated paper is best for the reproduction of photographs, and economics presumably have precluded its use here, the paper used is certainly of acceptable quality, with the result that little photographic detail seems to have been lost. The book might have been improved by the inclusion of footnotes to the quotations and to some of the other sources, but the omission is perhaps to be excused in a popular book. The only serious criticism is of the failure to give the source for each photograph. The general acknowledgement simply does not satisfy as would more specific documentation.

Gutkin's book remains, nonetheless, a welcome addition to the Canadian bookshelf, and the journey one that this reader will take again and again.