

Book Review

The Jews of Kingston: A Microcosm of Canadian Jewry? Marion Meyer, Kingston, Ont.: Limestone Press, 1983. Pp. 142

Marion Meyer's study is a welcome addition to the still sparse literature on Canadian Jewry. It draws our attention to the fact that although the large majority of Canadian Jews live in the large cities, not all do. While small cities have lost their population to the metropolises, others have a stable Jewish population and still others, like Kingston, and like the Kitchener-Waterloo region in Ontario, have a growing, albeit currently small population. Although there are memoirs of the small town Jewish experience in Canada — Morley Torgov's *A Good Place to Come From* is an outstanding example — we have little literature on the contemporary scene. In this study, we have a sketch of the community's history over its several generations and an analysis of systematic research on Kingston's Jewish population in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Kingston, we are told early, is unlike other cities of the same size. The presence of Queen's University, the military college, its hospital and its prisons give it attributes like those of larger cities. Perhaps, Meyer reasons, what is characteristic of its Jewish population may indicate what is characteristic of Jews in more typical Canadian settings.

Despite its small size — the 1981 census counted only 655 Jews (by religious self-identification) — Kingston does show many characteristics of larger Jewish communities. Like larger Jewish communities in North America, the Kingston Jewish community has become organizationally more segmented over the past generation. While this segmentation in part reflects broad structural trends in Jewish life in North America, it also reflects the fact that the Jewish population in Kingston was stable over the thirty year period from 1921 to 1951 and then doubled over the next twenty year period. Until the 1950s almost all the Jewish families in Kingston were affiliated with Beth Israel, Kingston's Orthodox congregation. Since the late 1970s, a small Reform congregation, Ir-Ha-Melech, has been present and many newcomers remain completely unaffiliated. As in other places, the occupational base of the community is shifting, from business to the professions, with the community now balanced between the two. Trends in denominational self-identification in Kingston also

parallel the broader pattern, showing a shift away from Orthodoxy towards Conservative and Reform Judaism. Kingston may differ from the larger pattern in this shift there being true *especially* of members of the Orthodox congregation, of whom over half describe themselves as “Conservative”, a quarter describe themselves as “Reform” and more describe themselves as “agnostic” than “Orthodox.” As in many other synagogues, the issue of the role of women appeared on the Beth Israel agenda in a variety of ways during the period of the study.

As elsewhere, the affiliated Jews of Kingston have become less concerned with the issue of “integration” and more concerned with the issue of “survival.” There is a statistically noticeable tendency for the Beth Israel members under sixty to be less tolerant of intermarriage, have a higher proportion of Jewish friends and to prefer to live in a mainly Jewish society. Educational standards have improved. The feeling of a special relationship with Israel is widespread, even among the unaffiliated — there is, however, a gradation in support, with the Beth Israel sample highest and the unaffiliated sample lowest.

There are significant methodological and theoretical strengths in this study. Meyer adapted to a situation that was evolving around her. She began research around the same time that Ir-Ha-Melech was organized. What had begun in 1976 as a profile of Beth Israel was extended to include Ir-Ha-Melech in 1979 and a sample of unaffiliated Jews in 1981. Meyer is also clear about the methodology used to gather comparable data about these three different populations. The total membership of Beth Israel and Ir-Ha-Melech were sent questionnaires, with a response rate of 56% and 94% respectively. Interviews were held with 26 households of Beth Israel and 16 of Ir-Ha-Melech. Questionnaires were sent to 39 unaffiliated households, with a response rate of 87% and interviews were held in 39 households. To secure comparable data, the questionnaire sent to the unaffiliated sample in 1981 was also sent to the affiliated population.

In reporting her findings, Meyer chose to use real names rather than pseudonyms, as is sometimes done in sociological community studies. Because the city is identified and the specifics of its development discussed, it is easier for the reader to place the broader issues in context. The study also includes numerous photographs and a map, all of which add to the reader’s interest in and understanding of current issues in community life.

The rooting of the study in local history and the comparable data on three populations allow an important theoretical issue about the religious implications of occupational identity to emerge. Occupationally, the community is divided between businessmen and professionals, mainly academics. Various

findings indicate the significance of this division. The business families are, with a very few exceptions, in their second generation of residence in Kingston. The professionals, with very few exceptions, came as adults. The business families all remained members of Beth Israel; the few business families who relocated in Kingston also all joined Beth Israel. In contrast, and despite the presence of many professional families in Beth Israel, all the members of Ir-Ha-Melech and all the unaffiliated studied were professionals. These and other findings indicate that the business families and the professional families experience the synagogue in different ways.

Several hypotheses may be advanced. The business families have more loyalty to the established synagogue because it is the synagogue established by their parents; because in a city like Kingston most of the members of Jewish business families have known each other since childhood, and because a congregation of businessmen is also a congregation of men who do business with each other. Common membership in Beth Israel maintains an economically important social network. In contrast, the professionals are less tied to a local community network than successful retailers and small manufacturers who have tangible and intangible local assets which are not easily reproduced elsewhere. The professionals have come from other places and could move on and do the same work elsewhere. Academics in particular are schooled to be critical of received wisdom and are less tolerant of dissonance between the standards taught in the Orthodox synagogue and the home. One might hypothesize that an established local community may receive with reservations critical outsiders who make difficult demands and may then move away and that these newcomers will feel welcomed on conditions that are acceptable to only some of them.

These hypotheses about the role of synagogue affiliation in the business and professional families which emerge from the study are consistent with the more general findings reported by Cohen (1983:89-92). They suggest a direction that sociological research into the changes taking place in synagogue life in North America might follow.

The study also has some limitations. Meyer discusses briefly one other Jewish organization in Kingston — the local chapter of Haddasah-WIZO. Its members are overwhelmingly from Beth Israel, but not exclusively so. Some women members of Ir-Ha-Melech and some otherwise unaffiliated women also belong. Meyer mentions that the annual bazaar is a high profile event in the entire community. It would have been interesting to explore its symbolic importance as an event whose many hours of preparation involve a broadly based range of persons in the community and not just in one section of it. The “Kingston Jewish Community Council” is also mentioned but its role is not explained.

The population figures leave some unanswered questions. Synagogue affiliation statistics are given only for adults. While the centrality of the Hebrew school to Beth Israel members is stressed and a Sunday school associated with Ir-Ha-Melech is mentioned, the numbers of school age children in the two congregations and among the unaffiliated are not given. The unexpected growth in Beth Israel's membership between 1976 and 1982 is mentioned but not at all explained. During this period Kingston was experiencing, like some other places — especially Ottawa and Toronto — a migration from Montreal.

The usage of "intermarried" is also unclear. "Intermarriage" may describe several situations — a couple who are married but are not members of the same faith, a couple who were of different faiths at the time of the marriage, and a couple who are of the same faith at the time of the marriage but were not born into the same faith. Meyer appears to be using it to describe the second situation, writing, for example, that approximately 10% of the members of Beth Israel "were intermarried. The majority of the non-Jewish partners had converted to Judaism." (98) Later, it is simply stated that half of the families of Ir-Ha-Melech are "intermarried" and most of the unaffiliated families interviewed are "intermarried." The questions of whether these "intermarried" families think of themselves as "Jewish families" or "intermarried families" and whether the "non-Jewish" spouse has converted or thinks of her/himself as part of the "Jewish community" or as "a non-Jew married to a Jew" are not raised.

Despite these limitations, the study is a significant, worthwhile addition to the literature on Canadian Jews. Meyer gives the scholarly audience the details about her methodology necessary to understand how and why she arrived at her conclusions, but she also writes clearly and without jargon to make her book accessible to a broader audience. Best of all, the sympathies of this study are also broad. The points of view of all the Jews studied — from the local businessmen proud of their history of economic and organizational success in Kingston to the unaffiliated newcomers — are presented in a way which stimulates thought rather than allowing the reader to become easily judgemental.

Meyer puts a question mark into her title. Kingston may or may not be a microcosm of Canadian Jewry, but it is clear that this careful, readable and thought-provoking study helps clarify issues of more than local concern.

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REFERENCES

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