

Tulchinsky, Gerald. *Taking Root: the Origins of the Canadian Jewish Community*. Toronto: Lester Publishing, 1992. xxvi + 341pp.

A Canadian publisher I know once told me that Canada is a “one book country.” What he meant was that the Canadian book-buying public is only large enough to support one book on any given topic. If this is true, we are fortunate that the scholarly volume detailing the early history of the Jews in Canada is Gerald Tulchinsky’s *Taking Root: The Origins of the Canadian Jewish Community*. It is an exceptionally fine piece of work. Grounded in painstaking research and reflecting an obvious command of the historian’s craft, Tulchinsky explores the formative stages of Canadian Jewish experience, organizational life and expression of community identity from earliest beginnings into the post-World War I era.

Tulchinsky’s key argument is straightforward. He asserts that the Canadian Jewish community is unique and that uniqueness stems from the historical encounter Jews have had with the Canadian land, the Canadian civic culture and the Canadian polity. Canadian Jewry is unique even from the American Jewish community with which so much is shared. Most certainly, Tulchinsky would reject the oft-repeated claim that Canadian Jewry is just like American Jewry except out of step by one generation. On the contrary, Canadian Jewry is not behind American Jewry. Canadian Jewry is apart from American Jewry. Canadian Jewry is as different from American Jewry as Canada is from the United States.

Tulchinsky builds his case by carefully separating historically documented fact from home-grown community folklore. The major chronological markers in *Taking Root* are those familiar to students of Canadian history: the era of New France; the British colonial period; Confederation and nation building; the era of western expansion and urban industrial development; World War I and its aftermath. But if history is a seamless web, then Tulchinsky knows that the Canadian Jewish historical web extends well beyond Canada’s borders. The threads of Canadian Jewish experience are tied to the tumultuous events defining the course of Jewish events elsewhere: the economic opportunities offered Jews by an expansive mercantile system in

western Europe and its colonies; the individualistic emancipation promised by the American and French revolutions; the often disorienting spread of the Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) eastward across Europe and the concomitant rise of Jewish secularism and religious revivalism; the Dreyfus Affair; the social, political, demographic and economic upheavals in crumbling empires—Austro-Hungarian and Russian—home to millions of Jews; the pain and devastation of pogroms; the challenge of Bundist, Zionist and Communist ideologies; the tenacious hold that *America* took in the mind of eastern European Jews.

The book covers the entire scope of Canadian Jewish experience into the early 1920s. But, as a student of Canadian immigration history and the history of Jewish immigration to Canada in particular, I found Tulchinsky's analysis of Jews as a people with a self-conscious immigrant past especially helpful. As he makes clear, those who gradually shaped the Canadian Jewish community date their Canadian Jewish experience not from arrival in Canada but from the decision to forsake the old world for the new. The historical experience of departure and arrival has remade every generation of Canadian Jews, both as individuals and as a community.

Recognizing the importance of this, Tulchinsky offers an insightful synopsis of those historical factors which combined to send millions of Jews in search of new lands and brought many thousands to Canada. Wisely, he does not allow himself to become prisoner of any romantic or cardboard Fiddler on the Roof image of Europe. Rather he recognizes the variety of Jewish experience in Europe as it differed over time and from region to region. No doubt that Jews who came to Canada from the England of the eighteenth century came from a different world than those who came in the nineteenth century. It is equally true that those Jews who came to Canada from Romania, from the Russian and the Austro-Hungarian Empires and their post-war successor states in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were also not coming from identical worlds. And if their origins were different so were their world views. What Jews who came to Canada shared was less a singular past or even singular ethnoreligious tradition, but rather the act of migration, and, unbeknown to them at the time, a place in building a Canadian Jewish community.

And why did Jews come to Canada if other destinations were

open to them? To this Tulchinsky offers a vision of ongoing duel agendas—that of the immigrant and that of the Canadian state. And these separate agendas did not always dovetail neatly. The reasons why Jews sought to leave Europe and come to Canada had little to do with the reasons why Canada was prepared to admit immigrants. Far from it. Indeed, even if Canada's door generally remained open to Jewish immigrants through the early 1920s, it can be argued that Jews least fit the government's narrowly defined profile of desirable agriculturally based immigrants. As we know, the notion that Jews were not the "type" of immigrant Canada wanted or needed was later used to close Canada's door to Jews and close it tightly.

How did Canada fit into the immigrant Jewish imagination? Was Canada part of the Jewish psychic map of America before World War I? Yes and no. There can be no doubt that, for many Jews, Canada was included as part of their America. But Canada was also Canada. As *Taking Root* explains, there was a particularly *Canadian* Jewish encounter with this new land, comprising a competitive and class-based encounter of Jewish merchants with a non-Jewish commercial class, the encounter of Jews with an often anti-Semitic non-Jewish world—English, French and/or fellow immigrant—and the frequently difficult encounter of Jew with Jew in Canada.

In this last regard *Taking Root* is particularly insightful. The interior history of Jews in Canada was marked by tensions between often uncomfortably overlapping Jewish interests. This was particularly the case after 1882 and the uneasy and often fractious collision of the older, established and seemingly integrated Jewish communities of Montreal and Toronto with the surging numbers of newly arrived Yiddish speaking, more traditional, poorer and often politically dissonant eastern European Jews. The echoes of this encounter continued to resonate through the organizational, political and religious life of the community for decades. It had its impact on the leadership role of those, like the prominent Montreal de Sola family, who were never truly at home among the mass of eastern European Jews whom the de Solas and other establishment Jews often represented in the larger civic culture. It fanned mistrust of the immigration and settlement programs organized by the local Jewish establishment, including agricultural farm settlements. It derailed community efforts to unite all Jewish interests under a single umbrella

organization in the wake of World War I, and surfaced again and again as a point of division during the turbulent era of union organization in the clothing industry.

Surprisingly, while Tulchinsky is aware of the pluralism of Jewish experience brought from Europe, especially eastern Europe, he fails to relate that to the pluralism of Jewish urban experience in Canada. Does the fact that by the early twentieth century the Jewish communities of Montreal and Winnipeg are drawn more heavily on Russian and Romanian Jewry rather than Toronto, which is more rooted in Polish Jewry, tell us anything about the tone and texture of these communities? Does it tell us anything about the way each formulated its own community institutions, educational, religious and social organizations, or even the ways in which each dealt with the larger surrounding civic culture? I think so. If I am right, these old world experiences may explain the sometimes palatable differences between the three senior Jewish communities in Canada better than the argument that Montreal, Toronto and Winnipeg represent distinctly different Canadian urban experiments. These Jews were the heirs to particular cultural traditions and applied their pluralism of experience to the community building process just as recent South African, Moroccan, Israeli and Russian Jews are doing in remaking the Jewish communities they have encountered in Canada.

This is a small fault in what is otherwise a proud accomplishment in Canadian and Jewish historical writing. *Taking Root* is an authoritative and well-written narrative of Jewish life in Canada from its earliest beginnings through the post-World War I era. It is light years beyond the kind of filiopietistic fictions that too often pass for broadly based surveys of Jewish history. And while my comments have concentrated on those particular sub-themes of the book which hold immediate interest to me, no doubt other readers with other interests will find *Taking Root* an equally valuable source of information and analysis. Even if my publisher friend is wrong and other books on this particular era of Canadian Jewish history are published, *Taking Root* will still be a hard act to follow.

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