
BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDUS

Anctil, Pierre. *Tur Malka: Flâneries sur les cimes de l'histoire juive montréalaise*. Sillery: Editions de Septentrion, 1997. 199p.

Pierre Anctil's *Tur Malka: Flâneries sur les cimes de l'histoire juive montréalaise* is a collection of essays written between 1984 and 1994, and drawn from various contexts. *Tur Malka* is the Hebrew equivalent of Mont Royal, and the name adopted by a Montreal socialist-zionist group of 1919. The choice of title for the work announces its unifying theme: the appropriation by Eastern European Jewish immigrants of Montreal space, and their subsequent blossoming as an organic part of the urban physical and cultural landscape. While students looking for original research might be disappointed by the book, Anctil's intentions lie elsewhere. His goal is to make accessible, to a francophone readership, a sense of the originality of Jewish Montreal.

In his portrait of the immigrant generation arriving in Montreal in the first three decades of the century, Anctil is the perfect observer, giving us an almost photographic depiction of the complexity, intensity and creativity of the "Shtetl in a city" (the phrase is Anctil's). The author skillfully evokes the mixture of fascination and of strangeness experienced by French Canadian observers, enabling us to see this unique material culture of store-front synagogues, small shops, political clubs and workshops from both inside and outside. Taking a wide-angle perspective, Anctil stresses the marginality of Montreal Jewry, compressed spatially in the narrow immigrant corridor, and squeezed institutionally between Protestants and Catholics. Anctil shows how the course of Jewish history in Quebec is inextricably bound up with the unique place of confessionality in its society. This particular contingency led to a

certain degree of isolation and greater institutional autonomy, which have become the hallmarks of Quebec's Jews.

The middle part of the book uses three well-known figures, H.M. Caiserman, A.M. Klein, and André Laurendeau, as metaphors to explore the contradictions within their cultures, as well as the external forces which shaped these collectivities. The essay on Caiserman reveals a man standing on the border of an intensely vibrant culture, both transforming and being transformed by it. The other hero of his story is Montreal itself, home to a burgeoning Jewish immigrant population at the height of the Eastern European Yiddish literary movement of the thirties and forties. The bicultural city is portrayed as the midwife to its own distinct Yiddish renaissance. Language takes primacy in Anctil's treatment of Yiddish as a kind of plasma binding and nourishing an entire generation through to its mature years.

Anctil's strength lies in a kind of flexibility of perspective. In portraying a heroic age of the immigrant generation he manages to take us within the culture while maintaining the wider view of an often shifting cultural and institutional landscape. However, when dealing with the transitional periods of the post-immigrant, post-Quiet Revolution generations, Anctil steps increasingly outside his subject, and his perspective thins out. His exclusive focus on the problem of Jewish integration into the modern francophone state has as its cost a loss of context, and of depth. Not only is the Jewish experience of integration obscured, but all surrounding cultures, French Québécois and others, disappear behind the facade of a neutral State.

A.M. Klein, the author of *The Rocking Chair*, a volume of poetry eulogizing French Canadian life, appears only in his guise as a stranded ambassador of peace between the two communities. There is little attempt to understand his place in contemporary Jewish Montreal, to explore the meaning of his unusual social and cultural mobility or to explain his long literary silence. André Laurendeau gets a similar symbolic treat-

ment. In the fifties he recanted his anti-Semitic forays of the previous decade to become a fervent advocate for tolerance, and Anctil treats him as a stand-in for Quebec itself. His “virage identitaire” foreshadows that of a society where the emerging definition of Québécois “perdra tout son sens culturel spécifique pour ne plus désigner qu’une population domiciliée sur le territoire du Québec, reconnu comme un espace à majorité linguistique francophone.”[p.145] In his pursuit of the ideal of a culturally neutral state Anctil loses sight of the day-to-day reality in which change takes place. Conspicuously absent is any sense of how this ongoing process of secularization of Quebec life is experienced in its cultural specifics.

Anctil comes closest to adopting this perspective in a sensitive and lucid essay on the Jewish Orthodox community in the wake of the Outremont crisis. Though he succeeds in conveying the idea of the mutual negotiation of cultural boundaries that define public space, he ultimately sells his own argument short by writing the dialogue as taking place between a traditionalist culture on the one hand, and a modernizing Quebec society on the other. In the last article in the book (on the position of the official leadership of the Jewish community vis à vis language legislation in Quebec), Anctil hits the nail on the head when he cites “mobilité identitaire” as the precondition for accommodation. But can we really understand the meaning of this term without reference to the *experience* of ethnicity in the Sephardic and Ashkenazic diasporas? Of particular relevance is the way in which the concept was recast in its new, North American context.

An omission of this sort of exploration leads Anctil to certain distortions. For instance he would have us believe that Jewish hospitals became open to non-Jews in order to conform to 1972 social service legislation, when in fact the Jewish General hospital has been non-sectarian since its inception in 1934. [p.181]

Anctil is not the first writer to lose a wider anthropological perspective while looking at the very recent history of

his own society. Surely the task of reinventing Montreal's history from a pluri-cultural perspective is a daunting one. Hearing the phrase "un shtetl dans une ville" spoken quite spontaneously by a francophone professor in a classroom at the Université de Sherbrooke is all the proof this reviewer needs that Pierre Anctil's efforts have borne fruit.

Eve Lerner
Concordia University

Forman, Frieda, Ethel Raicus, Sarah Silberstein Swartz, Sarah and Margie Wolfe, Margie, eds. With an introduction by Irena Klepfisz. *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*. Toronto: Second Story Press, 1994. xv+392pp.

This book is not new. It came out in 1994. I have been browsing in it ever since. It became a part of my private time; almost a ritualized time spent with my ancestors. The different voices unveiled a world of mother ancestors.

Found Treasures is about memory. It highlights a language once thought unsalvageable and a heritage seldom recalled. Eighteen writers who happen to be women share their stories and their lives. It is only recently that we have witnessed this recalling of Yiddish literature, and only rarely have we heard from the women who wrote in that language. With this book as guide, many can remember, listen and begin to understand their struggles and experiences. Ironically, translation has preserved their world of Yiddish.

This book is dedicated to mothers and sisters and to continuity. But it does more than recall an age gone by or save a lost literary legacy. It does more than remind us of diverse female ancestors. It is an artifact of continuity forging links not readily found in our collective histories. It manages to capture an era of creativity and individuality that is then passed on to us its heirs. This sense of cultural continuity is heightened by the last sections of the collection. On page 353 the author's brief biographies are presented followed by the biographies of the contribu-