

Weisbord, Merrily. *The Strangest Dream*, Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1994, 267 pp.

The Strangest Dream is anything but! It challenges cruel myths. It exposes political chicanery, on the left and on the right. Above all, it documents and celebrates the lives of working men and women in Montreal during the 1930s through the 1950s who rejected capitalism and sought—as much for others as for themselves—to build a secular New Jerusalem.

The author is the daughter of parents who were socialists and members of the Communist Party. This personal account of their trials, triumphs and disappointments, based on interviews, government documents, archive data and secondary sources offers a remarkable, “rank and file” portrait of Montreal and indeed Canada’s history that most social scientists have neglected or avoided.

The book focuses on working class struggles during a period when Montreal was the industrial heartland of the nation. The Steel Company of Canada, the Montreal Locomotive Works, the great Angus Shops of the CPR, Dominion Steel and Bridge, The Imperial Tobacco Company, the St. Lawrence Sugar Refinery, Olgivie Flour Mills, the steaming garment industry in the Jewish quarter about St. Lawrence Main and in the French Canadian slums of St. Henry, the fledgling aircraft industry at Cartierville employed thousands of men and women under conditions which could be summarized as exploitation.

The Strangest Dream describes the efforts by Communists, labour unions and others on the left to challenge this state of affairs.

The role of immigrants, particularly men and women of Jewish faith or cultural background is particularly striking. First, there was a large contingent of Jewish men and women in the ranks and leadership of the Communist Party in Montreal during the period covered by the book. In some cases, they brought a radical tradition of socialism and revolution from the old world to the new.

Second while anti-Semitism was encouraged within the French working class by a narrow, nationalist Roman Catholic church, 20% of the Party membership in Quebec were French Canadians, several of whom became leaders at the national level.

This affinity of French Canadian workers for immigrants, including those of Jewish faith or culture, may be explained, in part, by the fact that many, but not all, of the garment manufacturers were owned and managed by immigrants who were also of the Jewish faith. The fact that thousands of Jewish workers chose to be loyal to their class and break rank with co-religionists certainly seriously undermined the claim that men and women of Jewish background were in all respects homogeneous — a community onto themselves.

Weisbord devotes six (of 20) chapters to Fred Rose, the Communist Party leader who fought French Canadian nationalists and the established Liberal Party to win the 1943 federal by election in the Montreal riding of Cartier.

Rose was a gifted leader, who could reach across ethnic barriers and forge tough, disciplined and informed working class alliances.

In the heat of the Cold War and in the light of the Gouzenko disclosures, Rose was singled out as the spy who furthered the military capabilities of the Soviet Union. At least, it was alleged that he passed on information about minor ammunition technology during World War II, when the USSR was a Canadian ally.

One must recall that the early post war era was not initially kind to capital. The CCF was elected to power in Saskatchewan in 1944 and almost repeated the feat in B.C. and Ontario shortly thereafter. There was a rising mood of militancy among unionized resource and manufacturing workers. The Labour Party was in power in Great Britain and became a major force in France and Italy. The hegemony of capital was in question.

The influence of Fred Rose, his ability to challenge church and state in attracting French Canadian support in the

largest industrial city, was, one could argue, disquieting, at least to capital and to a church who feared a further loss of its parishioners through the influence of a Polish Jew.

One is reminded of an earlier period, when again capital was seriously challenged. The Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 terrorized men of business. Despite the fact that it was clearly led by Scottish immigrants with thick Glaswegian accents, the Northwest Mounted Police furnished Prime Minister Borden with “evidence” of Jewish trouble-makers; charges that were eagerly supported and propagated by a troubled press.

The point is this. Why, in 1919, is there an effort to deflect attention away from the ethnicity or strike leaders and lay the burden of trouble and insurrection on foreigners and Jews? Why, in the 1946 spy trials, was the state and press content to focus on a Communist leader of undoubted gifts and promise, who happened to have been born a Polish Jew?

In an otherwise excellent review and analysis of the Rose case, Weisbord hints at the question, but chooses not to answer it.

Finally the book must surely raise in the reader’s mind the issue of the attraction socialism has always had for men and women of Jewish faith or background. Weisbord suggests the tendency for capital to deploy, encourage or financially support anti-Semitic campaigns and movements is one answer. There is another that deserves to be explored: the rich and complex legacy of Judaism itself.

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