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THE CANADIAN YEARS OF YEHUDA KAUFMAN (EVEN SHMUEL): EDUCATOR, JOURNALIST, AND INTELLECTUAL

In the mid-1920s, while living in New York, Yehuda Kaufman encountered a worrisome problem. His Canadian passport had expired and he needed a new one. When he went to the British consulate in New York, which, at that time, handled such things for Canada which had not yet fully cut its ties to the mother country, he found himself in difficulty. Since he was no longer a permanent resident of Canada, and had not been born there, he was required to prove his connection to the country on the passport renewal form. As he wrote to his protégé, friend, and colleague, Shloime Wiseman:

I thus related that I was connected to the Jewish cultural life of Canada., that I founded institutions, edited a newspaper, that I am at present connected to the network of Jewish Peoples’ Schools, and that I am here [in New York] as a representative of the Canadian Jewish community to compile a Hebrew-English Dictionary.1

Who was this man, and what were his connections to Canada, where his presence has been all but forgotten?2 Only a brief sketch of Kaufman and his Montreal activities can be offered here. It is hoped, however, that this introduction to a person deemed important enough in Jewish history for a settlement in
Israel to be named for him, will spark further research into his place in Canadian-Jewish history and beyond.

The best way to begin to introduce Kaufman in his complexity, is through an autobiographical statement, which formed part of his application for doctoral studies at Dropsie College in Philadelphia in 1916:3

My earliest years were passed in the study of Bible, Talmud and Poskim [Halakhic deciders], as well as secondary general education. From my fourteenth to my eighteenth year I had the good fortune to study under teachers of great renown and authority; among these I am proud to mention the name of the great Talmudist, Rabbi Dr. [Haim] Czernovicz. I studied in three Yeshiboth [schools of traditional sacred learning]: one of the Polish type, in Kishinev,4 one of the Lithuanian type and under the auspices of Lithuanian Geonim [great scholars], in my native city, Balta; and one of the most modern character, the Odessa Yeshibah, “Torah Chaim,” under the rectorship of Rabbi Czernovicz mentioned above. In the latter Yeshibah in addition to Talmud and Poskim, I also studied Midrash, Jewish Philosophy and Homiletics, History and Poetry. At the age of eighteen, after having successfully passed the examination of a six-years’ course in a Russian gymnasium, I proceeded to London and Paris. In London I was fortunate enough to find in two libraries the great bulk of the Hebrew and German literature known as “Chakmath Israel,”5 which I read and assiduously studied for about one year. The University of Paris accorded me a “Dispense” for the Faculty of Law.

There I attended the lectures of Professor May in Roman Law, and of various professors (Gide and Beaulieu, among others) in Political Economy and in Sociology. At the same time, I did some research work [sic] in the comparative study of Roman and Jewish law. The following year I
entered the Sorbonne, and for two years studied Philosophy, Philology and History under Brochard, Picavet, Levy-Bruhl, Lalande, Durkheim, Psichari, Slouschz, Levy, and others. During this period I succeeded in writing (in Hebrew) a good deal on the history of Greek philosophy, on scholasticism (particularly on Sir Roger Bacon), and on Hebrew philosophy. I also made a close study of the Mishnaidah [?] and gathered material for my life work in Mishnah, concentrating especially on the period of R. Akibah; I also studiously read the classical literature of Biblical criticism. The next few years I passed in Russia, in teaching and in propaganda for our national renascence.

There is much in this autobiographical description that typifies eastern-European Jewish intellectuals of Kaufman’s generation. Born in 1886 or 1887,6 Kaufman received a traditional rabbinic education while also acquiring the tools to access both secular subjects and the modern academic study of Jewish history and literature. Not untypically, Kaufman traveled to western Europe to complete his education. A stay in France was of particular importance for his future development. Supplementing what is known from Kaufman’s own statement, Shloime Wiseman remarks that it was in France that Kaufman became attracted to socialism and, in particular, to the teachings of one of the French socialist movement’s greatest leaders, Jean Jaurès.7 Also in France, Kaufman began his university education which was to be continued in North America. Kaufman’s mastery of French, which he had to have in order to follow lectures at the Sorbonne, as well as his command of English, acquired during his stay in London, meant that he knew both of Canada’s official languages. This served to differentiate him from most new Jewish immigrants to Canada, who usually acquired only English, and that, after their arrival. Had circumstances been different, and had Kaufman’s stay in Montreal been longer, he might have been able to communicate with francophone intellectuals in Quebec
in a manner that no other eastern-European, Jewish immigrant to Montreal of his era could. It is a poignant reminder of the “rendez-vous manqué” as Pierre Anctil describes the Jewish-French Canadian encounter of that time.8

Kaufman came to Canada in 1913. Why Canada? At first glance, it was a case of chain migration, common enough in this era. Kaufman had relatives in Montreal named Zelinger, whom he joined. That, however, is not the entire story. An intriguing possibility is that he came to Montreal to be a disciple of one of the most prominent, eastern-European, Jewish intellectuals of the era, Reuven Brainin, who had come to Montreal in 1912 to edit the Yiddish-language daily, the Keneder Adler.9 This conjecture is based upon A.B. Bennet’s statement that: “Kaufman...had come from the Sorbonne to continue his studies at McGill because he wished to be near Brainin in Montreal.”10 What is certain is that shortly after his arrival, Kaufman connected with Brainin. In December, 1913, Kaufman wrote to Brainin as a student addresses his master, calling himself “one of the youngest of your disciples” [ehad mi-ze’irei talmidekha],11 and he began writing articles for Brainin’s newspaper.12

In Montreal, Kaufman pursued Jewish studies at McGill University, picking up where he had left off in France.13 Once again, we have a description of his activities in his own words:

Three years ago [1913] I came to Montreal where I was admitted to the third year of the Faculty of Arts of McGill University. Here I took up Semitic studies under Professor C.A.Brodie Brockwell,14 the well-known Semitic scholar (who has been working for years on his hypothesis of the existence of a classificatory system of relationships in early Jewish society). At McGill, I studied the North Semitic Inscriptions, besides the following Semitic languages: Arabic, Syriac (the Syro-Roman code), and (under Prof. Craig) Assyro-Babylonian. I also took a course in general social anthropology and in English literature. At the end of two years, I took the B.A. degree with First
Last year I passed in post-graduate studies specializing in Mishnah and writing a thesis, “The Earliest Strata of the Mishnah”.

At McGill, Kaufman seems to have had an especially close connection with Professor Charles A. Brodie Brockwell, who was, among other things, his first teacher of Arabic. Though Kaufman began graduate studies in Semitics at McGill after his BA, and Fuks claims that he received an MA in 1917, apparently Kaufman never received his degree. According to Stuart Rosenberg, his thesis was “rejected by a local rabbi, [the spiritual leader of Temple Emanu-el] who was lecturing on Jewish studies at the time.” While it is not possible at this time to determine the reason for the rejection of his thesis, it certainly must have been a factor in Kaufman’s decision to leave Montreal and to complete his graduate work elsewhere.

Apparently much of Kaufman’s time beyond his studies at McGill was taken up by journalism, which is probably how he earned most of his living. Kaufman estimated that while in Montreal, he wrote three articles a week under his own name and pseudonyms, such as tana kamma, and “Hodelson.” This would mean that in his Montreal years Kaufman wrote hundreds of articles for Brainin in the Keneder Adler and later in Der Veg, as well as in the weekly newspaper, Dos Folk, that Kaufman himself edited in Montreal from July to November, 1917. A systematic examination of Kaufman’s Montreal journalism would likely help us to understand his intellectual development in these years.

During his stay in Montreal, Kaufman was also quite deeply involved in a number of activities within the immigrant Jewish community, including Poalei Zion politics, which provided a forum for the exchange of views with ideologues, such as Ber Borochov. It is also in this period, that he began his career as a public lecturer, eventually becoming one of the most popular figures on the Jewish lecture circuit in North America.

Kaufman was also an institution builder. In 1914, he assisted Brainin in the formation of Montreal’s Yiddishe Folks
Bibliothek (now the Jewish Public Library), whose first librarian, Devorah Zelinger, was his relative. About the same time, along with Moshe Dickstein and Abraham Parnass, Kaufman broke with the recently founded, Yiddishist, National Radical School, to establish the Yiddishe Folksshule (the Jewish People’s School), where the curriculum stressed the learning of both Hebrew and Yiddish, and placed greater emphasis on Jewish tradition than did the National Radical School. Kaufman was the first principal of the Folksschule. In 1926, Wiseman sent Kaufman the following evaluation of the latter’s influence of his teaching on the Folksschule:

More than twelve years ago, you brought us together under the banner of modern Jewish education. You have woven your complete love of our people, which is so strong in your heart, into the ideal of a national, progressive, Jewish-Humanistic education. With the warmth that comes from your beautiful soul, the chosen among the palace of souls, you have united us to the ideal in which we have found the deepest sense of our social life.

Along with Brainin, Kaufman fostered the idea of the nascent Canadian Jewish Congress. As secretary of the organizing committee, he supplied much of the organizational élan for the Congress and served as Brainin’s representative in meetings in Toronto and elsewhere.

Kaufman left Montreal in 1916, at the same time as Brainin. Did he decide to leave because Brainin was leaving, or because he could go no farther at McGill once his MA thesis had been rejected? Though both factors undoubtedly contributed to the decision, I believe that Brainin’s departure was the more powerful factor. Kaufman’s letter of application to the doctoral program at Dropsie College in Philadelphia is dated, June 14, 1916, just a week before Brainin was forced to liquidate his newspaper. The proximity of these dates is likely not a coincidence. After his departure, Kaufman retained numerous ties
with Montreal, which he once called “one of my native cities.”
Montreal was a frequent stop on his lecture circuit; sometimes
he spent weeks, even months, going from city to city, though he
could also give a series of lectures in one place, like the twelve
lectures on “Modern Jewish Movements,” which he gave in
Montreal between 6 May and 31 May 1925. The series was
sponsored by Kaufman’s Montreal Poalei Zion comrades and was
described as “dealing in a systematic manner with the development
of Jewish culture from the seventeenth century to contemporary
times.” It dealt with such topics as Shabbatai Zevi’s messian-
ism, Hasidism, Haskala, and Jewish nationalism in its varied
forms, and ended with a lecture on “The New Eretz Yisroel.”

Beyond his service as a public lecturer, Kaufman was
also drawn back to Montreal as a consultant to the institutions
he had been instrumental in founding. These included especially
the Canadian Jewish Congress and the Folksshule. In 1922,
when the Folksshule had its first formal graduation, Wiseman
invited Kaufman to be present. As Wiseman put it, the school
could not have the ceremony without the presence of the
school’s first principal. Kaufman also maintained a close inter-
est in issues of importance to the Montreal Jewish community,
especially that of separate schools for Jewish students. Finally,
friendships, such as he had with Shloime Wiseman, connected
him to events and issues in Montreal.

Who was Kaufman in his North American years? One
way of evaluating him is along the axis of secularism/tradition-
ality. In those years, he had abandoned the traditional practices
of his youth - which he resumed much later in life—but not its
vocabulary. Thus he perceived his mission to be disseminating
what Wiseman had termed, a “national, progressive, Jewish-human-
istic education.” This meant that he was a Zionist (“national”), a
socialist (“progressive”), and a secularist (“humanistic”). When
he spoke of his teaching and lecturing activities, however,
Kaufman did so in thoroughly traditional terms, such as “public
dissemination of Torah.” Perhaps the persistent use of tradi-
tional terminology signalled his eventual return to traditional
Jewish observance decades later, such that Yizhak Rafael considered him “among the greatest penitents [hozrim be-teshuva] in the history of our people,” along with Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, and Nathan Birnbaum. In fact, Rafael thought Kaufman the greatest scholar of them all.36

In his North American years, Zionism and socialism served Kaufman as substitutes for traditional Judaism. In his early letters to Brainin, Kaufman began with the slogan, “In the name of the Revival,” written in the same spot where traditionally observant Jews placed the words, “with God’s help.” Kaufman’s youthful exposure to the Hasidic movement had made a lasting impression on this ostensibly secular Jew. In a sense, he conducted himself as something of a secular “rebbe.” Thus observers like Mordecai Halevi speak of those who followed Kaufman’s lectures as “a spirited congregation of Hasidim.”37 Fishel Herstein, one of Kaufman’s students at the Jewish Teacher’s Seminary in New York, which he headed in the 1920s, likewise recalled:

The special spirit of the Seminary was...prominently displayed in the seminary’s unique holiday celebrations. In them, Dr. Kaufman would “preside at table [tish] like a Hasidic rebbe with “saying Torah” and song.38

Another way in which Kaufman embodied a secularized Hasidic ethos was his attachment to secular rebbes. This is certainly the case with respect to his relationship with Brainin.39 Especially in the early years of that relationship, Kaufman’s enthusiasm for his mentor bordered on adulation, when he suggested that Brainin’s birthday should become a national festival, for example.40 It is also evident in his relationship to his favourite McGill professor, Brodie Brockwell. Thus Kaufman wrote to his friend Wiseman to send regards to “our rebbe, Prof. Brockwell, may his light shine forth.”41

The greatest intellectual/spiritual influence on Kaufman was that of Chaim Nachman Bialik, the Hebrew poet and public intellectual who was instrumental in arranging Kaufman’s emigration
to Palestine, and who guided his career there until his death in 1934. Kaufman expressed his awe of Bialik to Wiseman in these words: “What a Passover I had....I merited the revelation of Bialik’s presence [le-gilui shekhinato shel Bialik]. A wondrous world! A complete man! A complete “merkava”.” It is noteworthy that Kaufman used such traditionally-charged terms as gilui shekhina and merkava in defining his relationship to his secular “rebbe.”

While Kaufman’s communal and journalistic activities alone would have earned him a secure place in Canadian Jewish history, it is his scholarship that remains his major legacy. Any examination of Kaufman will find that he was genuinely conflicted regarding the focus of his efforts. He was scholarly in nature but focused on the community and devoted his time to public activities. As he put it himself: “Many times I was prepared to flee from the stage to the library, and to stay there in my great solitude, a solitude than which no friendship is greater.”

After completing his doctorate at Dropsie College in 1919, Kaufman became head of the Jewish Teachers’ Seminary (Yiddisher Lehrer Seminar/Beyt Midrash le-Morim) in New York. He moved to Palestine in 1926 at the behest of Bialik, who obtained for him a position in the Dvir Publishing House, where he worked on a project begun in New York, which resulted in the first major English-Hebrew dictionary. He then served as head of the Cultural Department of the Vaad Leumi (the developing Jewish self-government), a position which lasted until 1947. Despite Bialik’s efforts, Kaufman, who became known as Even Shmuel, never received an appointment as professor at the Hebrew University. Nor did he succeed in his attempt to obtain the Columbia University professorship in Jewish history that ultimately went to Salo W. Baron. Ultimately, though, he did succeed in establishing himself as a significant intellectual figure in the yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine during the British Mandate), as well as in the new state, where he died in 1976.

Kaufman left Montreal behind him in 1917 with the failure of the short-lived Dos Folk, which he edited, as noted
earlier. His Montreal years, which were formative in terms of his intellectual development, left their impression. In his perceptive article on the intellectual circles of yiddishists in Montreal, David Roskies notes that the circle’s greatest efforts were to effect a “translation” of the ideas and concepts of the Jewish tradition in a manner accessible to the newly emerging generation of Jews. What the Montrealers did, mostly in Yiddish, Yehuda Kaufman-Even Shmuel attempted to do in Hebrew. Thus his greatest efforts were expended on translating into a modern Hebrew idiom for a contemporary Hebrew-speaking audience, Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed* and Yehuda Halevi’s *Kuzari*. For these efforts he received the Israel Prize.

Further research into the life and career of Yehuda Kaufman promises to shed new and important light on the intellectual history and educational development of North-American Jewry in the early twentieth century, as well as the evolution of the Jewish community in Palestine, and later, Israel. Hopefully, this paper will lead to new and more detailed research.

**Notes**

1 Yehuda Kaufman-Shloime Wiseman, undated [Hebrew]. Shloime Wiseman Papers, Jewish Public Library Archives, Montreal [JPLA]. All translations from Hebrew and Yiddish are my own. - IR


3 I am indebted for this information to Dr. Arthur Kiron, Curator of Judaica Collections, Center for Advanced Jewish Studies Library, University of Pennsylvania.

4 His teacher there was a Rabbi Zirelson. Cf. S.Z. Shragai, “Dr. Yehuda Even Shmuel-Kaufman (zu der Shiva),” *Letzte Nayes* (Tel-Aviv) [Yiddish], 1976, p. 7.

5 This intellectual movement was often known by its German equivalent: Wissenschaft des Judentums.


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11 Kaufman to Brainin, 10 Kislev, 5674 (December 9, 1913) [Hebrew]. Brainin Papers, Judah Kaufman File (#2927) JPLA.


15 Judah Kaufman is listed in McGill University’s “Sessional Examinations, 1914-1915” as having achieved first rank honours in Hebrew. The Canadian Jewish Congress Archives, at one time, may have had a copy of Kaufman’s record at McGill. It is not presently extant. Cf. David Rome, CJA n.s., 5 (1976), p. 11.


Wiseman-Kaufman, October 3, 1926 [Hebrew]. Wiseman Papers, JPLA.


Both men were feted and bidden farewell at the Jewish Public Library Annual Meeting in 1916. JPL, “Third Annual Report.” JPLA

Arthur Kiron, email to author, August 24, 2005.

Fuks, Cent ans, p. 82.

Kaufman-Wiseman, August 23, 1926 [Hebrew]. Wiseman Papers, JPLA.


Wiseman-Kaufman, February 25, 1922 [Yiddish]. Wiseman Papers, JPLA.

Kaufman-Wiseman, March 24, 1930 [Hebrew]. Wiseman Papers, JPLA.

“marbits torah be-rabbim” - Kaufman-Wiseman, April 23, 1924 [Hebrew]. Cf. also Kaufman-Wiseman, June 12, 1932 [Hebrew]. Wiseman Papers, JPLA.


39 In one letter, Kaufman literally calls himself a *hasid* of Brainin. Kaufman-Brainin December 30, 1914, Brainin Papers, Kaufman file, letter 2923 [Hebrew], JPLA.

40 Kaufman-Brainin, undated. Brainin Papers, Kaufman file, letter 2919 [Hebrew], JPLA.

41 Kaufman-Wiseman, undated. Wiseman papers, [Hebrew], JPLA. Note that the Hebrew abbreviation, n”y, normally refers to a Jewish scholar. Cf. Kaufman’s statement of indebtedness to Brockwell in his introduction to his translation of the *Kuzari*, p. 85, n. 40.

42 “*Merkava*” is a Judaic mystical term derived from the divine manifestation in the first chapter of Ezekiel, Kaufman-Wiseman, April 9, 1926 [Hebrew]. Wiseman Papers, JPLA.


44 He published his dissertation as *Yom Tov Lippman Muelhausen: Ba’al ha-Nizzahon ha-Hoker veha-Mekubal* [Hebrew] (New York: no pub. stated, 5687 [1926/7]).


46 *English-Hebrew Dictionary* (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1929). Kaufman worked on this dictionary together with Israel Efros and Benjamin Silkiner.

47 Shragai, “Dr. Yehuda Even Shmuel-Kaufman”.


49 David Roskies, “*Yiddish in Montreal: the Utopian Experiment*,” in *An Everyday Miracle: Yiddish Culture in Montreal*, eds. Ira Robinson,

Moreh ha-Nevukhim (Tel-Aviv: Shvil, 1935) [Hebrew].

Kuzari (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1972). It has been noted that Kaufman shared with Yehudah ha-Levi both given name, Yehuda, and father’s name, Shmuel. Wolf Sales, “Dr. Yehuda Even Shmuel (Kaufman) z”l,” Heshbon 85-86 (September 1976): 70.

Since writing this article in 2006, I have presented “Yehuda Kaufman’s Montreal Journalism, 1913-1917”, at the meeting of the Association for Canadian Jewish Studies in 2007, and I hope to submit it for publication soon.