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## **“EVERYBODY COMES TO THE STORE”: PEOPLE’S BOOK STORE AS THIRD PLACE, 1910-1920**

### **Introduction**

On March 8, 1918, Winnipeg’s Yiddish-language newspaper, *Dos Yidische vort*, carried a story about a fire in the Grand Theatre. The Grand was a commercial theatre located at the corner of Main Street and Jarvis Avenue, in the heart of the North End. *Dos Yidische vort* did not focus, however, on the damage to the theatre. Its coverage was centred on the devastation to a business which rented a storefront in the building at 816 Main Street, and was titled, “People’s Bookstore Burned”:

Early Tuesday a fire broke out in the Grand Theatre and the People’s Bookstore was destroyed. The entire stock was ruined by fire, smoke, and water.

Mr. Miller, owner of People’s Book Store, explained that he had about \$4,000 worth of stock but carried only \$1,000 of insurance. Mr. Miller is well known and he has made many friends and acquaintances from being in business the last eight years. His business was not only a bookstore where you could buy Yiddish books and newspapers but also a place for the Jewish population to socialize and hold debates or discussions. The store was a center for Yiddish reading youth.

It is a terrible shame that the young businessman has suffered such a loss, but it is to be hoped that everyone will once again patronize his business

as soon as he can re-open his store, and help him get back on his feet and once more able to support his family.<sup>1</sup>

Three months later, the bookstore did re-open, a few doors down at 822 Main Street, marking the occasion with a week-long sale.<sup>2</sup>

At the time, Winnipeg's North End was a crowded, immigrant community populated primarily by Eastern Europeans: gentile Ukrainians and Poles, and Jews from those countries and others. The Jewish North End was a Yiddish-speaking world, with its long-running newspaper (first called *Der Kanader Yid*, then *Der Yid*, and later *Dos Yidishe vort*), a variety of educational institutions, fraternal organizations, political groups, and literary and cultural circles. The newspaper's characterization of the bookstore as a meeting place for the community, with an emphasis on those who wanted to talk, read Yiddish materials, and particularly as a place for youth, reveals how the bookstore space was used by North End Jews in creating an informal, ad hoc social life. This kind of unplanned community space has been called a "third place"—the first two places being home and work—which enables citizen engagement and support democracy by forging ties between people and place.

Sociologist Ray Oldenburg developed the concept of the "third place" as a social space where leisure is allowed, ideas are exchanged, wit is on display, and friends are encountered or made. Oldenburg believes these places are central to the functioning of healthy urban communities, by allowing leisure to take place in low-pressure social situations. Oldenburg defines the characteristics of "third places" as:

- being neutral ground, where all may come and go as they please;
- providing a levelling effect between high- and low-status individuals;
- being places where conversation, particularly wit, is the main activity;

- providing access and accommodation for people's free time through such means as keeping long hours and being centrally located;
- having "regulars";
- keeping a low profile (architecturally);
- maintaining a consistently playful mood; and
- being seen as a home away from home.<sup>3</sup>

Although Oldenburg acknowledges that there are likely financial advantages to frequenting a third place—as the circle of friends there might lend or give objects to each other, tell each other about opportunities, or offer help with projects—the real benefits of third places are social and psychological. They provide diversity which is often greater than found in workplaces, and this non-homogenous group will discuss matters more varied than those under discussion in workplaces or home. All who attend are themselves participants in a mutual act of entertainment, rather than serving as either consumers or providers of entertainment (as in other locations such as the theatre or a house of worship). Because of these factors, third places provide variety which can be lacking in daily routines of industrialized societies. They also provide perspective on life: the collective wisdom of the group can be tapped, and ideas can be discussed without the sensitivity needed in work or home situations. Discussions are allowed to become heated, but are also often infused with humour. Nobody is above being teased. The collective nature of the interactions provide a different kind of support than individual friendships. Enjoyment is taken from participating in a group, and if most interactions are casual, they are also free of many of the stresses of close friendships. Oldenburg notes third places serve a democratic purpose, in creating spaces where political opinions are openly discussed and participation in the circulation of ideas is encouraged. The emotional investment regulars make in their chosen third place also helps tie them to their community, and to have strong feelings of ownership of and a strong reason to defend their localities.

The Yiddish-speaking, immigrant culture of the North End was highly creative in its responses to its situation, and it is not farfetched to think that the community understood implicitly its need for institutions that served this kind of function. At the time, “home” for most North Enders was a small, often overcrowded space; and “work” was usually menial labour involving long hours and low pay.<sup>4</sup> What could be more natural than a third place that allowed other possibilities to be envisioned? At the very least, a low-cost option for entertainment and socializing would obviously have been welcome.

That such a third place would turn out to be a bookstore is itself of note. Many of the “third places” identified by Oldenburg are bars, barbershops, and beauty parlours—places that are significantly more gender-segregated than bookstores. People’s Book Store could accommodate men, women and children, and did so in a way that was culturally appropriate, given the place of honour education and reading held in Jewish life. It speaks to the democratic, populist embrace of intellectual life in Jewish culture at the time that instead of drinking at a bar, Winnipeg’s North Enders chose to get drunk on ideas in a bookstore.

### **People’s Book Store: a Brief History**

People’s Book Store, or “Folks bukh handlung” in Yiddish, was opened on November 6, 1910, at 824 Main Street. The proprietors were Berl (or, in English, Bernard) Miller and Joshua Gurevich. Miller was born in Russia in 1886 and came to Canada in 1905.<sup>5</sup> In 1912 Miller married, and his wife, Bertha, also took part in running the store. Bertha Miller was also European-born and arrived in Canada in 1911. They briefly opened a second branch of the store on Selkirk Avenue, but this branch did not do well and was soon abandoned. In 1914 the business moved down the block into the storefront in the Grand Theatre building, and thereafter moved up and down the block several times, never straying far. In 1917 Gurevich left the business to become a subscription agent for Jewish newspa-

pers, setting up shop across the street from the bookstore at 843 Main Street. After this, the store—although always retaining the name People's Book Store—became widely known as Miller's Books. The Millers closed their shop upon their retirement in 1964. Bertha died in 1965, and Berl Miller died fifteen years later, at the age of 92.<sup>6</sup>

Although the name of the business was “Folks bukh handlung” from the beginning, Berl Miller later recalled that they did not start out with books. Yiddish book publishing was still in its infancy, and at any rate, neither he nor Gurevich had the money to invest in much stock. Their main trade was in international socialist newspapers:

I didn't have much money to open the store, but it wasn't a bookstore in the beginning. All I had was papers, newspapers from all the European countries. [...] I had German papers, Russian papers, French papers, and all the socialist people used to come and get their papers at my store. Cigarettes, drinks, but there were no books at that time yet.<sup>7</sup>

When they did add books, they were of a different kind than the newspapers:

Main books were religious, a *siddur* and the *khumesh*. That was the two books the Talmud Torah used. If somebody bought a *khumesh*, he had it for the next twenty years.<sup>8</sup>

Another source of books was the English Labour Party—apparently the Labour Party “decided [Miller and Gurevich] were going to spread socialism in Canada.”<sup>9</sup>

Obviously, the store could not stay afloat on once-every-twenty-years purchases and English-language propaganda booklets. When inexpensive, North American editions of Yiddish books began to be available through publishers such as Hebrew Publishing, Miller was able to gradually add more books. This occurred in tandem with the Yiddish newspapers' transition from primarily newsstand sales to primarily subscriptions,

which drastically reduced the store's income. Books moved in to fill the gap.

The Miller family was active in both Jewish and general endeavors. Berl and Bertha were among the founders of the Peretz School, the secular Yiddish school which operated from 1914 until 1983, and she continued to be active in leading the school, though fundraising and curriculum projects of the *Muter Farein* (the women's auxiliary), long after her own children had graduated. Bertha's obituary also mentions her activities in the Canadian Jewish Congress and the Jewish Welfare Fund. Berl's obituary mentions the Jewish Historical Society and the Jewish Public Library. Both Millers are regularly mentioned in newspaper reports on the activities of Jewish groups such as the *Hilfs Farband* (an aid organization), ORT (an international Jewish education and re-training organization, originally called in Russian *Obshestvo Remeslenofo zemledelcheskofo Truda* or Society for Trades and Agricultural Labour), the Jewish National Workers Alliance, Pioneer Women (a Zionist group), and the Jewish Reading Circle Council.<sup>10</sup> But in addition to their political and cultural commitments, the Millers were a fun-loving, outgoing couple. As their daughter Ruth Miller Levy remembered years later:

I wonder sometimes whether my father was best known as the proprietor of the People's Book Store, or as the "Chasid" who danced on the table. The dancing took place at the "Chasidim Ball," an annual event in Winnipeg for some ten years, and Bernard Miller, doing the "Kozatchke" on a table full of dishes or glasses was one of the highlights of the celebration.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Bookstore as Third Place**

How can we know if the bookstore served as a third place? One place to look for clues is in the store's advertising. The bookstore advertised regularly in *Dos Yidische vort*, and these notices discuss the availability of food, the store's long opening hours, the conversation to be had there, and the likelihood of seeing

friends. The Millers clearly were aware of the dynamic which had not yet been dubbed the “third place.”

On May 9, 1912, for example, the bookstore announced the opening of a new branch:

We have opened an attractive ice cream parlour, which is also a branch of our Main Street bookstore, at 571 Selkirk Avenue between Andrews and McGregor, for the enjoyment of the public. Come by and try a selection of delicacies and soft drinks. Local customers can find newspapers, books, religious titles, Hebrew and English grammars, stationery, cigarettes, cigars, and more. Open every day (including Sundays) until 11 p.m.

The new store was only about ten minutes' walk from the first store: both were situated firmly in the most central part of the North End. The second branch was envisioned primarily as an ice cream parlour—the kind of place where a variety of people might linger. The hours of operation are long and include the Jewish Sabbath, when observant Jews would not frequent the store but Jews of a more secular orientation would; however, the variety of materials include religious books. The proprietors expected a diverse clientele.

A June 15, 1917, advertisement was aimed at visitors to Winnipeg from other parts of Western Canada, participants in a large Zionist convention.<sup>12</sup>

To the delegates and guests of the Zion Convention

The People's Book Store:

- a) is the Jewish cultural centre of Winnipeg Jewry where all classes of people meet;
- b) will give you all the information you need;
- c) has prepared a free coat check, reading and writing room;
- d) serves kosher lunches;
- e) offers all of the Yiddish, Russian and English

- newspapers, weekly and monthly journals, cigars, cigarettes, chocolate and various drinks;
- f) has a large selection of books on Jewish history, Zionist questions and many other modern books.

More third place attributes are apparent in this advertisement. Not only do “all classes of people meet,” but there is accommodation to the most religiously observant through the serving of kosher food, as well as to a variety of linguistic needs and intellectual interests<sup>13</sup>. The ad specifically encourages people to use the space for reading and writing, in addition to browsing for purchases. The bookstore was now fulfilling the functions of a community centre. Also apparent in these self-descriptions are the importance of study and learning to the bookstore and its customers.

Further evidence of the “third place” nature of Miller’s Books can be found in the newspaper description of the store with which this article led off, specifically in its characterization of the store as a place where debates were held. Further, Ruth Miller Levy recalls the bookstore’s diverse clientele having many heated discussions:

Scores of immigrants from Czarist Russia were settling in Winnipeg. They soon found their way to the store which served as a gathering place for those seeking companionship, friendship, and contacts with other Jews. But clientele came from much further afield. [...] Every young male between Winnipeg and Vancouver bought his prayer shawl for his Bar Mitzvah there. I constantly run into people who remember being in the store for one reason or another.

With such a diverse group gathered in one place, many political opinions were expressed. Arguments became heated, accompanied with much fist pounding on a glass topped showcase. Bearing the brunt of these discussions, it soon wore more mending tape than glass on its counter

top. In self defense, a new showcase was built, with an all-wood top—mute testimony that the store was a vital, meaningful place, and helped to contribute to the growth of a healthy Jewish Community.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, the store's various Main Street locations fit with the characterization of third places as typically architecturally humble. The main store was on a block of plain buildings fronting directly on a street lacking trees, benches or public amenities. Even the Grand Theatre, from which the store rented a storefront for a while, is a pleasant enough larger building, but not imposing.<sup>15</sup> There is nothing intimidating in any of these spots. The social levelling that is necessary for "third place" camaraderie and culture could easily take place in these kinds of locations. Political beliefs and values could also enhance this aspect of place: like many North Enders, the Millers' socialism included a commitment to social equality. And we should keep in mind the family's sociability, as evidenced by their daughter Ruth's remembrances. People who are themselves outgoing attract to them both other extroverts and people who enjoy lively company. The store was a social leveler both by design and through its organic development as the business of a particular family, with particular values and political beliefs, and as an institution in a community that to a large extent shared those beliefs and values.

### **What Use is a Third Place?**

The bookstore's *modus operandi* fits generally and in many specific ways with Oldenburg's concept of a third place. Oldenburg believes these places enhance democracy—and in this, too, we find evidence that the bookstore fits his model.

The Millers' were a politically involved family. Political activity requires space in which to meet, plan, and build affinity between participants. By coincidence, a few months after the store opened a notorious case came against a Ukrainian immigrant, Savva Fedorenko. Russia had requested Fedorenko's

extradition on charges of murdering a police officer. Fedorenko's history of revolutionary activity led Canadian labour and left-wing organizations to suspect the murder extradition was a ruse. Relations between Jews and Ukrainians in Winnipeg were generally strong, particularly in their shared labour activism.

After I opened the store, about two months, maybe less, we had the Fedorenko case. The only place where they could have meetings was in my store. We got delegates from every group, and I was the secretary, naturally, cause I have the store ... And then they made appeals to all the unions in the States, and every union sent a dollar, one dollar, and we got some few thousand dollars, we got a lot of money from the states.<sup>16</sup>

The fact that this action was eventually successful—Fedorenko was able to slip out of the country unnoticed while free between hearings—may have given this community a sense of its power and the importance of spaces such as People's Book Store in making their voices heard.<sup>17</sup>

In the case of the Fedorenko trial, the Millers saw their role primarily as an organizing space. But they also saw their business as participating in political culture, and nurturing civic involvement, through their wares:

It took pretty near a year before people got used to that they have to read papers. We started with maybe ten, then we went to over a hundred papers a day. And even a few years later, before subscription began, everybody had to come for a paper, we were selling about three hundred a day. So business was going good. Three hundred people going from work, everybody comes to the store, hoo-hah, and I make three dollars for the whole day. 300 cents.<sup>18</sup>

As Berl Miller notes, Jewish immigrant reading habits in this era were in flux. Immigrants who had been without Yiddish-language newspapers and novels did not have a developed taste for current affairs, or the literature and poetry that

was also found in Yiddish newspapers. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the Haskalah took root in Eastern Europe, both the content of reading material and the language in which it was read became contested issues among Maskilim. While Yiddish was sometimes seen as a remnant of the backward, superstitious shtetl, the desire to make Western knowledge available to a wide swath of Jewish society necessitated translating material into Yiddish, or producing Yiddish books on Western concepts. As Ellen Kellman argues in her study of Jews in interwar Poland,

The Haskalah shaped modern Jewish culture in many ways, one of the most important of which was to foster an urge towards secular education. We know from memoirs describing east European Jewish life at the beginning of the twentieth century that a youth culture revolving around autodidacticism flourished.<sup>19</sup>

Reading choices, such as secular study, became a new way of expressing personal identity and group affinity. As we learn from the memoirs written by Polish Jewish youth the mention of books read is tied to religious, political or personal identity, and to experiences of new ideas or adopting a new ideology. Memoir writers sometimes characterize the progress of their own lives through the books they read at different times.<sup>20</sup> Another scholar notes that the main language of reading was Yiddish, and the main areas of interest were “modern Yiddish literature, world literature in Yiddish translation, political theory, and the social and natural sciences.”<sup>21</sup>

During the fall of 1911 and through most of 1912, the People's Book Store advertised weekly in *Der Kanader Yid*, each time featuring a different book or item of interest to their public. These ads provide an excellent view of the reading habits of local Yiddish readers, through which we might infer some aspects of individual identity and group identification.

On September 29, 1911, the store announced the arrival of a Minikes newspaper for the upcoming holiday of Sukkot. The Minikes newspapers were a phenomenally popular innova-

tion: they are said to have ushered in the era of modern holiday advertising when Chonen Minikes began publishing them in 1895.<sup>22</sup> These papers were called the *yontef bleter* (holiday papers) and were sold in the weeks leading up to each holiday. Thick and filled with reprints of stories by major Yiddish writers, the papers were intended to help fill up empty holiday hours when Jews were off work. Sukkot, with its five days of *khol ha-moed*, in which pleasurable activities and celebration are allowed, but not paid work or chores, was a prime time for reading this kind of material. The *yontef bleter* cost a fraction of books (5 cents, compared with 30 cents or more for a book), but provided a similar amount of reading material. The bookstore advertisement mentions the prolific, very popular Yiddish writer Avrom Reyzen, then still living in Russia, as one of the writers included.<sup>23</sup> These papers, while bulked out with advertising and aimed at a general readership, nonetheless provided literary reading material at a very high level.

At the other end of the spectrum, only a few weeks later an ad promoted a novel by Miriam Karpilove. Karpilove was at that time 22 years old, living in New York, and embarking on a career as a writer of popular literature. She exploited social anxiety about women's liberation in the modern era, and her own status as a young woman, by writing about young women in sexually fraught situations. Her most famous book, *Tog-bukh fun an elende meyd* (The Diary of a Lonely Lady), was written a few years later: the book advertised in 1911 was called *Yudis* (Judith). "This is a book of collected letters that shows the love and suffering of an intellectual Jewish girl who heroically offers herself on the altar of love," the ad states.<sup>24</sup> While the Karpilove book is quite different from the Minikes publication in terms of its literary status, both catered to readers of Yiddish fiction. And while Karpilove's material was light fare, it traded on the same Haskalah interests in Western cultural thought: Freudianism, free love, and bohemian life are used as plot devices in her stories.

Material for formal study was another segment of North End reading. On October 27, 1911, the store advertised its

Hebrew language primers for Talmud Torah students. Hebrew material was far less common than Yiddish, but on November 3, the store advertised the Hebrew weekly *ha-Deror*, edited by Reuben Brainin. Brainin's publication, published in New York, was a literary periodical designed to help spread modern Hebrew as part of the Zionist enterprise.<sup>25</sup> The Hebrew material was balanced between religious and secular modes.

A December 1, 1911 advertisement shows a different side of Yiddish reading habits. This is an ad for a "premium"—a bonus given to customers for purchasing a product—in this case books published by newspapers for their subscribers at a subsidized price. As the sales agent for the left-wing New York daily *Varhayt*, the bookstore had the right to pass these inexpensive editions on to its customers. In this case, the premium on offer is a translation into Yiddish from Russian: the works of Turgenyev in four volumes, for \$1.25.<sup>26</sup> Translations from world literature played a large part in Yiddish publishing, serving those who were not comfortable reading literary Russian, German, or English-language texts. The reading of classics, and the hefty editions that were made available at low prices through the newspaper premiums, was based on the assumption that canonical literature of all traditions, but particularly the European greats, was a necessary part of the self-education of modern, cosmopolitan Jews.<sup>27</sup>

If European literature was revered, local literature was not much heeded. None of the books or authors mentioned in People's Book Store advertising between 1910 and 1920 were Canadian. All were American or European, even though five books by local authors were published in Winnipeg by 1920.<sup>28</sup> Books from Toronto and Montreal were also not mentioned. It may be fair to speculate that in this era Winnipeg Jews saw themselves primarily as consumers of world culture: participants in the great movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to be sure, as they debated various ideas in the aisles of Miller's Books. Local product was seen as secondary to major authors and titles which were under intense scrutiny elsewhere in the Jewish world.

Their values were firmly located with canonical literature. In this, they were perfectly in step with mainstream Canada, which had no real sense of itself as producer of canonical texts until far later.<sup>29</sup> There was therefore no model for Winnipeg Jews to follow which would perceive value in locally-produced literature.

The bookstore was not a passive observer in these developments, but took an active part in creating a knowledgeable, sophisticated, Yiddish-reading public. Berl Miller, quoted above, notes that people had to learn “that they have to read papers.” He phrases this as a duty, and assumes that this duty is understood and shared by his interviewer. It probably was. The shared value invoked is that understanding the wider world, its political contours and possibilities, and caring enough about it to purchase and discuss a newspaper, is a central part of modern identity. But the Millers also understood that involvement with the wider world did not come at the expense of Jewish identity.

This tension between engagement with larger issues and retention of Jewish particularity was under constant negotiation by the immigrant generation as it struggled to decide how, and how fully, to become Canadian. This is a central question for every immigrant group as it finds a new equilibrium in its new location, and helps determine the extent to which the group will become engaged citizens with a stake in the adopted landscape. People’s Book Store walked this line in numerous ways, offering opportunities for Canadianization as well as catering to Jewish pride and separateness.

In 1946 Louis Rosenberg, research director for the Canadian Jewish Congress, undertook a detailed demographic study of Winnipeg Jewry based on the 1941 census.<sup>30</sup> Rosenberg’s numbers show that just over 90% of Winnipeg’s Jews had Yiddish as their mother tongue, even though over 47% of them were born in an English-speaking country. Because Yiddish culture was not spread evenly through the city, Rosenberg breaks down Yiddish native speakers by district. In parts of the North End, as late as 1941, Yiddish was the first

language of upwards of 99% of Jews of all ages. Nonetheless, knowledge of English as a second language was extremely high: 98% of Jews in Winnipeg reported an ability to speak English. (This was up from 96% in 1931).

As these figures imply, language shift was not immediate or complete for the first few generations of Jewish immigrants to Winnipeg. Bilingualism was a mode they were comfortable in for decades.<sup>31</sup> Child immigrants and those born in Canada could become fluently bilingual through the school system, but adult immigrants had to find other opportunities to learn English, particularly as the pressing need to earn a living did not allow for full-time study. Several People's Book Store advertisements from 1911 and 1912 promote methods for learning English. Harkavy's dictionary was on sale for \$1.75 in 1911.<sup>32</sup> The Harkavy dictionaries were an indispensable aid to immigrants, and went through dozens of editions from the first in 1891. A few weeks later, another aid for adult English-learning material was on sale:

We have available a large stock of *Upright Calendars* In Yiddish-Russian and English with various idiomatic expressions on the left side of each page

Price 35 cents. Regional orders—free postage.<sup>33</sup>

The motivated adult learners were not simply interested in knowing enough English for everyday transactions. Another ad, aimed at both independent learners and those enrolled in night school classes, while emphasizing practical considerations such as language proficiency, also urged readers to know more about Canada:

Learn about the country and its language

We have added to our stock all sorts of Yiddish-English and Russian-English grammars, dictionaries and letter writing guides. Through these you can in a short time learn to write, read and speak English without the help of a teacher. We also

have all the textbooks for night school such as readers, spellers, grammars, and all other school things. Our stores are open every day (including Sundays) until 11 p.m.<sup>34</sup>

Another indication of the language shifts and other cultural adaptations to Canada occurring in the Jewish population is the language of the advertisements themselves. In early ads, almost everything is in Yiddish. In some cases the address and the phone number are given in English; at other times, they are in Yiddish letters. This causes awkwardly transliterations. The notation “Phone St. John 143” is rendered in Yiddish as “fhon st. dzshon 143” (143 אשזז טס ןאהפּ).<sup>35</sup> But this was quickly given up and the English used consistently for this information. It makes sense to approach inherently non-Jewish concepts such as “St. John” in their original alphabet than trying to retrofit them to fit Yiddish. This thin edge of the linguistic wedge then opened the way for more material to be rendered in English. For a while the name of the *בוק סטאָר* of appearing as “*Folks bukh handlung*” was rendered in English in Yiddish letters, such as “Pipels Buk Stor” (ראַטס קוב סלעפיפּ).<sup>36</sup> It is common for immigrants to find speaking English much easier than navigating English orthography in writing. English words could be sounded out using the familiar Yiddish alphabet, but writing the words in the English alphabet would be too difficult for readers. Eventually, much information was given in English, sometimes duplicated in Yiddish: the name of the store, the address, phone number, and proprietor’s name all appear in both English and Yiddish in the tenth-anniversary advertisement. Beginning in 1917, there were occasional forays into selling English-language Jewish books, advertised in English in the pages of the Yiddish newspaper. In the first of these, a bilingual ad promotes completely different merchandise in the two languages:

[In Yiddish:] Flags, Jewish and English, all sizes. A special price for Zionist organizations.

[In English:] Just received a selection of all

Books in English of General Jewish Interest.<sup>37</sup>

The “Jewish flags” were Zionist flags, precursors to the modern flag of the state of Israel, of which several variants were used in Canadian Zionist organizations. The “English flags” were the Union Jack, as Canada did not yet have a flag of its own. The Balfour Declaration a few weeks earlier was greeted with great excitement in the Winnipeg Jewish community. Zionism had always been strong among Canadian Jews, and particularly on the prairies. Beginning in 1899 with the founding of the Winnipeg Zionist Society, membership in Zionist organizations was higher among Winnipeg Jews than those in Montreal or Toronto<sup>38</sup>. The additional endorsement of Great Britain gave it another boost. Even before the Declaration, for example during the Zionist convention held in Winnipeg a few months previously, public displays of Zionist activity were covered by the local English-language press, and there was a tacit endorsement of the proposition that Zionism could co-exist with loyalty to Canada.<sup>39</sup> Yet there remained a distinction between Jews who were completely comfortable in Canada (the readers of English) and those who still used Yiddish. The message about Zionist flags in this advertisement appears only in Yiddish. This suggests that more assimilated Jews would not be as interested in Zionism, or might feel it to be less central to their identity.

A further language-related issue appears in a 1918 advertisement. The same material appears in Yiddish and English, but the English text assumes something radically different about its readers:

[In Yiddish:] Taleysim, makhzorim and shana toyves. You get the best prices only at People's Book Store. Regional orders quickly seen to.

[In English:] Machsorim (Holiday Prayer), Silk Talethim (Prayer Shawls), New Year Cards sold by People's Book Store.<sup>40</sup>

Since, Canadian-born Yiddish-speakers or immigrants

who arrived as children were not as familiar with the Yiddish/Hebrew names for ritual objects, the names are explained. All three of the items mentioned use words adopted from Hebrew to describe them: these words are often more difficult for Yiddish readers approaching them from a secular context because, unlike Yiddish words of European origin, they do not include separate letters for most vowel sounds. The spelling of these terms is confusing to those with incomplete Jewish education. Not only do the Millers spell out the items in English, they also include explanatory glosses for them, or in the case of *shana toyves*, simply give an English alternative name and leave out the Yiddish/Hebrew term altogether. While today even Jews with only moderate cultural literacy use terms like “tallis” and “machzor” (to give their most common contemporary English spelling), in 1918 either knowledge of the objects themselves or knowledge of their names was not something that could be taken for granted.

### **Conclusion**

Imagine if we could eavesdrop on the people debating and banging on the counter at People’s Book Store. What would we find out about the role the store played in creating a thoughtful, engaged citizenry? Or would we discover that they were fighting about their bets on local hockey games? Perhaps it doesn’t matter. The bookstore’s mere existence, because it functioned as a third place, was enough to create a bond between immigrant and place. The Canadian landscape was accepting enough for the immigrant generations to make its oasis there, and the proof of the engagement of this citizen group with Canada can be gauged by the extraordinarily large number of former North Enders holding political office.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Berl and Bertha Miller’s son Saul became a municipal politician in the early 1950s, then graduated to provincial politics earning a seat in the legislature in 1966, and served as a cabinet minister in the Schreyer government through most of the 1970s. While we can’t credit the bookstore with the entire course of his career,

there is no doubt that the atmosphere of the bookstore—an atmosphere created by proprietors and customers together—was saturated with the ethic of public engagement and service.

The relationship of Jews to books is well-documented and much-studied. A great deal has been written about Jewish texts and their survival through centuries of displacements, at least partly as a result of the need for certain texts for ritual purposes. The notion of the Bible as the Jews' "portable homeland" originated with Heine and was enlarged by George Steiner:

...the centrality of the book does coincide with and enact the condition of exile. [...] The text was the instrument of exilic survival [...].<sup>42</sup>

This relationship is viewed as emblematic of Jews' insecure relationship to their geographic locale at any given time. Recent writers find Jews used books in general (not just holy books) to form a psychic rootedness:

[A]lthough printing may have been localized, the books themselves circulated throughout the entire Jewish diaspora. For a wandering people like the Jews, books became a portable homeland, and to a great extent they formed the ground upon which the Jews felt they could temporarily encamp.<sup>43</sup>

There is nothing wrong with this formulation: indeed, it is foundational to our understanding of how Jews have used and responded to books through the centuries. Yet it seems too narrow to encompass what happened in Winnipeg at the People's Book Store. The uses of the books—as connection to Jewish culture; as a source for modern ideas; and as a way of learning Canadianness—were far more varied than the traditional view of Jewish book culture hints. But even less well-understood are the ways in which the books enabled locality: the bookstore, with its stock of world literature in Yiddish, became a repository of the collective belief in cosmopolitan culture, itself an expression of a longing for engagement with the non-Jewish world. The bookstore became a site in which to

enact one's identity through erudite debates and impassioned table-bangings. The store was an anchor which allowed immigrant Jews to both be surrounded by other Jews and Jewish ideas, but also gave them many ways of relating to the non-Jewish country they found themselves in. This double nature of books—their ability to look inward and nurture the reader, and also to bring the outside world into focus and enlarge the reader—is, the Winnipeg model shows, as crucial to Jews as to any other group of readers.

The People's Book Store was not a by-product of these dynamics; it did not simply react to community trends. Rather, it helped create the conditions in which these activities could take place. Although privately owned and operated on a for-profit basis, the bookstore was a crucial element among community institutions, serving for more than 50 years as third place that accepted all comers, provided friendly camaraderie, listened and argued in good faith, and demanded nothing but the same good will in return. These traits are implicit in an advertisement taken out at the time of the bookstore's tenth anniversary:

The 6<sup>th</sup> of November will mark 10 years since the People's Book Store opened. During this time the bookstore has grown enormously thanks to the good, honest dealings that I provide to my many thousands of customers. Therefore I have decided to celebrate this anniversary together with all the Jews of Winnipeg and Western Canada with a large sale of books and seforim at the lowest prices; 25% off the regular price. Come and enjoy yourselves. [...] With greetings, your old friend, B. Miller<sup>44</sup>

After listing the kinds of books available, the ad summarizes: "If you need to meet your friend and you can't find him, you can be sure you'll find him in People's Book Store every time."<sup>45</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> "Pipels buk stor obgebrent," *Dos Yidishe vort*, March 8, 1918: 6. All translations are mine. Readers will note that Berl Miller is generally mentioned as the sole proprietor of the store, but I describe both Berl and Bertha as active in running the store. This information is based on Bertha's obituary which describes her as active in the store. Because of social norms at the time which would consider the husband the main or sole proprietor even if work were shared evenly, it is not possible to know to what extent Bertha worked in the store. My best guess is that Berl was the main proprietor and Bertha served as an assistant some of the time, at least while their children were young. In later years she may have had more time to devote to the store, but as the business became more established it may not have been necessary for her to do so. In the 1930s their children Saul and Ruth worked in the bookstore, and in the 1940s Saul, but not Ruth, became a partner, once more indicating that only men were considered proprietors. (These details are found in the city directories for the 1930s, which list occupations).

<sup>2</sup> Advertisement, *Dos Yidishe vort*, June 7, 1918: 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ray Oldenburg, "The Character of Third Places," *The Great Good Place* (New York: Marlowe & Co, 1999), 2nd ed., 20-42. In this edition Oldenburg includes bookstores among his list of businesses that typically serve as third places (coffee shops, neighbourhood bars and beauty parlours are also on the list), although he does not include a case study of a bookstore. Another volume he edited, *Celebrating the Third Place* (New York: Marlowe & Co, 2001) includes an essay about a bookstore.

<sup>4</sup> For more on North End living and labour conditions in this era, see Allan Levine, *Coming of Age* (Winnipeg: Heartland, 2009), 105-116.

<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, biographical details about Gurevich are not known.

<sup>6</sup> Advertisement, *Der Yid*, May 9, 1912: 4; advertisements, *Dos Yidishe vort*, May 4, 1917: 5 and Oct. 29, 1920: 2; Winnipeg city directories, 1910-1920; obituary for Bertha Miller, *Winnipeg Free Press*, July 19, 1965: 21; obituary for Berl Miller, *Western Jewish News*, Jan. 11, 1979: 8; obituary for Berl Miller, *Winnipeg Free Press*, Jan. 10, 1979: 61. These details disagree slightly with Ruth Miller Levy's recollections (see note 6 below): Levy states the bookstore was in existence for 52 years, but both Bertha and Berl Miller's obituaries state the store closed in 1964, or 54 years after it opened.

<sup>7</sup> B. Miller interview, collection of the Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada (JHCWC).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Obituary for Bertha Miller, op cit; obituary for Berl Miller, op cit.; *Dos Yidishe vort*, Nov. 4, 1919: 5; *Dos Yidishe vort*, Feb. 1, 1952: 2; *Dos Yidishe vort*, Dec. 16, 1955: 2; *The Jewish Post*, Nov. 23, 1939: 7; *The Jewish Post*, June 30, 1960: 24.

<sup>11</sup> Ruth Miller Levy, from the video archives of the exhibit, “The North End Remembered,” held May 1993 at the Winnipeg Jewish Community Centre. Quoted in *The Scribe*, 13 n. 2 (Spring 1993): 20. Available online at <http://www.jewishmuseum.ca/Scribe>

<sup>12</sup> “Zionists are to Meet in Winnipeg,” *Manitoba Free Press*, June 26, 1917: 5; “Zionists Hear Rabbi Sandheim,” *Manitoba Free Press*, June 30, 1917: 10. The second article includes the subtitles: “Patriotic Sermon Preached to Big Congregation—Lieut.-Governor is Present,” indicating a strong articulation of the position of many Winnipeg Jews that Zionism and Canadian identity could co-exist.

<sup>13</sup> Laurence Roth, describing his father’s Jewish bookstore in Los Angeles, notes that crossing denominational lines was part of the deal: “On the Sabbath and holidays, my father would sometimes take us to an Orthodox synagogue, sometimes a Conservative synagogue, and, on occasion, even to a Reform synagogue. It was good for business.” Laurence Roth, “Unpacking My Father’s Bookstore,” in Sheila E. Jelen, Michael P. Kramer and L. Scott Lerner, eds., *Modern Jewish Literatures: Intersections and Boundaries* (Philadelphia: UPenn Press, 2011), 281.

<sup>14</sup> Ruth Miller Levy, op cit. Similar anecdotes about arguments and debates at Miller’s have been told to me by several older Winnipeggers or their children.

<sup>15</sup> See Google Streetview for 822 Main Street, Winnipeg. To the left in this picture is the Grand Theatre building on the corner. To the right is 824, another location for the store. Although the current picture shows many storefronts boarded up and the area clearly in economic distress, it does not seem that even when most bustling and busy this area would have had any pretensions.

<sup>16</sup> B. Miller interview, JHCWC. Miller explains how Fedorenko’s escape was effected: he had a similar-looking cousin, whom they dressed

in Fedorenko's suit and coat to distract any law enforcement who might be watching, while Fedorenko wore unfamiliar clothing and was able to get to the train station unnoticed.

<sup>17</sup> For more on Fedorenko, see Vadim Kukushkin, *From Peasants to Labourers: Ukrainian and Belarusian Immigration from the Russian Empire to Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queens Press, 2007), 165.

<sup>18</sup> B. Miller interview, JHCWC. Miller made \$3.00 by getting in 300 papers at a cost of a penny a piece, and selling them for 2 pennies each.

<sup>19</sup> Ellen Kellman, "Dos yidische bukh alarmirt! Towards the History of Yiddish Reading in Inter-War Poland," *Polin* 16 (2003): 215.

<sup>20</sup> Ido Bassok, "Mapping Reading Culture in Interwar Poland: Secular Literature as a New Marker of Ethnic Belonging among Jewish Youth," *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 9 (2010): 15-36.

<sup>21</sup> Kellman, op cit.: 226.

<sup>22</sup> "Minikes, Khonen-Yankev," in *Leksikon fun Yidishn Teater* (New York and Warsaw: Elisheva, 1931-1969), vol. 2, col. 1323-1325; "Minikes, Khonen-Yankev," in *Leksikon fun der Nayer Yidisher Literatur* (New York: Alveltlekhn Yidishn kultur-kongres, 1956-1981), vol. 5, col. 644-646; "Minikes, Chonen Yankov" in *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: 1939-1943), vol. 7, p. 567.

<sup>23</sup> Advertisement, *Der Kanader Yid*, September 29, 1911: 5.

<sup>24</sup> Advertisement, *Der Kanader Yid*, October 13, 1911: 2. A typo in the ad renders her name "Miriam Kaplan".

<sup>25</sup> "Brainin, Re'uven" in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* ([http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Brainin\\_Reuven](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Brainin_Reuven)). For more on Brainin, see Naomi Caruso, *Reuven Brainin: the Fall of an Icon* (Montreal: Canadian Jewish Archives, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Advertisement, *Der Kanader Yid*, December 1, 1911: 3.

<sup>27</sup> This accords with the status of secular study seen in other parts of the Jewish world during the first half of the twentieth century. While no figures are available for the years under discussion, a study of a list of 1922 Yiddish publications shows that 25% of the total books published in Yiddish were translations. "The demand for works of world literature in Yiddish translation rose as secular education became more widespread among Jewish youth." Kellman, op. cit.: 219.

<sup>28</sup> These books were: Mordkhe Miler, *Mayne perl* (Vinipeg: Beker Pres kompani, 1917); Ezekiel Brownstone, *Blittsen: fun "dos kleyn menshele"* (Winnipeg, 1917); Ezekiel Brownstone and H. Galski, *Milhomeh veyhen* (Vinipeg : Farlag "Vinipeg", 1918); Ezekiel Brownstone and Mordkhe Miler, *Tsvey veltn: Ongevarfene blumen, Zun un beynkshaft* (Vinipeg: Farlag "Vinipeg," 1919); J. J. Goodman, *Gezamlte shriften* (Vinipeg: Kunst un literatur gezelshaft, 1919).

<sup>29</sup> Robert Lecker says this did not take place until well after the Second World War, beginning in 1957. Lecker, "The Canonization of Canadian Literature: An Inquiry into Value," *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 3 (Spring, 1990): 656-671.

<sup>30</sup> Louis Rosenberg, *A Population Study of the Winnipeg Jewish Community* (Montreal: Canadian Jewish Congress, 1946), 65-68, 87-92.

<sup>31</sup> As the excerpts from Berl Miller's oral history interview indicate, his English was never perfect. This interview was conducted in 1969, after he had been in Canada for 64 years, yet he slips into Yiddish frequently and towards the end of the interview, when he is tiring, completely reverts to Yiddish. Miller may have been less fluent in English because so much of his business involved dealing with Yiddish-speakers, but he is probably fairly indicative of the struggle of the immigrant generation in learning English.

<sup>32</sup> Advertisement, *Der Kanader Yid*, December 21, 1911: 2.

<sup>33</sup> Advertisement, *Der Kanader Yid*, January 4, 1912: 2.

<sup>34</sup> Advertisement, *Der Yid*, September 26, 1912: 7.

<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., advertisement, *Der Kanader Yid*, March 14, 1912: 2.

<sup>36</sup> See, e.g., advertisement, *Der Yid*, July 11, 1912: 2.

<sup>37</sup> Advertisement, *Dos Yidishe vort*, November 16, 1917: 5.

<sup>38</sup> Joseph B. Glass, "Isolation and Alienation: Factors in the Growth of Zionism in the Canadian Prairies, 1917-1939," *Canadian Jewish Studies* 9 (2001): 85-123.

<sup>39</sup> See note 9 above, and, for example, "Joyous Celebration by Jews of Winnipeg," *Manitoba Free Press*, May 20, 1920: 1, 5; "Jewish Celebration of Palestine Mandate," *Manitoba Free Press*, Aug. 5, 1922: 6; "Jewish Celebration Balfour Declaration," *Manitoba Free Press*, Nov. 3, 1924: 6.

<sup>40</sup> Advertisement, *Dos Yidishe vort*, August 16, 1918: 2.

<sup>41</sup> See Levin, *Coming of Age*, 121 ff. for more information on North End politicians.

<sup>42</sup> George Steiner, "Our Homeland, the Text," *Salmagundi* 66 (1985): 5.

<sup>43</sup> Zeev Gries, *The Book in the Jewish World: 1700-1900* (Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007): 7. The "portable homeland" trope is now applied to many aspects of Jewish culture: a web search finds it used in relation to hip-hop ([http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=uhf\\_2010](http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=uhf_2010)), fiction (Judith Roumain, "The Portable Homeland of North African Jewish Fiction: Ryvel and Koskas," *Prooftexts* 4 n. 3 [1984]: 253-267), the Yiddish Book Center (<http://www.haaretz.com/news/new-home-for-a-portable-homeland-1.174958>), and contemporary Orthodoxy (<http://www.jpost.com/LandedPages/PrintArticle.aspx?id=274518>). There is also a book blog called "Portable Homeland."

<sup>44</sup> Advertisement, *Dos Yidishe vort*, October 29, 1920: 2.

<sup>45</sup> Advertisement, *Dos Yidishe vort*, October 29, 1920: 2.