

BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDUS

Ancil, Pierre. *Jacob-Isaac Segal (1896-1854); un poète yiddish de Montréal et son milieu*

Quebec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2012. 447 pp.

The poet J.I Segal was widely known and revered in the Montreal Jewish cultural community. So why is it that so few people are familiar with the content of a single one of his poems? Yud Yud Segal, as he was known by some, is at once remembered and forgotten.

Pierre Ancil addresses this lacuna with a beautifully written and researched book abounding in grace, nuance and depth, *Jacob-Isaac Segal: un poète yiddish de Montréal et son milieu*. The volume is a biography, a memoir of a literary friendship between the poet and the celebrated community organizer and literary critic, Hannaniah Meir Caiserman, and a collective portrait of Yiddish Montreal.

Segal was a shy and retiring man who left very little biographical material. In spite of this, he emerges as a complex person: a community based teacher (he taught at the Jewish People's School) who was essentially reclusive and introspective, a modernist whose later work stands out for its use of traditional religious symbolism, a man drawn to New York but at home in Montreal, a poet who teetered spiritually between the shtetl and the city, the Old and the New World. He was born in 1896 and raised in the Ukrainian shtetl of Koretz in the household of his maternal grandfather, a harsh and austere Hasidic merchant who refused to support the family of his widowed daughter. Koretz was clearly a place of alienation and pain, yet the shtetl is often invoked in his work as an ideal world, pristine, pure and whole. (120-125)

Segal immigrated to Montreal at the age of 15 with his mother and sister. Except for a stay in New York between 1923 and 1928, he lived in the city until his sudden death in 1954. He began his working life as a clothing factory worker, though after a few years he was able to eke out a meager subsistence through writing and teaching. Economically marginal all his life, Segal still managed to churn out hundreds of literary reviews, news commentaries, and poems.

Anctil's biography follows the contours of Segal's literary life. He documents Segal's early literary successes as a new immigrant in the 1920s in Montreal and his failed adventure of establishing himself as a poet amongst the modernist "*Di Yunge*" group in New York, where he experienced the sudden loss of a beloved daughter. It follows him back to Montreal and through the lean years of the depression, when a loving and nurturing Yiddish community, including the salon hostess Ida Maza and the irrepressible friend and patron H.M. Caiserman, supported his literary efforts. The author's treatment of the holocaust and its aftermath, where the devastated Segal turns inwards to mysticism and traditional imagery in an effort to recapture the vanished world of his youth, is poignant and immediate. Anctil captures, in a very intimate and personal way, the moment of loss of connection of an entire community.

The entire narrative is interwoven with the biography of Hannaniah Meir Caiserman (1884-1950), who was born in Rumania and who arrived in Montreal in 1910. Caiserman, who had spoken very little Yiddish in Europe, was possessed with a burning faith in the power of the language as a vehicle for the national, cultural, and socialist aspirations of the Jewish people. Involved in a myriad of political and cultural initiatives largely under the auspices of the Poale Tzion, he was the driving force behind the formation of organizations such as the Jewish Canadian Congress and the Refugee Relief Committee. He was also the author of the invaluable *Yiddishe Dikhter in Kanade*, an annotated catalogue of Jewish Canadian writers still used as a reference by students of Canadian Yiddish literature.

The two men were bound together by the shared values of idealism, universalism, loyalty to Judaism and artistic innovation, as well as by mutual admiration and affection. Segal supplied much of the material that became the subject for Caiserman's literary criticism. Montreal's foremost *klal tuer* paid, on occasion, to have Segal's work published. He organized fund-raising events for the same purpose, and opened his home to Segal and to other Jewish artists. In fact most of the biographical information we have about Segal's background and childhood comes from the biographical sketches that Caiserman wrote, based on his interviews with Segal.¹ The friendship between the two men (who died within four years of each other) forms a leitmotiv of the book, accompanied by a paean to the city that nurtured their relationship.

According to Anctil Segal was the first poet in Quebec to embrace modern urbanity in his work. Consequently, he chooses to focus on Segal's Montréalité, both the lens through which the poet's modernity is reflected and the repository of longing for the idealized innocence of the shtetl, as we see in the following excerpts.

Dans mon labyrinthe
De désires et de péchés étincelants où retentissent
et brillent des milliers de signes,
Je ferais jaillir les sources
De mes joies insondables

Et exploser milles feux de lumières!
Vous quitterez vos champs infinis
Pour rejoindre mon royaume de pierres
Abandonnant le calme divin
Des forêts et des rivières²

In this instance the language is secular and universalistic. However, Segal also "appropriates" Montreal by Yiddishizing it.

...ce jour de Dimanche rayonnent encore davantage
les croix dorées
De grosses cloches entonnent hallel et de plus
petites répondent amen

Des rues...me sourient avec douceur, moi, qui
 suis une sorte de Juif yiddishiant,
 Dans le sillage duquel ne parviennent pas à
 estomper
 Le rythme et la sonorité d'une ancienne mélodie
 liturgique ³

As much as the Yiddish poet attempts to assimilate the rhythm and shape of contemporary Montreal, the city imposes its own landscape, which in turn becomes imbued with significance. In decoding of the meaning of the Mountain (which appears in many of Segal's poems) in Yiddish poetry, Anctil moves gracefully between individual and collectivity, Montreal as it was imagined, and Montreal as it was lived.

Accueillant au pied de ses pentes l'îlot
 que constitue le quartier immigrant juif, la
 "montagne" devint le point d'encrage du
 judaïsme montréalais, un symbole par sa masse
 sombre et incompressible de la présence divine,
 un rappel à la fois de la Jérusalem terrestre et
 de la Jérusalem céleste. Le mont Royal paraît
 de plus sous cet angle un symbole de la nature
 canadienne, sauvage, inaccessible, dominant
 imperturbable...(275)

Modernist though Segal is, claims Anctil, his humble shtetl, the town of Koretz is transposed and absorbed into the "incandescence" of the North American city (91), his modernism and secularity interwoven with inextricable strands of tradition and religious symbolism. Anctil concurs, then, with Shari Cooper Friedman's assessment of Segal as a poet between two worlds "Dans cette interstice impossible à combler et qui toujours faisait surgir une impression d'absence et de manque, l'œuvre poétique de Segal... n'a fait qu'effleurer par moments les exigences du temps présent et tendait distraitemment l'oreille au tumulte du nouveau continent." (324)

Anctil's success at giving us a convincing rendition of Segal and his place in an evolving Jewish Montreal lies partly in his skill in using the voices of Segal's peers to mirror

him, citing, for instance, the socialist poet Sholem Shtern's tribute: "Segal a la force poétique de nous faire croire en des phénomènes que nous ne percevons plus autour de nous"⁴ and A.M. Klein's praise of Segal as a "latter-day Levite... making a great song for a little clan." (322)

The book draws on an extensive range of archival sources in both Yiddish and English, all carefully referenced in a comprehensive bibliography and in annexes containing nearly twenty of Segal's poems in transliteration. This meticulous work contrasts with less careful editing, especially in the introductory chapter and in some of the Caiserman sections. These are chronologically chaotic, moving back and forth in time as the focus shifts from Segal to Caiserman, and from either individual to the community. And although the reader will appreciate that Anctil has made use of the transliterated Yiddish to convey the sonority of some of the poems, it is hard to understand why sometimes the Yiddish, and at other times, the French version of a poem appears in the body of the text.⁵

In giving us a French language biography of a Yiddish poet, framed by a careful, complex and nuanced account of the ways of thinking and feeling of the immigrant community, Anctil crowns a long career of making Yiddish Montreal intelligible and relevant to the francophone Quebecers. He provides a counterweight to the idea that Yiddish Montreal was a "third solitude," highlighting for instance, Caiserman's embrace of French Canadian poetry. The cost of emphasizing exchange and mutual influences, as important as these were, is to gloss over anti-semitism, conflict and communal insularity that were part of everyday reality of Yiddish Montreal, only lightly touched on in Anctil's narrative, though admittedly, far from the focus of the work.

The book is sure to resonate deeply with readers partly because the fragile memory of Segal, the revered forgotten poet, is reminiscent of the fate of Yiddish culture itself. For a time solidly rooted in the American diaspora, but ultimately doomed, due not only to the disappearance of the European mother-culture, but also to the very acceptance, in America,

which made the Yiddish modernist project possible, an acceptance which facilitated the eclipse of Yiddish by the language of Shakespeare.

This intimate, compelling and scholarly collective portrait is essential for anyone interested in the inner life of the Jewish community, and in the immigrant experience in Montreal.

Endnotes

¹ Segal described Caiserman as “my guardian angel (45).

² English translation of the French translation: “In my labyrinth of desires and of sparkling sins, where thousands of signs flicker and shine/ I will draw out the wellsprings of my depthless joys/,and explode thousands of bright lights!/You will leave your endless fields/and join me in my kingdom of stones/abandoning the divine calm/ of forests and rivers The poem appears on (90) of the text.

³ (182). Shari Cooper Friedman looks at the same passage from a different perspective. For her, the tone of a Eastern European Jew looking at Catholic Montreal is almost ironic, the footsteps on the stones that beat the rhythm of Segal’s Hebrew liturgy are small and quiet compared to the ubiquitous ringing bells. Where she sees is David and Goliath, alienation and the refusal to submit to it, Anctil sees celebration. See her “Between Two Worlds, the Work of J.I. Segal” in *An Everyday Miracle, Yiddish Culture in Montreal*, ed. Ira Robinson, Pierre Anctil and Marvin Butovsky, Montreal, Vehicle Press, 1990, 115-158.

⁴ Segal has the poetical power to make us believe in phenomena which we no longer feel around us to a world we no longer feel ourselves, (286).

⁵ At one point a poem appears, commented, for a second time.

Eve Lerner

Jack Lipinsky, *Imposing Their Will: An Organizational History of Jewish Toronto, 1933-1948*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011. 384 pp.

The alphabet soup of Jewish organizational history is often appreciated without a great deal of concern for the individual