

**Ellenbogen, George. *A Stone in my Shoe: in Search of Neighbourhood*. (Montreal: Vehicle Press, 2013), 170 pp.**

In *A Stone in my Shoe* George Ellenbogen joins a number of other writers-in exile-from Montreal, Saul Bellow and Mordechai Richler among them, in memorializing Jewish Montreal in the years between the depression and the Cold War. What makes this beautifully written book different is that Ellenbogen attempts to capture memory and longing, the fleeting nature of a community itself. His is the lost generation of secular Jewish second generation immigrants whose parents struggle to make their children fully Canadian while tugging on the strings tying them to Old World Jewish values and a culture that these children could not fully understand. Maps, memoranda and photos, and brief historical contextualizing pepper the book, making it as much about beloved and quirky Montreal, as it is about one man's spiritual quest.

Ellenbogen, a poet and teacher now living in Boston, describes in detail with grace, eloquence, and occasionally rawness, the experience of growing up in "the hood," the old Jewish ghetto just east of the Main (St. Lawrence boulevard), of playing football on the street with a stuffed stocking, playing hockey in clumsy overshoes on the streets packed with ice and snow, as a teenager, co-founding the Buzz Beurling social club, (named after a WWII pilot who died while on a mission to the newly founded State of Israel ) and of meeting in the local Neighbourhood House to discuss the common cause of Blacks and of Jews.

Being Jewish in this generation meant being an outsider ambivalent about getting in. It meant singing Christian hymns at Mount Royal Elementary School, asserting Jewish independence by changing the last line of the popular hymn to "sleep in heavenly piss"; of being "smitten, cowed" by the British imperial culture that the teachers from Baron Byng attempted to impart to their students, in the form of enthusiastically administered doses of *As You Like it* and of David Lean's film *Great Expectations*. Of one such teacher Ellenbogen says "[he made] us aware of the power of language [while he also] made us aware of our status as course, unlettered sub-Colonial gate-crashers, party-crashers at a dance whose steps we had not begun to master." (108)

Being Jewish in Montreal also meant escaping to the nearby Laurentians every summer. Ellenbogen describes lovingly the culture of the barracks-like camp colony in Prefontaine, peopled by mothers and children who would eagerly await the Friday night arrival by train of the father of the family, and as the family grew more affluent, the move to a less communal setting, a lakeside cottage in Nantel where visits to local farmers and dealing with a friendly and helpful caretaker provided more contact with French Canadian culture than daily life back on the street ever had.

But this is no purely individual account. Ellenbogen links his own trajectory to a narrative of an evolving space and time by interweaving into his story carefully selected and presented primary documents and historical tidbits: maps of the neighbourhood, a 1926 letter from a social worker fretting about Jewish delinquency, an explanation of the signature spiral staircases in Montreal (a space and money saving design), a photo of the New Adath Yeshurun synagogue, where Ellenbogen celebrated his bar mitzvah. The synagogue has departed and there is no trace of its presence on the corner of Mount Royal and St. Urbain, the site of an apartment building. This absence is emblematic of the book, which seeks to convey at once the elusiveness of community, the childish illusion of its permanence, and the consciousness of the backward-looking mature adult who understands both, and is bewildered by their incongruity.

The book however, escapes nostalgia through its uninhibited approach to repulsive realities: the story-telling barber who cuts “like a blind man” leaving his clients entertained but with patches of hair uncut, or a cruel principal who receives a beating from two of his students. After all, as real and as gritty as some of the narrative of this book is, it remains an elegy to the sacredness of space and the longing to recapture a vanished community and its authenticity. “A Stone in my Shoe” may refer to the Jewish practice of wearing a stone in one’s shoe, as a remembrance, in lieu of an absolute prohibition to wear leather on certain holy days or when in mourning. (Alternatively, the reference may be to the Edgar Allan Poe’s “The past is a pebble in my shoe.”) When the ritual act has lost its meaning, is out of place or out of time, the remembrance of it salvages remnants of this meaning, and so redeems the wearer. A desire for redemption is an understandable sentiment for one of the lost generation of second generation immigrants. Outside of the Orthodox community, the most visible marks of the communal Jewish presence in Montreal today are the shiny new-ish structures erected by Jewish philanthropy: hospital buildings, nursing homes, and apartment blocks. These buildings, while absolutely essential, and sometimes even beautiful, might seem comparatively soulless to an outside observer who says of the Montreal of his youth:

Though the incomes of the neighbouring Jews were thin, the unperturbed exteriors of their houses, the unlettered streets and the occasional tree did not conjure up poverty. And to the eyes of a child, the ornate metal cornices, false mansards, carved wooden balcony supports, mass produced though they were, gave to those exteriors a magical and somewhat elegant quality. (44)

If the book has any shortcomings, they are marks of a laudable ambition that sometimes misses the mark. For instance, the poems which Ellenbogen has integrated into the text are diminished by invariably following a detailed description of the situation which inspires them, making them seemingly redundant. Had they preceded the narrative, it might have made them more effective. In the last section of

the book, the author steps back from his detailed narrative to provide the European background and the life trajectory of his parents and of their generation as they left their immigrant origins behind them and attained comfortable middle class status (including a winter home in Florida, in the case of Ellenberger's mother). These broad strokes, placed together at the end of the book, somewhat dilute the intensity of the narrative. These shortcomings in no way mar the beauty of this book, which belongs on the bookshelf of anyone interested in the history of Montreal, or simply in the complex business of growing up.

**Eve Lerner**