

Ira Robinson, Rivka Augenfeld and Karen Biskin, eds. *The Future of the Past: The Jewish Public Library of Montreal, 1914-2014* (Montreal: Concordia Institute for Canadian Jewish Studies, 2015), 97 pp., ISBN: 9781771855457.

In late October 2014, on the occasion of the centenary of the Jewish Public Library of Montreal, scholars, writers, librarians, and Jewish community members and leaders gathered at this most important institution to share research and reflections on its history and its future. In assembling a number of these presentations, this volume contributes not only to the commemoration of the JPL's special birthday, but to the history of Yiddish language in Montreal, and more broadly, to the recognition of the importance of the library and its archive to the social, cultural, and political history of a community. The volume, edited by Ira Robinson, Rivka Augenfeld, and Karen Biskin, comprises ten chapters including research papers, reflections, and a transcription of an engaging round-table discussion between library specialists on the future of libraries, making for a lively and enjoyable read.

A number of essays focus on immigration's impact on the history of Montreal's Jewish community, and subsequently, the Jewish Public Library. Eugene Orenstein locates the founding of the JPL, a secular institution, within an ancient Jewish history of literacy and libraries, the tastes and interests of the nineteenth-century Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*), and most important, a fin-de-siècle context of Jewish socialist labour politics imported to Montreal from Eastern Europe. The JPL, Orenstein explains, was borne of socialist-Zionist desires to break free from a wealthy anglicized upper class of Jews who had previously stored their collections at the Baron de Hirsch Institute, Montreal Jewry's social welfare institution (14-15). After a period of strikes against powerful Jewish manufacturers, Yiddish Labour activists founded an institution to cater to "the new social and cultural life emerging among Jewish working class immigrants. The *Yidische Folks-biblyothek* (Jewish Peoples' or Public, Library) would quickly emerge as a vibrant social space for Montreal's Jewish working class seeking to "advance the creative future of the Jewish people"(17). In the 1950s, the JPL was a transformed institution. Rebecca Margolis examines these changes by interrogating the decline of the use of vernacular Yiddish among Montreal Jews after the Second World War. Associates of the JPL and its *Folksuniversitet* (People's University) responded to the dwindling of a Yiddish readership among children in a number of ways; by promoting Yiddish language education and programming, by focusing its attention on developing secular Jewish culture, and finally, by offering multilingual education and programming to address the needs of the new waves of immigrants and the wider community, an approach still favoured today. By envisioning Montreal's Jewish community as one in constant flux, the JPL has managed to expand its relevancy while simultaneously retaining its core mandate to promote Yiddish language. On the topic of immigration, Anna Dysart explores how the JPL's program was shaped by the arrival of thousands of Francophone and

North African Jews in the 1960s, a wave precipitated by French decolonization. For the most part, French-speaking Jews were able to integrate socially and professionally into Quebec society, but “religious and cultural integration into the existing Jewish society,” a heavily Ashkenazic one, “was more difficult” (60). With successive waves of immigration of both Ashkenazic and non-Ashkenazic migrants from North Africa, France, and the Middle East, French speaking Jews “tended to cleave to one another” by creating their own schools and institutions rather than “integrate into the mainstream Jewish community.” Beginning in the 1970s, the JPL’s cultural committee began the process of creating distinct sections for different languages – Yiddish, Hebrew, English, and French. By the 1990s, Dysart argues, the Franco-phone committee was separate from the English one, and began to engage Jewish and non-Jewish francophone communities in cultural and educational programming such as photography exhibitions, conferences, and archival development on the Iraqi and Lebanese Jews (63–64). Mark Groyberg’s brief essay makes note of the significant contributions made to Montreal and Canadian Jewish life by the influx of Jews of Russian roots at the turn of the 20th century, after the Second World War, and at the end of the Cold War. This fascinating topic deserves closer examination, particularly with regard to the long and evolving relationship between Russian Jews and the JPL.

Reuven Brainin, the founder of the Jewish Public Library, is the subject of two essays. Naomi Caruso outlines some of the major events of his life. Born in Belarus, Brainin began his public life as a Zionist and a Hebraist, but eventually moved to Communism, choosing Yiddish as his language of politics and artistic expression. In spite of the community work he led in Montreal, his creative and academic writing, and his extensive work in the Zionist and Communist movements, Brainin’s reputation was destroyed after H. N. Bialik accused of him being a Soviet spy in the late 1920s. While Brainin was editor of the Yiddish daily *Keneder Adler* at the time he founded the JPL with other Yiddishists, Menachem Rotstein focuses on this “conflicted spirit’s” background as a Hebraist to examine the origins of the library’s Hebraica collection as well as its century-long shift from Yiddish to Hebrew. As an aside, Rotstein makes note of the role of Israeli culture in Montreal Jewish institutions in the 1990s and until today. This unfolding story certainly merits further investigation, not only in the case of Montreal, but in other major Jewish communities in Europe and the Americas.

Two more essays explore elements of the JPL’s archival collections. Zachary Baker reflects on his research in the JPL’s audio archives and argues the recordings of public ceremonies in honour of the institution reveal a transforming institution, firmly “Jewish” in its commitment to Yiddish language as well as to cultural and educational services for Jewish immigrants arriving in Montreal. However, Baker points out, these very public services actually reveal the JPL’s emergence as an important civic Canadian institution during the decades after the Second World War, “when the

phrase “New Canadians” was coming into vogue, when multiculturalism was on the not-too-distant horizon.” (55) Esther Frank’s fascinating contribution outlines the story of Yiddish writer Rokhl Korn’s archive, which came to the library in the 1980s. Her papers reveal the extent to which this prolific and much-loved Jewish writer retained strong links with Poland, the Soviet Union, and other locations where she lived and worked before arriving in Canada in 1948. Korn, like many others discussed by essays in the volume, lived a transnational life. In many ways, this is the ultimate story of Montreal Jewry: a fragmented life of language, politics, and creativity scattered across many cities and continents; and the JPL is an institution borne of, and shaped by, these groups and individual historical experiences.

Finally, a transcript of the conference keynote presentation which was a roundtable among library specialists and writers, provides a gripping conclusion to the collection. Guylaine Beaudry, Barbara Clubb, Alberto Manguel, and Brad Sabin Hill, moderated by Bernie Lucht, discuss the transforming role of the institution of the library. The conversation spans topics such as the history of the book, the evolution of education and literacy, preservation, technology and digitization, as well as the role of a library as a social space. This rich conversation offers points of departure for a plethora of studies on related topics. *The Future of the Past* is a fascinating compendium of research and reflection on the occasion of the centennial of Montreal’s Jewish Public Library, though its interest and significance expands well beyond the particular history of this institution.

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