

## **Reflections/Réflexions**

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**Finding a Way into Canadian Jewish Studies:  
Reflections of a Francophone Interloper**

As is customary in such reflections, I feel that I must first, before getting to the heart of the matter, discuss my personal upbringing and childhood. I grew up in Quebec City in a family that belonged to both sides of the old merchant class of French Canada, which means that I spent my early years in a household that had espoused political liberalism late in the nineteenth century and which exposed me to rich cultural influences. In our family, my three siblings and I were expected to know English well, but not to use the language to communicate among ourselves or in the uptown neighbourhood where we lived. Out of political conviction and a sense of justice, my father had enrolled in the Royal Canadian Air Force as early as 1942 and he had first-hand experience of wartime London. For her part, my mother, a pharmacist's daughter, had seen most of Western Europe as a tourist, a few years before marrying in 1951. Every summer we left Canada for the sandy beaches of Maine. We were also later sent to American summer camps for extended stretches of time. For months on end I would speak only French while studying at Le Petit séminaire de Québec, under the strict guidance of Catholic diocesan priests, and at other times only English when vacationing and camping in the USA. This experience left a deep mark on me and at certain junctures I was not certain exactly to which world I belonged, until two groundbreaking events took place in quick succession, forever changing the social environment that surrounded me. In 1959, Premier Maurice Duplessis died, setting in motion the Quiet Revolution and forcing a breakneck transition from a conservative Church-oriented society to one intent on modernizing and building *l'État du Québec*. Almost simultaneously, in 1962, Pope John XXIII convened in Rome the Second Vatican council and propelled Catholicism toward a profound *aggiornamento*. As it would turn out, unbeknownst to me at the time, both momentous developments within the traditional structures of French Canada would fashion my cultural and intellectual trajectory. Eventually a third fundamental turn of events would influence my path, but which was not to take place until twenty years later. More about that soon.

Perhaps the reader will have to be patient and bear with me a little longer as I bring elements that are far from being digressions. Growing up in the provincial capital, despite the overwhelming influence of Francophone Canada in our lives, one did not have to go very far to encounter proof of a certain Jewish presence in the city or in the province of Quebec at large. Almost every week we would go shopping at the local Steinberg grocery on the corner of rue des Érables and chemin Sainte-Foy where one could, if one wished, sample food produced in Montreal and considered standard fare of East European Jewish cuisine, I do not remember as a child ever hearing English spoken in Steinberg or having met employees who were not French Canadians. Some people even used the expression: "Je m'en vais faire mon Steinberg," meaning that they were going to buy food at the corner grocery. When shopping centres opened in the early sixties in the city's Sainte-Foy suburbs the Steinberg Company built a very large store under the Miracle Mart banner, part of a chain present everywhere in Quebec that sold household products at discount prices. Un-

impressed by these new developments, a very successful local merchant by the name of Maurice Pollack followed suit and branched out from downtown, where he had established his clothing business as early as 1902. Everybody knew him as a Jewish immigrant from Eastern Europe. My grandfather's drugstore was almost across the street from his departmental store on rue Saint-Joseph in the old commercial district of Quebec City. I still remember the huge Pollack sign on boulevard Charest as we drove by, next to Paquet and Le Syndicat stores. Later, I would study at l'Université Laval and meet my peers in the Pollack pavilion, where student services were housed, the result of a large donation made by the Jewish merchant to the institution during the fifties.

My very first experience with rabbinical Judaism was much more personal. Our immediate neighbour on chemin Saint-Louis was Edward Joseph, whose beautiful garden was just over the fence from ours. The son of Montefiore and grandson of Abraham, all Quebec City merchants of British Jewish origins, Edward was already a very old man when I was learning to walk. My mother would point to his flowers and say to me: "Look, Pierre, he does no gardening today because we are Saturday, and tomorrow he will not either because it will be Sunday and he wants to respect the Christian holy day as well to honour his immediate neighbours." This was at a time when both my family and Edward's had developed a positive relationship over several decades. I grew up in an intense Catholic atmosphere both at home and at school, and I recall going to church on every possible occasion with my parents. In our parish, one fine day when I was nearing sixteen, the Dominican priests convened the members of the pastoral team to participate in a *Seder*—exactly like a Jewish one—and bearing the same moral teachings overall, but with no Jews present. I remember how the six prescribed items were assembled on a plate and how their symbolic meaning was explained to us at length. This was a few years after the 1965 publication of the *Nostra Aetate* encyclical by Pope Paul VI, declaring Christians forever tied to the First Covenant and to the patrimony of Abraham, and rejecting any form of antisemitism as contrary to the faith. As they were encouraged to do by the Vatican authorities, the Dominicans were now paying homage in their parochial institutions to the new approach favoured by the church in its dealings with Judaism. For an evening, we prayed like Jews and I learned of the ten plagues and of the flight from Egypt. It was my first contact with a Jewish religious narrative. I was too young then to realize fully, but this was the doctrinal rejection of centuries of contempt and marginalization. For the first time, it removed the impenetrable barriers that had made it next to impossible for a Catholic to come to terms with Judaism in a positive way. A few years later, I would witness the long-term results of this complete reversal of perspective.

As was expected of young men and women of my social class, I graduated from the *cours classique* and in 1970 headed for l'Université Laval, an institution that had been founded by the diocese of Quebec more than a century earlier and, at the time, still had a Catholic priest as rector. Rather than choose a liberal profession, I followed in the footsteps of Father Georges-Henri Lévesque, a Dominican priest that in 1938 had founded l'École des sciences sociales, with the purpose of providing Franco-Quebec with a scientific instrument for the observation of society. Lévesque's program of research, and the ideas that he had acquired in Europe at l'Université catholique de Lille, in France, were incubators of the Quiet Revolution and spawned an entire generation of sociologists and political scientists that would encourage social change in French Canada. I was also inspired by the contributions of Marius Barbeau, the first full-time anthropologist in Canada, who spent an entire career recording French-Canadian and Wendat songs and also taught at Laval, as well as by those of Luc Lacourcière, the founder in 1944 of les Archives de folklore et d'ethnologie. These were very recent advances when I arrived on the scene, but they nonetheless left a deep mark on me as I was negotiating my way to a university career and witnessing the germination of Francophone aspirations on the Canadian political scene. In 1975, I graduated from Laval with an M.A. in social anthropology and planned to extend my interest to the great Francophone emigration to New England, a massive demographic movement that had taken place at the end of the nineteenth century and deeply influenced the evolution of French Canada. During these five years and in a city that was overwhelmingly French-speaking and of Catholic background, the subject of Canadian Jewish History or Judaism as a field of intellectual enquiry rarely emerged. What I did absorb, though was the importance of cultural relativism and the essentials of anthropological fieldwork, which I practiced in the Beauce region and in rural districts around the city during my B.A. and M.A.

Where, however, would I pursue my advanced studies in anthropology? In the social sciences, most francophone graduate students of my generation looked to France as a model and sought entry into institutions of higher learning where French was the language of scientific enquiry. My own personal interests and experiences made me look south of the border. I naturally gravitated toward New York, which had been a familiar tourist attraction and commercial destination for members of my own family for many generations. Following the advice of one of my anthropology professors at Laval, Gerald Gold, I applied both to Brandeis University and to the New School for Social Research (NSSR). I felt particularly attracted to the latter because it offered a curriculum that placed the study of nationalism and historical materialism high on the list of its priorities. These were domains that had attracted my attention while I was at Laval, but which I could not explore to my full satisfaction during the rather short M.A. program that I had completed there. In the fall of 1975, I plunged ahead, showing up at the corner of 13<sup>th</sup> Street and 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue to attend my first classes at the NSSR. New York, I reasoned, would be both an intellectual adventure within the

academic confines of the NSSR, and a place to explore the complex forces of immigration, ethnicity, and urbanization that had shaped the North American continent, including the French-Canadian world that had shaped me.

During two full years, I roamed the city and at the NSSR absorbed the great tradition of the Frankfurt School of critical philosophy based upon Hegelian, Marxist, and Freudian theory. Professors introduced us to the works of Herbert Marcuse, Theodor W. Adorno, and Jürgen Habermas, among others of the same academic current who had produced a rich body of philosophical and sociological works in the years following the Second World War. Many of them had fled Nazi totalitarianism as refugees to the United States, including the political theorist Hannah Arendt who had spent long periods of time teaching in the city. We were also introduced to the methods of the founders of American anthropology, Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and to the leading theorist of structuralism, Claude Lévi-Strauss—many of whom shared a common *weltanschauung* with the proponents of the Frankfurt School. I was subjected to a culture shock of great magnitude as I wandered in the streets and neighbourhoods of the city itself, and in the NSSR, where I encountered the deep intellectual traditions of Central Europe merging with the post-war progressive American intellectual milieu. It was a life-changing experience and a profound transformation of my *feuille de route intellectuelle*, producing a broad reorientation of my way of perceiving my own origins.

At the NSSR, I charted new ground and entered into contact with very different manifestations of nationalism and ethnicity. It was at that point that I first encountered what would later appear to me more fully as the “Jewish question,” a lasting interrogation that was present in the writings of almost every author that I studied in that period of my life. Certainly, the Frankfurt School was not per se a specifically Jewish current of thought, but enough great minds active in that philosophical sphere had German Jewish background to make it a highly significant issue, not to mention that most of them had been personally impacted by the rise of the Third Reich and by the Shoah. It left a deep mark on me. As this type of questioning was taking ever-larger proportions in my mind, I was also entering—largely unbeknownst to me—a process of acculturation to American Jewish culture that seemed to flow naturally from the NSSR environment and the Lower East Side neighbourhood, where I resided for many months. I had specifically chosen not to enroll in an Ivy League University to avoid being subjected to the weight of British Protestantism. Little did I know that I would fall under the influence of highly secular forms of Judaism. As a participant of French Catholic background in Jewish culture, which remained a mystery to most in New York City, I felt quite comfortable meeting individuals who felt oppressed by the larger forces of contemporary history who remained at a distance from the mainstream. Not that the NSSR was an openly Jewish institution, like Yeshiva University for example, but elements of recent Jewish

history resonated within its walls quite clearly and affected a large proportion of its professors and graduate students.

Even more surprising to me was the fact that at the NSSR, French literature and cultural artefacts ranked very high in intellectual life, and this may have facilitated my transition to Jewish cultural sensitivities. In class I could discuss Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, and Balzac with ease and found out that I was often the only student who had read these authors in the original text during my high school studies at Le Petit Séminaire du Québec. It made me a sort of cultural hero in a way that would have been impossible in Anglo-Canadian universities imbued with a more British academic tradition. While studying with Stanley Diamond at the NSSR, I also took classes in sociolinguistics under the guidance of Dale Fitzgerald, which I very much enjoyed, and which gave me a sense of what it was like to learn non-Western languages. At the end of 1977, I began a one-year fieldwork placement in the industrial town of Woonsocket, Rhode Island, where the working class had been largely French-Canadian, and a few months later came to the end of my student visa. Faced with the obligation to go back to Canada, I made the decision in the summer of 1978 to move to Montreal instead of heading back to Quebec City. It was a momentous decision, notably because that was the year that the *Charte de la langue française* came into effect following the election two years earlier of a government led by René Lévesque. This new legislation would be the third most significant turn of events to influence my career. It most importantly brought the children of immigrants into the Francophone school system for the first time in great numbers, catapulting cultural and religious diversity to the centre stage of Quebec's political life. The situation was so novel in the early eighties that specialists in the field of immigration and integration studies were suddenly in great demand in French language school commissions. A vast new domain of research was opening up that had hitherto been largely neglected or plainly ignored by Québécois intellectuals and educators.

It must be said that Montreal was almost totally foreign to me when I settled in the city in 1978, including the very Francophone neighbourhoods to the east of boulevard Saint-Laurent: the universal boundary between the two linguistically dominant communities. I had no preconceived notions as I was acquainting myself with the cultural subtleties of the métropole, belonged to no specific group, and saw much through the lens of an anthropologically motivated participant observer. It was during these first few months in the city that I realized quite clearly that the Jewish population of Montreal, being neither Catholic nor Protestant, was the key to understanding the historical and political situation of minorities in Quebec. This was a turning point for me, and the rapidly evolving situation on the eve of the 1980 sovereignty-association referendum seemed to prove it. That year, I was hired by the Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture (IQRC), a public think tank headed by the sociologist Fernand Dumont. Among the IQRC's goals, in the wake of

Bill 101, was the need on the part of Francophones to better understand the specific realities of various immigrant communities living in Montreal and to monitor their reaction to the government's francisation plans. In this respect, the Jewish population in the city loomed very large. East European Jews had been, until the influx of newcomers from Italy in the post-war period, the largest group of new citizens in the city, had achieved a certain degree of economic prosperity over the twentieth century, and had forged the most extensive internal communal structures among all other immigrant communities in the city. They had also been traditionally isolated from the Francophone majority as a result of the latter's latent hostility and had developed links mostly with Protestant Anglophone institutions. Furthermore, efforts were then being made by a new generation of Jewish leaders to come to terms with the Quiet Revolution, with the new political options offered to Quebec voters by the sovereigntists and the general policy of francization, all this within the principles clearly defined in the 1975 Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms.

In 1980, I began to do field work among recent immigrant communities and to expand knowledge on the subject among French speakers. At that time, there was very little available on Jewish history in Quebec and on the main points of reference of its then-current political leadership. Francophones had simply not fully measured the demographic, cultural, and socio-economic importance of the Jewish population in the Montreal region and significant studies on that subject were almost non-existent in the French language. I soon encountered the wealth of Jewish archives available in Montreal, preserved by the community itself, and in multiple languages dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century. For decades the Jewish Public Library (JPL), the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC), and a large number of cultural associations and trade unions had collected documents, reports, and cultural artefacts, not to mention the documentation held by Anglo-Protestant and Franco-Catholic institutions, which came into regular contact with immigrant populations. It was at that point that I met David Rome, the archivist of the CJC, who generously introduced me to these historical treasures. Simultaneously, I made my first forays into the JPL, a cultural institution founded by East Europeans in 1914 for the purposes of self-education. There was a Montreal Jewish history of great richness, only waiting to be fleshed out in more detail and presented to a broader French-speaking public. The first conduit, I felt, for this long-term program would be the IQRC and in 1984 there appeared *Juifs et réalités juives au Québec* and in 1988 *Le rendez-vous manqué: les Juifs de Montréal face au Québec de l'entre-deux-guerres*. Meanwhile, I realized that Canadian Jewish History was a field that required multilingual skills, and my anthropological reflexes polished during my NSSR years convinced me that learning Yiddish was essential. In the fall of 1984, I enrolled in a beginner's class at McGill University offered by Leib Tencer, himself a survivor of the Holocaust and an outstanding pedagogue. It was another turning point in my quest for a significant reinterpretation of Montreal history. After a while, I became fluent enough to reverse the flow of information and



could now read in their own language the perceptions offered by Yiddish-speaking immigrants on their host society, and particularly on French Canada.

When my relationship with the IQRC soured, I sought and obtained a postdoctoral position at McGill University's Department of Jewish Studies to deepen my understanding of Montreal Jewish history. This is where, in 1989, I gave my first class in Canadian Jewish history, to a largely Anglophone and Jewish audience, and began to measure the gaps in perception between the world that I was coming from as a Québécois scholar and the political ideas that circulated more broadly within the Montreal Jewish cultural milieu on Quebec society. Quite boldly, I had submitted a research proposal to SSHRC to begin translating some of the works of Montreal Yiddish poet Jacob-Isaac Segal (1896-1954), probably the foremost writer of his immigrant generation. Even though I still had a shaky knowledge of the language and could count on few true Yiddishists to guide me along, it was from the start a very moving experience. I chose to concentrate my efforts on a poetry book called *Lirik*, published in 1930 in Montreal. Line by line, sentence by sentence, Segal's poetic images slowly began to appear in literary French, including poems about Montreal and the Jewish neighbourhood situated at the foot of Mont Royal. It was a revelation for me that there actually existed, for some time, in the city three great literary and cultural traditions. In 1992, my modest attempts at deciphering a Jewish immigrant language appeared at the highly respected Éditions du Noroît under the title *Poèmes yiddish / Yidishe Lider*. The book was a collection of sixty poems, each of which had the original version and the French translation side by side. I was pleased that the aesthetic and cultural achievements of the East European immigrants of Montreal were now crossing the French linguistic divide for the first time, couched in the highly poetic language of Segal.

I reached the end of my post-doctoral position and realized that this was as far as I could go at McGill University. I opted to move into Quebec's civil service, in the domain of education and immigration, suspending for a time my research efforts into Canadian Jewish history. If I could no longer spend long periods of time in archives and libraries, there remained inside me the desire to put to good use my recently acquired knowledge of Yiddish and to continue my translation efforts. My assumption was that if I could go beyond the secondary sources most commonly used, and begin to decipher Yiddish language memoirs and community documents, there would probably emerge a very different narrative of the Montreal and Canadian Jewish historical experience. I was especially attracted to the decades that ranged from the beginning of the great migration from the Russian Empire to the end of the thirties, a period in which the vast majority of Jews in the country communicated among themselves in Yiddish and produced significant descriptions of their experiences in that language. Furthermore, I was now convinced that one could learn a language, even as foreign to Francophones as Yiddish, strictly by translating long

passages and absorbing its inner logic. I started with the most celebrated of Montreal immigrant memoirs, Israel Medres's [Medresh] *Montreal fun nekhten* [*Montreal of Yesterday*], which had originally appeared in 1947 in book form. In his collection of short chapters initially published in the Montreal Yiddish daily, *Der Keneder Odler*, the author described in a humorous vein the main features of the immigrant community at the time of the First World War and its perceptions of Canada. It was, I soon discovered, a compelling, frank, and accurate ethnography of Jewish Montreal, written by a seasoned journalist, shielded from censorship or attack by the fact that he was publishing in a non-official language. Nothing of the sort had become available to contemporary historians of Canadian Jewry before, and certainly not to Francophones. Medres's recollections went back to a time when large number of Jews were making their way into Montreal and transposing to the city a worldview intrinsic to the late nineteenth century *shtetlech* of the Russian Pale of Settlement.

When it appeared in 1997, at les Éditions du Septentrion, a publisher specializing in Quebec's Francophone history, *Le Montréal juif d'autrefois* was the first Canadian Yiddish language book fully translated into French. By then, I had realized the potential of such narratives to shed new light on Canadian Jewish history.<sup>1</sup> Through these Yiddish language books, one could hear the voices of the immigrants, encounter their aspirations as new Canadians and read precise descriptions of the institutions that they were creating at specific points in time. It was as if the cultural and ideological assumptions of the newcomers, in all their complexity, were suddenly becoming accessible through the language that they had brought with them from Europe. Shortly after, I took on Simon Belkin's 1956 history of the left Poale-Zion movement in Canada in the early part of the twentieth century, which appeared in 1999 under the title *Le mouvement ouvrier juif au Canada, 1904-1920*, by far the most documented of such studies published in Yiddish in Montreal. It included valuable information on the city's early Zionist organizations, on the funding of the first Yiddish language afternoon schools just before the First World War, and on the tailors' unions as they were beginning to appear around 1910. Being himself an intellectual of great ability, Belkin offered in his study a thorough documentation and serious reflection on all the key political issues and organizational problems confronted by early twentieth-century Canadian Jewish immigrants, always written from the point of reference of the East European newcomers. Nothing quite like this was available in English language interpretations of Canadian Jewish history based on secondary sources. These "discoveries" encouraged me to pursue the translation of other foundational documents, notably the autobiography of Hirsch Wolofsky, the founder in 1907 of Montreal's Yiddish daily, the *Keneder Odler*, which appeared in 1999 in French under the title: *Mayn lebens rayze; un demi-siècle de vie yiddish à Montréal*. I also translated in 2005 the biographical dictionary of Haim-Leib Fuks, entitled in French *Cent ans de littérature yiddish et hébraïque au Canada*, which describes the lives and works of 425 Canadian Yiddish writers, and in 2006 the literary memoirs of left-leaning Montreal Yiddish

poet Sholem Shtern, *Nostalgie et tristesse*. Finally, I studied the recollections of Hershl Novak, one of the founders in 1913 of the Peretz shule in Montreal, published in 2009 as *La première école yiddish de Montréal, 1911–1914*.

In 2004, I was recruited by the University of Ottawa to become the director of the Institute for Canadian Studies and saw this first academic appointment in my career as an occasion to pioneer a broader reinterpretation of Canadian and Montreal Jewish history. In 2008, I obtained a Killam grant to write a full literary biography of the Montreal Yiddish poet that I had been reading since the early 1990s. It appeared in 2012 under the title *Jacob-Isaac Segal, un poète yiddish de Montréal*, supplemented with translations of dozens of his poems and a detailed description of his career.<sup>2</sup> This paved the way a few years later for a new interpretation of Montreal's Jewish history, published in 2017 by les Éditions du Boréal as *Histoire des Juifs du Québec*.<sup>3</sup> This time, the narrative was supported by three solid pillars: a good understanding of the forces at play during the immigration era, when Yiddish was the *lingua franca* of the East European community in Canada; a solid conception of French Canadian society and Francophone Montreal into which Jews were being partially integrated; as well as a thorough consultation of the classic English language sources pertaining to demography, sociology, and economic mobility. The decision to engage in this task was not entirely mine. In fact, I was approached in 2014 by Paul-André Linteau, the renowned Quebec historian, who wanted to incorporate such a study of four centuries of Montreal Jewish history into Boréal's catalogue for the fall of 2017. Left to my own devices, I might well have shirked from a task that appeared formidable and had never before been attempted in French. As it turned out, *Histoire des Juifs du Québec* received a great deal of media attention. Its publication also coincided with a rise of interest on the part of Francophone historians in the historical roots of the cultural diversity now present within their own society, a trend that is ever-growing in the present context.

The complexity of Jewish history in Canada is such, of course, that no single historian can claim to hold a monopoly on the subject. Quite the contrary, discussion and debate, if presented reasonably, will enlarge the scope of our knowledge and deepen our understanding, while canonical pronouncement rather tends to obscure the field. Not having had the benefit of a Jewish education myself, I am well aware that my perspective is definitely an "inclusionist" one where the scholar moves from the mainstream of Canadian history, both in its English and French components, in the direction of what is sometimes perceived as its more marginal Jewish elements. Engaging the subject from a different angle, where Jewish culture and tradition are the central paradigm, and Canadianness as an outside force exerts irresistible pressure, is equally justified. Those espousing the thesis of centrifugal inertia in Canadian Jewish history, like myself, whether consciously or not, may of course come into "conflict" with those who favour a particularist hypothesis and seek to illustrate the unique

characteristics of Canadian Jewry. I do feel strongly that the two paths can remain separate and still cross at certain intersections in the historical narrative, producing an interesting exchange of points of view. As it is, historians who belong to the *goy-ische* realm have at least learned in the last few years that we cannot construct a sound and reasonable history of Montreal / Quebec society without factoring in a strong Jewish component, itself the product of very diverse influences in the wider area of European and Middle Eastern Jewish history. That is certainly as good a basis for discussion between the two schools of Canadian Jewish history as will ever be, and an extraordinary advance from earlier periods when no avenues for dialogue and exchange existed.

**1**

Translated into English by Vivian Felsen as *Montreal of Yesterday: Jewish Life in Montreal, 1900-1920* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 2000).

**2**

It appeared in an English translation by Vivian Felsen, under the title *Jacob Isaac Segal: A Montreal Yiddish Poet and His Milieu* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2017).

**3**

It appeared in an English translation by Judith Weisz Woodsworth, under the title *History of the Jews of Quebec* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2021).