

Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Annalee Greenberg and Daniel Stone, eds., *Jewish Life & Times, vol. 10* (The Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, 2024), 184pp.

Jerrold Landau, *The Interconnected Jewish Families of Ottawa, Canada* (JewishGen, Inc., 2023), 268pp.

Rouyn–Noranda Former Residents, *The Jewish Community of Rouyn–Noranda: The Life and History of a Small Jewish Community in Northern Quebec* (Rouyn–Noranda Jewish Community, 2023), 254pp.

Historians and sociologists have rightly devoted considerable attention to the key factors demarcating “Jewish community.” Varied approaches include analyzing the interplay of individuals, geography of space, and institutional formation and relating the resulting analysis to communal perceptions of “success.” While these studies of communal life in Winnipeg, Ottawa, and Noranda differ in their foci and methodologies, they offer insights into the relationship between communal size, Jewish identity, and the attainment of a sense of Jewish community, which will be discussed in the first part of this review. The second part of this review will ask how these studies and others help us understand everyday life in smaller Jewish communities in Canada.

Jerrold Landau’s work on the genealogy of one hundred Ottawa Jewish families with over 950 associated surnames began as a family genealogy project in 2010. It took over a decade to transform a computer-based family tree into this extensive work, underscoring the importance of Jewish genealogy in documenting the pivotal role familial association plays in building community.

Landau uncovered a copious trove of photographs depicting life cycle events and, importantly, various venues that hosted them. His meticulous research allowed him to craft captions identifying a significant number of communal leaders and key events.

Genealogists will welcome the index to family names, while historians can mine these to trace immigration patterns. In addition, though Landau deliberately narrowed his research to related Ottawans, much can be learned about major institutions, communal figures, and types of celebration—both familial and communal—that bound them together. Landau’s work provides an excellent template for future genealogical studies and creates a vital trove of data for scholars of Canadian Jewish life. It also underscores the importance of documenting everyday community life both for its own sake and as a basis for future scholarship.

While Landau's methodology precludes using personal narratives, the volume describing Rouyn-Noranda's Jews relies on them. This thoughtfully designed collection of first-person recollections offers a clear picture of everyday life deeply imbued with communal pride. The community, located seven hours northwest of Montreal, began as a mining town in 1925, built and administered by the eponymous mining company. In other words: a true "Yehupetzville." It grew rapidly in the mining boom, and its Jewish community soon numbered roughly thirty-five families, most of whom stayed until the early 1960s. The Jewish population was split between largely Francophone Rouyn and Anglophone Noranda.

This carefully edited volume conveys many aspects of communal life through the recollections of more than thirty contributors. The short recollections and historical pieces venture far beyond hagiography; while emphasizing the warmth of community, contributors do not shy away from describing the challenges of living so far from other centres of Jewish life, ethnic boundaries, and relations with the non-Jewish community. The book includes many interesting photographs and an article in Yiddish (with an English translation) from Montreal's *Canadian Jewish Eagle* (*Keneder Yidisher Odler*) describing the community in the early 1950s. The sense of pride that inspired this volume's publication decades later attests to the powerful bonds formed by their foundational residential experiences in this isolated but vibrant Jewish community.

Certainly, communal pride is not limited to small communities. Winnipeg Jewry has long been cognizant of its history and produced a significant body of literature describing its rich Jewish life. The Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada has maintained this heritage in volume X of its *Jewish Life and Times* collection of studies in Western Canadian Jewish History. This volume has been published after a fifteen-year hiatus in the series. Like its predecessors, it reflects the strength and breadth of Western Canadian Jewish historical research. This primarily Winnipeg-focused volume brings together studies on a wide range of themes. A number of articles are especially relevant to the themes of this review. An article on Winnipeg Beach explores the convergence of geographic and ethnic lines between Jewish and non-Jewish beach goers. Intra-ethnic residential patterns, communal welfare efforts centering on the Jewish orphanage, and coping with immigration are well documented. The role of Jews in the Winnipeg General Strike offers a portrait of Jewish political breadth and involvement in the larger society, with a special focus on A. A. Heaps's role and its effect on his subsequent career. Articles on the career of Abe Yanofsky, first Canadian chess grandmaster, and Jewish jazz bands not only shine light on previously unexplored areas but offer further data on interethnic relations in the arts. It is also worth noting that an entire section is devoted to Jewish soldiers in World War One and the formative years of Rabbi Zalman Schachter, founder of the Jewish Revival movement. Scholars of Western Canadian urban and ethnic his-

tory and lay readers alike will find something to think about as they peruse these pages. There is also a great deal of material that will facilitate communal comparison and contrast, sorely needed in Canadian Jewish historiography.

What do these studies add to our understanding of Jewish community building? Are small communities simply downsized versions of larger ones with less institutional complexity? Or does their small size permit more microscopic analysis of communal breadth, intra- and interethnic relations, the role of voluntary societies in forming Jewish identity, and how “Jewishness” is expressed, to name but a few issues?

Many of the pictures from Ottawa and a number of narratives about Rouyn-Noranda touch on the many roles that synagogues played in communal life. Indeed, their importance as places of worship was only a small facet of their essential nature in a small community. A perusal of the archival record of the Small Communities Committee of the Central Region of the Canadian Jewish Congress between 1933 and 1950 attests to the use of small town synagogues as social gathering spots for Jewish youth, meeting places for Young Judea, B’nai B’rith, Boy and Girl Scouts and Pioneer Women, play houses, and—I suspect not just in Rouyn-Noranda—a useful place to practice skills on the synagogue’s piano. This remained an enduring facet of small town Jewish life. I recall a visit to Sault Ste. Marie in 1998 when I needed a quorum of ten men to recite Kaddish, the prayer for the dead. A communal leader said that would be easy to arrange: “We’ll just schedule prayers before the Israel Bond meeting and that will guarantee that enough folks show up.” And they did. Small town Jews lacked the means to build multiple buildings dedicated to communal infrastructure; they effectively coped by using the synagogue as a “multiplex.”

But the central position of the synagogue did not remove the loneliness from small town life. Nor did it resolve the challenges of distance from relatives and friends in larger Jewish communities. These issues are attested to in the literature on small town Jewish life and in some of the Rouyn-Noranda recollections. The community’s close-knit relationships could not substitute for the family that lived in Montreal or Ottawa, and the challenges of braving road conditions and lengthy drives to remain connected. Because of their weak layer of ethnic organizations, small Jewish communities quickly faded when their populations suddenly decreased after World War Two. This is vividly captured in the translation of an article from the *Keneder Yidisher Odler* in the early 1950s reporting that kosher meat had to be imported from Toronto since the only ritual slaughterer had died, that B’nai B’rith had closed its chapter, and that there was no funding for a rabbi or even a Hebrew school teacher.

Of course, antisemitism was an ever-present factor. In Winnipeg, there was an informally demarcated “Jewish area” at the most popular beach, whereas in Rouyn-Noranda Jews did business with their Anglophone and Francophone neigh-

bours but did not socialize with them. Neither study discusses how Jewish students fared in small town schools, but anecdotal and written sources from similar—and larger—communities describe challenges many Jewish students faced, including ostracism and verbal or physical attacks. In small communities the social boundaries between Jews and their neighbours were even more clearly demarcated.

“Yehupetzvilles”—or small towns—have much to teach us about resilience and the adaptation of Jewish practice when religious modalities were unavailable or no longer relevant. We can clearly see a shift toward cultural Judaism as the years passed. Fraternal organizations such as Hadassah and B’nai B’rith served as vital identity magnets promoting Jewish identity, linking to the larger Jewish world beyond and providing social opportunities for those who saw Judaism as more than just a religion. Young Judea’s camps inspired Zionism among youth and widened social circles. The fact that donations per capita for the Jewish National Fund’s Blue Boxes often exceeded those of Jews in large urban centres underscored these wider forms of Jewish identity. Today, as forms of “being Jewish” have widened even further, we can certainly see the beginnings of this clearly traced in small communities, which consistently punched above their weight in building community and, most importantly, producing a generation of joiners who would carry on their lessons in larger urban settings.

The rise and fall of small communities certainly underscore the accuracy of ethnic institutional completeness as a predictor of communal longevity. Jews in small towns had to work much harder than their peers in larger urban settings to retain their identities and their demographic precariousness. Fewer options on Jewish affiliation in small communities served to limit growth and encourage conformity. Postwar ethnic barriers to Jewish social, educational, economic, and demographic integration into Canadian society slowly collapsed, prompting an exodus of young small town Jews to larger urban centres. In short, nostalgia over the “Yehupetzville” reflects an era of communal resilience that certainly inspired fond memories, but few Jews today would wish their Jewish identities to be siloed.

Jack Lipinsky