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DR. JOSEPH KAGE: INTERPRETER OF CANADA AND ITS JEWS

Dr. Joseph Kagedan/Kage (1912-1996), whose life and multi-faceted career have greatly influenced the development of the Canadian Jewish community, was surely “a man for all seasons” in his eighty-four years. It is certain that the confines of this brief evocation will not suffice to do justice to the man and to his decades-long career in social work and communal activism. That will have to await the person with the skill and the time to sift through his voluminous papers and writings housed in the Canadian Jewish Congress National Archives. For the moment, what I can offer you is a very brief and preliminary assessment of merely one aspect of his work. It will serve as a *ta’am*—a taste—of the riches there to be revealed. It may serve as well to situate him in the intellectual context in which he lived and laboured.

Dr. Kage, born in Russia (presently Belarus), lived and worked in the context of the Canadian Jewish community in the mid twentieth century. When he started his career, his was a community which boasted of eighteenth-century origins but which Kage perspicaciously characterized as a “young community,” one whose essential roots were barely more than a century old.¹

His was a community that was largely made up of fairly recent immigrant origins and which tended, certainly up to the Second World War, to be marginalized by an Anglo-Canadian establishment which all-too-often saw immigrants

from elsewhere than the British Isles and Northwestern Europe as an undesirable, unassimilable liability in the building of Canada, and by the French-Canadian élite as a threat in many respects.²

It was the sort of situation in which the Canadian academic establishment viewed Canada's Jews with not a little wariness, as guests at best and as interlopers at worst, and where Jews as such still had precious little presence on the faculties of Canadian universities. In such a situation, the writing of the history and sociology of the Canadian Jewish community and the preservation of its legacy devolved upon a small but dedicated band of Jewish activists, journalists and public servants working in such institutions as Canadian Jewish Congress and Montreal's Jewish Public Library. Their number included such names as Benjamin Sack, H.M. Caiserman, Louis Rosenberg and David Rome.³

To this group Joseph Kage's name must be added. These were men who knew instinctively that the very best and most effective communal defense was knowledge and that knowledge demanded scholarship.

Joseph Kage was just such a communal activist/scholar. Though he differed from the others mentioned above in that he ultimately received academic training in Canadian history, he did not have the luxury of standing away from the confusion and hullabaloo of the grave historical events of the twentieth century which affected his community. He was, like the others in the list, a Jewish communal worker. His writing was driven by his communal agenda and his communal agenda was driven by his position as interpreter.

From where I sit, Kage can be seen as an interpreter in three ways: He was an interpreter of Jews and Jewish ideals to Canadians at large; He was an interpreter of Jews and Jewish ideals to the Jews of Canada; He was an interpreter of Canada and its meaning to the Jews. Furthermore, he functioned in the sense of a *meturgeman*, a translator of scholarship into meaningful communal goals and action.

How did this intellectual orientation work in practice? One example is his advocacy of Jewish education. In several of his publications he presented a comprehensive scheme for the development of Jewish education in Montreal. Reading his ideas on Jewish education, one is struck by many things. First and foremost was his conviction that

a gaze into the future involves knowing not only where we are, but also what has happened to us along the way. Hence in analysing the present day situation of Jewish education in Montreal, there is need to fill in some historical data which have a bearing on our subject.⁴

There are many ideas and recommendations contained in these schemes. Some of them, like the creation of a Board of Jewish Education, have come to fruition. Others, like his advocacy of afternoon supplementary Hebrew schools, are products of his time. I would like to dwell a moment, however, on another idea of his which did not come to pass—the creation of a college of Jewish studies in Montreal.

The basis of his idea was the United Jewish Teachers' Seminary of Montreal, where he taught for many years. This institution, created by the merger of two separate seminaries—Yiddishist and Hebraist—was not unlike a number of "Hebrew Teachers' Colleges," founded in the 1910s and 1920s for the purpose of training teachers for Jewish schools. Such colleges of Jewish studies existed and still exist in a number of American cities such as Boston, Baltimore, Cleveland and Chicago. Kage's vision, however, was not for more of the same. Rather he foresaw a "Jewish College of the Liberal Arts," which would supplement the Jewish courses with normal university-level courses either in conjunction with other Montreal universities or on its own with its own Provincial charter. He had a basic reason for his suggestion. He saw that the basic problem of the existing Teachers' Seminary was "the unavailability of suitable student material" since most "suitable" students wanted a university-level environment.⁵

That his Jewish College project never came to fruition is a story for another time and has to do less with the merits of his idea than how the culture of universities has changed. Thus instead of having to bring university courses to students of Jewish studies, Jewish studies has been brought to Concordia, McGill, York, Toronto and scores of other major North American universities.⁶

What is important to understand here is that his natural role was both to be a problem solver and a visionary. This was so in other aspects of his work as well.

As a writer, Joseph Kage was also involved in furthering his communal aims. Having been instrumental in bringing Jewish immigrants to Canada, he was deeply engaged in educating them for their role as Canadian citizens. Much of his published work on Canadian history stems from the need he perceived to let new Canadians know what kind of country they had come to. Thus he spent considerable effort in popularizing Canada's geography and history. Especially interesting in this connection is a Yiddish pamphlet he published entitled *An Areinführ tzu der Kanader Geshikhte* ("An Introduction to Jewish History"). In this pamphlet, it took Kage only six pages to get from Leif Ericsson to the situation after the Second World War.⁷

These six pages are not evenly distributed, however. A sure sign of where his interest lay was that Confederation in 1867 is found on page five of the six. By far the most space is given to the colonial era, and most especially to the French regime, a period which he described as "*Eynem fun di kolirfule kapitlen in der kanader geshikhte.*"⁸

Indeed Kage, like others in the Jewish community including A.M. Klein⁹ and David Rome, was actively interested, indeed fascinated by the French Canadian community, its history and institutions. This was likely both the impetus for, as well as the result of, his decision to study for his doctorate at l'Université de Montréal.¹⁰

It is this fascination he tried to convey in his *Chapter*

One/Chapitre Premier.¹¹ In that book, he had several aims. First and foremost, he was attempting to promote the cause of Canadian bilingualism by offering the book in a bilingual format.¹² More importantly, he was attempting to portray French Canadians and their history in a favorable light to new Canadians being introduced to Canada through his textbooks, who might have received different attitudes toward French Canadians elsewhere. He thus goes out of his way to idealize the “habitant”¹³ and, understanding his target audience, made a point of portraying Pierre Lemoyne d’Iberville as “the Canadian Judas Maccabeus.”¹⁴

In all his writing in praise of French Canada, Kage always had an eye for the survival of ethnic differentiation in Canada. For him:

This quest for the maintaining of a considerable degree of ethnic identity is not an incidental phenomenon but a conscious policy exercised by various ethnic groups in Canada. Leadership in this direction is given by the French Canadian population which forms the qualitatively and quantitatively outstanding ethnic minority group in Canada. It is the strongest force in Canada which categorically refutes the argument that all ethnic groups in Canada should be blended into one Canadian culture with subsequent loss of identity.¹⁵

In other words, for Kage, the ultimate survival of Jews as a recognizable ethnicity in Canada was entwined with the fate of French Canada.

Finally, Kage’s message to the new Canadians who were his audience in the JIAS Evening Schools was that Canada was a nation of immigrants. The First Nations were described by him as “the first immigrants to Canada.”¹⁷

Kage further described French Canada as “a nation founded by ... courageous immigrants.”¹⁷

Ultimately, the country he was preparing his students to

enter was one in which differences were to be respected and fostered, not homogenized out of existence. It is an idea and an ideal well worth recalling in an era which perhaps wishes to forget this truth.

ENDNOTES

¹Joseph Kage, *With Faith and Thanksgiving: the Story of Two Hundred Years of Immigration and Immigrant Aid Effort in Canada (1760-1960)* (Montreal, 1962), p. 1.

²Cf. Jean-Pierre Beaud and Jean-Guy Prevost, "Immigration, Eugenics and Statistics: Measuring Racial Origins in Canada (1921-1941)," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 28, 2 (1996):1-24.

³Cf. Ira Robinson, "David Rome as an Historian of Canadian Jewry," *Canadian Jewish Studies/Etudes juives canadiennes* 3 (1995), pp. 1-10, and on Sack, see Richard Menkis, "Myth, Historiography and Group Relations: Jewish and non-Jewish Québécois on the Jews and New France," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 33,2 (1991): 25-29.

⁴Joseph Kage, "Jewish Education in Montreal: Its Early Beginnings, Development and Prospects," reprinted from the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle* (Montreal, n.d.). Cf *idem.*, "Let's Light the Lamp of Jewish Scholarship: Jewish Education in Montreal- the Need for Re-Appraisal" (n.p, n.d.).

⁵Kage, "Jewish Education," p. 10.

⁶Cf. Michael Brown, "The Canadian Context for Jewish Studies: An Introduction," and Richard Menkis, "A Threefold Transformation: Jewish Studies, Canadian Universities and the Canadian Jewish Community, 1950-1975," both in Michael Brown, ed. *A Guide to the Study of Jewish Civilization in Canadian Universities* (Jerusalem and Toronto, 1998).

⁷The pamphlet is undated but must have been published in the period 1945-1949 since the Second World War appears to be over and the pamphlet further speaks of *nine* provinces.

⁸"One of the most colourful chapters in Canadian history," *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁹Cf. Pierre Anctil, "A.M. Klein: du poète et de ses rapports avec le

Québec français,” *Tur Malka: Flâneries sur les cimes de l’histoire juive montréalaise* (Sillery, 1997), pp. 109-131.

¹⁰His son, Ian, remarks that “the fact that he chose to do his Ph.D. at the Université de Montréal was in itself a reaching out to a sister community in which he felt sufficiently welcome, the long and sordid history here of Church-inspired nationalistic anti-Semitism notwithstanding.” “Remembering My Father,” p. 3.

¹¹*Chapter One: Sketches of Canadian Life Under the French Regime/Chapitre Premier: esquisses de la vie canadienne sous le régime français* (Montreal, 1964) It was first published, in English only, by the Jewish Immigrant Aid Service of Canada under the title “The Dawn of Canadian History” (Montreal, 1955).

¹²Kage, *First Chapter*, p. iv.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹⁵*With Faith and Thanksgiving*.

¹⁶*Chapter One*, p. 40.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. iv.