

York University (Research Associate)

Medresh, Israël. *Le Montréal juif d'autrefois*. Traduction et présentation par Pierre Anctil. Sillery: Septentrion, 1997. 272p.

Wednesdays and Sundays between December 1, 1946 and June 25, 1947, journalist Israël Medresh published installments of *Montreal fun nekhtn* in Montreal's Yiddish-language daily, the *Keneder Odler*. In fifty-five short pieces subsequently published in book form, Medresh offered his readers a look back at the formative years of Montreal's Yiddish-speaking community. With *Le Montréal juif d'autrefois*, Pierre Anctil gives non-Yiddish speakers access to Medresh's journalism, by means of an original text that holds both historical interest and considerable charm. The translation, together with its new introductory essay, also afford Anctil an opportunity to pursue what Gerald Tulchinsky has described as his "remarkable effort to make Francophones aware of this [Yiddish linguistic and cultural] dimension of their province's past." (*Branching Out: The Transformation of the Canadian Jewish Community* [Toronto, 1998], p. 334.) The non-specialist reader is helped to understand the world Medresh writes about by the glossary Anctil has appended and by his succinct biographical footnotes, alphabetically indexed in the back of the book, for all of the literary and political figures referred to in the text.

The core of *Le Montréal juif d'autrefois* is Anctil's translation of *Montreal fun nekhtn*, including Jacob Isaac Segal's 1947 Preface to the Original Edition. The text consists of short pieces, each focusing on a different facet of the life of Montreal's "downtown" Yiddish-speaking community. Topics include organizations, such as the Baron de Hirsch Institute, the Sick Benefit Society and the Workmen's Circle; events, including the Depression, a school children's strike and a public attack on the Talmud; and a variety of other matters of interest to Medresh, including social class, Zionism, love and marriage,

work in the garment trade, real estate, and Canada. The fifty-five pieces are arranged in roughly chronological order, from “Le premier quartier juif” to “L’adieu au passé.” This arrangement highlights the passage of time and the sense of looking back on a vanished world, a sense that is heightened by a number of “asides,” in which Medresh comments on the pre-WWII community’s ignorance of the bleak realities that lay ahead,

C’était une période heureuse, quand personne ne savait ce que signifiait l’expression “guerre mondiale”, ni ce que pouvait être un “camp de concentration” ou une “chambre à gaz”. (p. 39)

But Medresh’s text is primarily marked neither by foreboding nor by nostalgia; rather, it is distinguished by a wealth of detail and by a distinctive point of view.

Montreal fun nekhtn brings us, above all, the empathetic descriptions and wry journalistic voice of Israël Medresh as he tells the story of his community. This is not the work of a historian, but it is social history. There are details from the material culture of the times, descriptions of the steamboat motifs on Rosh Hashanah cards, or of the blue serge suits on sale for \$6.50 on the Main, with styling that appeared elegantly “American” to the new immigrants. There are poignant moments, as in Medresh’s clear and touching description of the plight of married immigrants during the Depression, struggling to know what to write to their spouses back in the Old Country. Medresh also writes about the occupations of the Yiddish-speaking immigrants, their efforts to learn English and become acclimatized, their work in the garment trade, as small shopkeepers, tailors, newsboys, dockhands, construction workers and, for many women, as keepers of small boarding houses. He writes of their leisure, the delights of window-shopping on the Main, family picnics on St. Helen’s Island, afternoons in Dufferin Park. There are also artfully-drawn descriptions of the earnest political engagements of different sectors within the community.

The text of *Montreal fun nekhtn* is preceded by an intro-

ductory essay, in which Anctil gives a biographical sketch of Medresh and a critical appreciation of his contribution. There is also an overview of the background of Litvak culture in Eastern Europe from which Medresh and a majority of Montreal's Yiddish-speaking immigrants came, and a short account of the development of Yiddish itself. The essay also includes Anctil's answer to the question that inevitably arose for him in the course of his work with the Medresh text:

La traduction en français de *Montreal foun nekhtn* soulève par ailleurs au moins une autre question fondamentale: comment s'articula en cette période de pionniers le rapport des Juifs avec le Montréal francophone? (p. 25)

In answering this question, Pierre Anctil demonstrates the particular blend of scholarly care and affection that characterizes his contribution to intercultural life in Québec, a blend that owes much to the pioneering work of David Rome, to whom *Le Montréal juif d'autrefois* is dedicated. Despite the facts, clearly reflected in Medresh's text, that the new immigrants were eager to learn English, not French, and that official and institutional contact was almost non-existent, Anctil's analysis insists that the Yiddish-speaking Jews and the French Canadians who lived and worked alongside each other in the area around the Main had more in common than it might at first seem. Jewish peddlers fanned out from their home bases around the Main, carrying their goods into the Québec countryside around Montreal and beyond. Newly urbanizing Francophone workers looking for cheap goods met and depended upon Jewish shopkeepers seeking to make ends meet in their small businesses on the Main. Further, both the new immigrants and the newly modernizing French Canadians were undergoing processes of profound social change. In the course of change, on and around the Main, Francophone workers learned new practices from the highly politicized Jewish workers, practices that included unionization and the general strike. There are

other examples of how the two groups crossed paths. One such that Anttil brings forward with particular delight centers around the Monument National, inaugurated by the Société St.-Jean-Baptiste in 1893 to serve French Canadian nationalist ends. Circumstance gave this building a parallel community-building vocation in the Jewish community, as preferred venue for Yiddish Theatre and Vaudeville, as overflow hall for the High Holy Days and as the place in which the founding meeting of the Canadian Jewish Congress was held.

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Pollock, Zailig, Seymour Mayne, and Usher Caplan editors. *A.M. Klein: Selected Poems*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1997. 190pp.

Klein's selected poetry, edited by Pollock, Mayne and Caplan, is a superb gift to all interested in Canadian and Jewish Canadian literature. It is a selection readily accessible to all due to its multicultural nature and the editors' painstaking and illuminating annotation. It goes without saying that this volume is of importance in both Canadian and Jewish Canadian literature. The poems constitute a chronological selection from Pollock's edition of Klein's *Complete Poems*. The book is a miniature encapsulation of Klein, and is a fine addition to the many other contributions of the editors. The introduction provides a clear perspective on Klein and his poetry. The edition includes an index of titles and first lines.

Klein was a modernist, in tune with the traditions of both Jewish and English literature and lore. His scope is so broad and yet so specialized; Klein has the ability to fuse many images providing a sensibility of expression which may be uniquely Jewish in theme but relies heavily on the poetic expression of classic masters like Shakespeare or Coleridge. Although a Jew writing frequently on Jewish themes, he was a Canadian poet as well as an alienated modern poet, the roles in