

Chava Rosenfarb and the Jewish Public Library of Montreal

Written by Goldie Morgentaler

My mother, the Yiddish writer Chava Rosenfarb, once told the journalist, Elaine Kalman: "There was a good reason why Jews called Montreal 'the Jerusalem of North America'. . . Take the Jewish Public Library! It was the centre, the vital heart and nerve of Yiddish and Jewish life in North America, not just in Canada. And the great Yiddish writers from New York used to come to Montreal to speak at the library. I met them all, right here in Montreal."

The institution Chava was referring to, the Jewish Public Library, officially opened its doors on May 1, 1914 in a cold-water flat on St. Urbain Street. It started with a collection of 500 Yiddish and Hebrew books. But the collection quickly grew and by the end of its first year the library had 1500 books, half of which were in Yiddish. By 1929, circulation had reached 15,000. As it grew, the library rented larger and larger spaces at various locations in the Plateau section of Montreal, which was then the heart of the Jewish immigrant neighbourhood of the city. It called itself in Yiddish "Di folks biblyotek," that is, the peoples' library, open to all regardless of language, political ideology or degree of religious observance. As such the Library quickly established itself as the beating intellectual heart of Jewish Montreal.

In 1953, the Library opened its own three-story building at 4499 Esplanade Avenue, corner Mount Royal, where it stayed until 1967, when it followed the Jewish migration west first to Décarie Boulevard, then to Côte Ste Catherine Road. The building at 4499 Esplanade is the one I remember from my childhood. My parents were both Holocaust survivors from Lodz, Poland, who spent the five years after the end of the war in Belgium as stateless, non-persons whose identification cards were marked "Droit émigrer," must emigrate. My mother's sponsor in Canada was Harry Hershman, her Yiddish-language

Montreal publisher.

One of the first places my parents lived was a third-floor walk-up on Bernard Street, not far from Park Avenue, and within easy walking distance of the Library on Esplanade. Montreal would be the incubator of my mother's novels, as well as the setting of her short stories. The Library itself is the setting of her one and only ghost story. What stimulated her creativity was the rich intellectual atmosphere that she encountered among the Jewish population in the city. Here is her description of the kind of literary ferment that greeted her on her arrival in Montreal.

"Upon my arrival in Montreal in 1950, I found a bustling Yiddish social life. Without having to wait until I learned English properly, I could read the *Keneder Adler*, the Montreal Yiddish newspaper every day, and so keep up-to-date with world and Canadian news events. Harry Hershman, my Montreal publisher, supplied me with Yiddish periodicals, which kept me informed about Yiddish cultural life both here and abroad. He took me to the Folk University at the Jewish Public Library, which was the centre of Yiddish cultural life in the city. I visited the Folk Shule at Waverly and Fairmont, and the Peretz Shule on Duluth, and I became a student at the Yiddish Teacher's Seminary.

I counted more than forty Yiddish writers living in Canada in the years just after my arrival, writers of international reputation and recognized all over the Yiddish-speaking world, as well as more marginal writers, so-called graphomanes. There was an active Yiddish writers' union in Montreal, which I was invited to join. There were constant public lectures on literary topics. There were visits by the great Yiddish writers from abroad. Here I met Avrom Reisen, H. Leivik, Itsik Manger, Israel Joshua Singer and his brother, Bashevis. They came to give public lectures and were feted at private parties. They joined us for promenades on Mount Royal and came along on literary excursions to the Yiddish literary chalet in Sainte-

Agathe in the Laurentians.

I do not have space to enumerate the many Yiddish-language journalists, historians, pedagogues, essayists who lived in Montreal in the early nineteen-fifties, nor all those who wrote belles lettres, who were novelists or poets.

For the next 50 years, so long as she remained in Montreal, the Jewish Public Library remained my mother's spiritual home, where she was often invited to speak, and where she absorbed the intellectual atmosphere that nourished her own writing.