

Mount Royal, the Yiddish park

Written by Sherry Simon

With a bit of imagination, you might, as you lift your eyes from the corner of Rachel and Parc, catch a glimpse of the Tower of Babel. The mountain as it rises from Jeanne-Mance Park has some resemblance to the celebrated painting by Breughel, beginning with the winding paths that gently ascend towards the summit and disappear into low hanging clouds. But what makes me think of the Tower of Babel as I look at the mountain has to do with languages. Like Breughel's tower, the mountain calls to mind stories of diversity, of people and languages from here and elsewhere. When I climb the winding path to the summit, winter and summer, I hear voices around me, bits of conversation in French and English, Spanish, Brazilian, Italian, Russian, Hindi, Tamil. Immigrants have always been attracted to the mountain, and their stories are part of its rich imaginative history.

Because Mount Royal is that precious and complex thing: a natural milieu which is also deeply cultural. It is saturated with memories and stories of many Montreal communities. Immigrants arriving in a new place will take in their surroundings through the prism of the past. Writers, whose work it is to tell stories shaped by their imagination, will apply to the new place words and images that come from elsewhere.

The Yiddish-language writers of Montreal were no exception. Bringing with them a language and a heritage shaped in the Jewish world of Eastern Europe, they created sometimes surprising amalgams of language and landscape in their new home.

The cross, for instance. Hardly a positive symbol for the Jewish populations who had fled the pogroms of Eastern Europe which often ignited by trumped up religious disputes, the mountain-top cross could well

have been an unwelcome feature of their new city. Yet, in the writings of several Yiddish-language poets of the 30s, 40s and 50s, the mountain **and its cross** are an object of affection. The cross has been debarbed, no longer a weapon brandished, more like a bedside lamp.

This might have had to do with the fact that the cross had become a familiar feature of the new world. The Yiddish-speaking population lived very near the mountain, and observed it daily. From the 1880s when the migration began until the 1950s, when the Jewish population began to move to newer and more spacious neighbourhoods, the Yiddish-language population lived along the north-south corridor of Saint Lawrence Boulevard. The first years were close to the port, but with increased prosperity the community moved up to the sector between Pine Avenue and Laurier street. Here they were close to the mountain. Major institutions like the Davis YMHA and the Jewish Public Library were within one block of the mountain, and many Yiddish speakers lived in the elegant flats on Esplanade directly giving onto Mount Royal Park. Mount Royal was known as Tur Malka from Aramaic (a Talmudic reference to a mountain near Jerusalem, or Kinigsberg, in Yiddish. Four writers of Yiddish Montreal had especially vivid ties with the mountain: JI Segal, AM Klein, Chava Rosenfarb and Régine Robin.

The Yiddish writer whose name is most often associated with the mountain is the poet J.I. Segal (1896-1954) who has already been mentioned in these podcasts. He represents the very figure of the immigrant poet—a tailor working in a factory by day, a dedicated scribbler at night. He might well have been one of the habitués of the café Jack Beder painted in 1935. The painting was entitled ‘And by night they resume their existences’, referring to those legions of men and women who worked at mundane jobs all day only to devote their evenings to politics, ideas and art. Both Beder and Segal paint their city in affectionate colours, for Beder salmon-red bricks and glistening rainy streets, for Segal the dreamy evocations of small streets filled with the music of piety.

In his many poems written about Montreal we observe the poet as he wanders the streets, listening to the music drifting from the streets, church bells and Jewish chants,

capturing 'a smile in the window', children playing in the streets, but also the proud silhouette of the mountain, resplendent in the bright light of the snow, a throne built by the winter. And the cross, throwing its light for great distances 'shines all night, who knows, for eternity?' (p.138) In this poem, the cross stands in for the 'immensity' which at once inhabits and escapes him.

The mountain, along with the streets and markets of the immigrant neighbourhoods and the bustling activity of the port, was a favourite subject of Yiddish poetry about Montreal. The mountain has sometimes wildly different connotations—a sign of the divine presence or the holy city of Jerusalem, but also the wilderness of the Canadian landscape: solemn, silent, untameable. Other poets, such as Yudika, Noah-Isaac Gotlib, or Sholem Shtern, evoked these many aspects of the mountain, but none as persistently and as convincingly as Segal.

A.M. Klein, though technically not a Yiddish-language poet, belonged to the world of Montreal Yiddishkeit—through his upbringing and through his ongoing connections with the language and the literary milieu. Klein was an English-language writer, familiar with Chaucer, Shakespeare and James Joyce. All the same, Yiddish, the language of his childhood, continued to nourish his creativity throughout his life.

Klein was more of a Montrealer than Segal. He was entirely at home here, having grown up in the city and having explored it extensively. He had a stronger sense of his voice as a public figure. In his *Rocking Chair* poems, a volume in which he engaged with the Catholic francophone community, he writes of convents, hospitals, or St. Josephs Oratory as places that are alien to him, representing a fiercely parochial

religious identity. But the mountain is a strange or alien site, rather a familiar companion, written into an affectionate narrative of daily life.

Klein didn't just look up at the mountain, as Segal seems to have done, he actually spent time on its paths, had his favourite lookouts, his favourite bench on what he calls 'the second terrace', his favourite wild flowers. Klein's best-known poem, 'The Mountain' starts with the cross 'bleeding into the fifty miles of night its light' and becomes a pastorate of youthful capers and first love. The Georges-Etienne Cartier monument, known as 'Winged Victory' is mentioned as the target in a game Klein and his friend Lefty play, throwing gravel and trying to hit the female sculptures in the breasts.

Chava Rosenfarb, who you have already heard about from her daughter, Goldie Morgentaler, arrived in Montreal only after the war and after several years in a Displaced Persons camp in Europe. And so, like Segal, she only came to know the city as an adult. Much of Rosenfarb's writing take place in Europe, in the past. But several of her short stories take place in Montreal. One of these stories, Edgia's Revenge, is a difficult tale of two Holocaust survivors meeting in Montreal and reliving some of the anguished emotions of the camps—relations of subjection, guilt, shame, revenge. At the start of the story, Edgia and her husband Lolek are living on Esplanade, in the shadow of the mountain. The cross appears as a symbol of suffering. One of the characters remarks on the beauty of the shining cross, but adds that it is missing the body of Jesus, the burden that the cross itself bears. Drawing a link across unbridgeable traditions, especially in the context of the Holocaust, Rosenfarb's character responds: 'Sometimes I believe that I am such a cross and that I am carrying Jesus on my back'. Rosenfarb uses the Christian symbol of suffering to enhance the emotional charge of her difficult tale.

Let's give the last word to Régine Robin, a French-language Montreal writer recently deceased, steeped in Yiddishkeit, author of a distinguished oeuvre of novels, stories, essays, and historical scholarship as well

as the now classic *L'Amour du Yiddish* in 1984 and whose relationship to time-honoured symbols is never pious or conventional. Interviewed for a documentary on the mountain, she notes that the most important lesson of the mountain is given by its cemeteries. This the place where the Fourth Commandment is obeyed, the command to honour your father and mother, to ensure the transmission of memory across generations. Robin recalls that the mountain has four cemeteries, more than 1 million graves. This makes for a huge weight, to which is added the memories transmitted by the cross itself. But for Robin, as for most observers today, the memory transmitted by the cross has much more to do with history rather than with religion.

In her introduction to *L'amour du Yiddish*, Robin says: I write from one place only, the 'in-between'. Would this be a fitting thought with which to conclude this promenade on the mountain? The mountain itself lives in an in-between of languages and stories—through words as numerous and inviting as its pathways.