

# Yaacov Zipper's Journals

Written by Norman Ravvin

Even in translation Yaacov Zipper's voice is elegiac; it sounds an end time. Zipper was raised in Tishevit, a sizable town in eastern Poland. He came to Montreal in 1925, and by 1928 had taken the role of Principal at the Peretz Shule, a leading Yiddish day school that was located on Cadieux before it moved to a renovated factory building on Duluth Avenue East in 1942. It would not be long after this move to the heart of the Jewish neighbourhood that Zipper's writerly and educational goals were swamped by change and the challenges it brings.

Zipper kept a detailed, almost novelistic diary between 1950 and 1982. It is a Yiddish artifact of its time, which was translated for English-language readers by Zipper's daughter, Ode Garfinkle and Concordia University professor Mesh Butovsky. It opens with the diarist's account of a meeting of community organizers, who offer scant support for the Peretz Shule's budget challenges. "The neighbourhood is exhausted," Zipper records his comrades telling him in May, 1951, and the goal of maintaining the school in its present state is a fool's errand (18).

Absence of ready support was compounded by the enrollment, between 1946 and 1954, of as many as 700 child Holocaust survivors, and the children of survivors, who sought Yiddish education but were hard-pressed to pay for it (36).

The signal characteristic of the postwar decade was the neighbourhood's unpeopling, so that the area around Duluth underwent, in Zipper's view, an intense cultural crisis. This is a repeated theme in his diary. In June, 1954, he writes:

In the last three years I've had the feeling that we are slowly approaching a catastrophe . . . . Bit by bit the neighbourhood surrounding the school is emptied

of long-time residents and is filling up with new immigrants, harshly battered and deeply embittered . (35)

The number of children at the school increased, but the “the number of activists” willing to support it was diminished.

This pattern resulted in the school’s departure from Duluth in favour of the new western suburbs. On June 21, 1959, the last graduation day was held in the old building, in a neighbourhood where, Zipper says, “we have become strangers” while the “surroundings” were increasingly “empty of Jews” (78).

Zipper acknowledges the postwar influx of Eastern European orthodox Jews, some of them Chasidim, who will not replenish the secular Yiddishists’ ideals of the Peretz Shule, regardless of their shared Yiddish vernacular. In June of 1954 he marvels in his diary at feeling, in Montreal, as if he is back in Tishevit, as he watches the “arrival of Hungarian Jews in their full traditional costume with their fur-trimmed hats and long black coats” (33).

In later years, on return visits to the old streets around Duluth, Zipper completes his elegy to his Montreal lost to memory and bemoans the absence of a written record of what is gone. On a “wonderful spring day” in 1967, just as Expo was opening at the city’s port, Zipper makes a stop “at the tailor’s in the old neighbourhood around Mount Royal” where he

had the urge to take a walk through the neighbourhood, the dwellings of your youth, our beginnings here, which had resounded with the ebb and flow of Jewish life. The Yiddish language was vibrant, and the hustle and bustle of Jewish labour, trade, old synagogues, schools, clubs, and social halls sprouted in every corner. The appearance of the district has hardly changed. The same cracked sidewalks, the curved outdoor staircases of the dark, shabby houses . . . . Very few Jewish names on the stores selling junk merchandise or on the small factories. And on St Lawrence even fewer Jewish faces – on the side streets I didn’t meet a

single Jewish face. The former synagogues are, for the most part, parking lots or apartment houses. The cornerstones that were in Yiddish . . . now have the Jewish letters effaced or painted over . . . . That's the situation at the Peretz Shule . . . (139).

It is the springtime of Montreal's modern era, a much-touted triumph of cultural nationalism. But Zipper is oppressed by cultural eclipse marked by the disappearance of the old "district" that was once called the "Jewish Quarter." In Yaacov Zipper's diary we find a melancholy guide to the city's Yiddish-speaking past.