

## THE HISTORY OF THE MONTREAL JEWISH PUBLIC LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES

by

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The history of the Montreal Jewish Public Library falls into two parts. The first has to do with the several attempts to found the Library, the final successful achievement of this goal and the Library's subsequent history. The second concerns the gradual, almost accidental, accumulation of archives which necessitated the Library Board's recent decision to inaugurate an archives program. This program, professionally planned and administered, will permit the inclusion of the Library's archives within an overall structure of a future Jewish Community Archives Program.

The Jewish Public Library officially opened its doors on March 3, 1912.<sup>1</sup> This occasion represented a double achievement; it was the final, successful effort to found such an institution and the visible embodiment of a long-cherished tradition which the Library's founders had brought with them from eastern Europe.

During the nineteenth century, the emancipation of the Jews in Central Europe sparked an intellectual ferment which moved slowly eastward, and the Folk Bibliothek and the Folk Universitaet were two of its manifestations.<sup>2</sup> The libraries, which were similar to the Mechanics' Institutes of England and America,<sup>3</sup> served the community in many ways, for they provided not only library services but adult education programmes as well.

The years 1871 to 1911 were a peak period of Jewish immigration to Canada and the United States;<sup>4</sup> a direct result of the persecutions and pogroms of Russia, Poland and the Balkan countries.<sup>5</sup> These eastern European Jews, warmly emotional and Yiddish speaking, belonged to the Ashkenazi or eastern branch of Jewry; their culture was a folk culture based on a closely-knit community.

The earliest Jewish settlers, who had arrived in Quebec during the 1760's, followed the Sephardic tradition.<sup>6</sup> This tradition, emanating from Spain and Portugal, had moved via Holland and England to North America and differed markedly from the Ashkenazic custom.<sup>7</sup> The Sephardic Jews spoke the language of the country in which they lived and took an active part in the general life of their communities.<sup>8</sup> Their synagogue services and sacred music, which followed the pattern set in pre-Inquisition Spain, were more formal as was their mode of behaviour. Thus, when the eastern European Jews immigrated to Canada at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, they found none of the traditions and institutions familiar to them. In many cases, the men came to Canada long before their families, working to save the family passage money from their meagre earnings as Hebrew teachers, pedlars, or workers in the clothing trade. These men, living in constricted economic circumstances, felt keenly the lack of mental stimulation which the Folk Library had provided. Eventually, the Jewish Public Library was to provide such an institution for this Yiddish-speaking population.

As early as 1888, a Hebrew library was established in Montreal. This

venture was short-lived, but was followed by the successful founding, in 1900, of two small libraries; one by the Zionist Organization, the other by the Baron de Hirsch Institute. Both libraries were only open during the day and did not meet the needs of the working population.

In 1903, a small discussion and reading circle was formed by a number of young men,<sup>9</sup> members of the Dorshai Zion Group.<sup>10</sup> Because of cramped quarters, they brought reading material from their homes to each meeting, carrying the books and pamphlets back again at the end of the evening. One youth later donated twelve dollars, his week's salary, to purchase a book-case. Subsequently, this group moved to larger quarters, but dissolved several years later and the books were stored in the home of a former member.

The Paole Zion Organization<sup>11</sup> also had established a library in 1903 which, within a few years, had outgrown its premises. In 1912, this Organization called a convention of the Jewish Labour Associations,<sup>12</sup> many of which were the Canadian offshoots of European organizations and, therefore, concerned not only with the working conditions of their members but with adult education as well. It was this common interest that prompted the convention's decision to establish a Jewish Public Library "for the advancement of Jewish learning and of Yiddish literature in particular".<sup>13</sup>

Thus the combined libraries of the Paole Zion and Dorshai Zion Groups formed the nucleus of the Library, to which later was added the library of the Baron de Hirsch Institute.<sup>14</sup> On March 3, 1912, the Library first opened its doors, its first location, a rented store. It was soon apparent, however, that the subscriptions of the labour organizations were insufficient to support it, and the Library was closed temporarily until firmer financial foundations could be laid.

In May, 1914, the Library re-opened. At this time, the total number of volumes amounted to four hundred forty-nine.<sup>15</sup> During the next twelve months, a Book Drive garnered an additional three hundred books which, with other donations and purchases, raised the number of volumes to fifteen hundred forty. The majority of these books were written in Yiddish, the remainder in English, French, Russian and Hebrew. Books in Yiddish predominated until the mid-1930's. Since then, the percentage has declined to its present proportion of approximately one third of the Library's content. In 1914, despite its limited funds, the Library made its first purchase of old and rare Hebrew books, an expression of its determination to encompass all aspects of Jewish culture.

In 1914, too, the Library inaugurated a program of lectures and literary events, at which both English and Yiddish-speaking Jewish scholars, authors and poets were the lecturers. The majority of these programs were in Yiddish and the guests included B. J. Sack, author of "The History of the Jews in Canada", Maurice Samuel and Irving Layton. This program continued, an integral part of the Library's policy, and today the many autographed works of these lecturers, together with Library purchases, form the Library's renowned collection of Yiddish material. Few such significant collections are extant today because of the almost total destruction of Yiddish writings in Nazi Europe.

The importance of Yiddish letters to the Library is illustrated in a letter dated 1919 from the Yiddish poet, Morris Rosenfeld, who was several times a guest speaker at the Library. "I have received...your Fourth and

Fifth Annual Report...it has truly surprised me. If you think the immigrant Jews of New York who speak and read Yiddish possess anything in the nature of your folk's bibliothek, you are in error, for they do not". This quotation illustrates the position already achieved by the Jewish Public Library as a supporter of Yiddish literature, a position still maintained.

Although uncertain finances were always a problem, the Library carried on successfully until 1923. In that year, the Library was faced once again with what appeared to be an insurmountable financial crisis. The holder of the mortgage on the recently purchased Library building had entered a foreclosure notice; there was no money to pay coal or electricity bills; once more the Library stood in imminent danger of being forced to close. At the last moment, the director and two of the Library's supporters managed to enlist the aid of several business men - and the Library was able to continue.

The Library's guiding principle has been to participate fully in any community cause. Between the years 1915 - 1945, the Jewish Public Library participated in Zionist Assembly; sent delegates to the meetings from which evolved the Canadian Jewish Congress; cooperated with the Jewish Immigrant Aid Society to implement immigration programs and inaugurated a Jewish Book Exhibition, a joint project of the Library, the Canadian Jewish Congress and the Young Men's Hebrew Association, and now an annual event. In addition, during World War II, the Library provided books to the Jewish inmates of internment camps in Canada.<sup>16</sup>

Two community services originated by the Library are the provision of small libraries to children's summer camps, and the circulation of books to hospital patients. Today, a further service is provided by the branch libraries which are situated in three Montreal suburbs.<sup>17</sup> Another program initiated by the Library was a weekly schedule of recorded classical music and for eight years, quarters for a drama school and theatre group were provided in the Library building.<sup>18</sup>

The need to establish a separate Children's Section was recognized as early as 1927, but the Library was unable to realize this plan until 1951. In March of that year, a Children's Library was organized, occupying its own quarters in the Library building. Regular story hours, held in English and Yiddish, formed a part of the children's program, from which evolved the present-day Children's Theatre Group, one of the few Yiddish theatre groups for young people.

When reconstituted in 1914, the Library Charter stipulated that a People's University should be organized and conducted under Library auspices.<sup>19</sup> This new department was established by the 1915-1916 season, and courses in languages, economics and history were given for a monthly fee of one dollar. All classes were held in the evening in rooms loaned by a nearby Protestant school. Several years later, this program was discontinued and it was not revived until 1940, when the Library was able to provide its own accommodation. At this time, a director was appointed and courses were given in Jewish History, Yiddish and World History, at a charge of twenty-five cents a lecture.<sup>20</sup> The fees covered the lecturer's expenses and the Library paid the administration costs. In 1954, with the exception of Yiddish, the language classes were discontinued since these were available elsewhere, and the Library's primary concern was Jewish culture. In 1966, all courses were ended.

The years following World War II saw the Library reach a long-desired goal, the construction of its own building. A site was purchased and the first of a series of building campaigns was launched. The total cost amounted to three hundred thousand dollars, an immense sum to be raised from supporters of modest incomes. At one point, construction was temporarily halted for lack of funds, but the building was finally completed in June, 1953, and formally opened the following October.

The Library now possessed a Yiddish section of international repute, and a Hebrew collection which included old and rare volumes as well as works of modern scholars.<sup>21</sup> The English section contained books concerning matters of particular Jewish interest in addition to those for general circulation, of a less specialized nature. The Children's Library formed a separate division, the books again being divided into Yiddish and English sections.

In this new building, the Library enjoyed its position as a cultural centre for a number of years, but by 1960, the Jewish population had largely moved into the suburbs; and so, in order to retain its central position, the Library sold its building to the Bibliothèque Nationale de Québec and moved west, to occupy rented quarters once again.

Since 1950, many of the Jewish community services have united to raise their funds through the Combined Jewish Appeal, now administered by the Allied Jewish Community Services. Today, grants from the Province of Quebec and the City of Montreal and money received from the Allied Jewish Community Services have ended the financial insecurity of the past, and the Jewish Public Library presently looks forward to the construction of its second building and to a further expansion of its service to the community.

#### ARCHIVES

The Jewish Public Library's Act of Incorporation did not mention archives, nor were they mentioned in the Amended Charter of 1919. It is only in the Supplementary Letters Patent of 1951 that the Library's holdings are specifically noted, and then as an already acquired body of material----the Corporation now possesses valuable old books, manuscripts and archives.

Though so late in being legally documented, the Library was always conscious of its responsibility to acquire and preserve material concerning the history of the Canadian Jewish community. Implicit in this obligation was the necessity to make this material available to the student and the research worker. These holdings include papers which antedate the formal incorporation of the Jewish Public Library; the personal library and papers of the late Reuben Brainin,<sup>22</sup> a legacy from its first president; the papers of the Montreal Yiddish poet, J. I. Segal, donated to the Library archives by his family; much original source material pertaining to personalities well-known to the Jewish community, both past and present. These papers, in both English and Yiddish, together with many documents relating to the various charitable organizations and synagogues of Montreal, form the basis of the Library's archives.

Source material of much value, which otherwise would have been lost to the community, has been accumulated in this way. As was the practice

in other Library departments, the knowledge and experience needed to carry out such an archives program was sought from among the Library members and from its Director. However, no definite Archives Policy was formulated and, as a result, material was acquired in a haphazard fashion or "collected" in the form of individual items. Over the past few years, it had become increasingly apparent to the Board and Archives Committee of the Jewish Public Library that such an approach no longer met the requirements of a community increasingly aware of its past.

In 1967, the Archives Committee was requested to draft an archives management policy and to begin the task of accessioning and sorting a large backlog of material. This work, now begun, is being supervised by two Committee members who have a working knowledge of archival procedures. Volunteers are being trained, though one difficulty only now being overcome is to find workers fluent in Hebrew and Yiddish to deal with the material in these languages, in addition to the volunteers in the English speaking group. Work is progressing, however, and it is expected that the backlog of material will be shelved, listed and partially indexed by the end of 1970.

A tape-recording project is underway, and photographs are being taken of buildings and sites important to the history of the Jewish community. An orderly program of planned acquisitions is being instituted, which included microfilm material. Further projects to be undertaken include an Index of the Library holdings together with those of other community organizations and private individuals. Publication of a Preliminary Inventory and Union List must remain future goals.

In addition to the Jewish Public Library's Archives Program, the Archives Committee is holding joint meetings with two other Jewish community organizations, the Canadian Jewish Congress<sup>23</sup> and the Allied Jewish Community Services.<sup>24</sup> The Joint Committee was appointed to devise an integrated archives program to encompass the holdings of the present repositories as well as material in the possession of other institutions and in private hands. Many of these organizations and individuals have indicated their wish to be associated with a Jewish Community Archives program, in which methods common to all repositories would be used.

As a first step, the Joint Committee engaged the services of Mr. John Andreassen, of the Records Company of Canada, to prepare a report on the present state of the archives of the Jewish Community and to offer recommendations to improve the existing situation. Received in April, 1969, the major part of Mr. Andreassen's report was adopted, and one immediate result was the Committee's decision to engage an archivist, whose services would be shared between the Canadian Jewish Congress and the Jewish Public Library, the two main archives repositories.

Another suggestion, to institute a training course for volunteers, is now being implemented, and from this group the future staff for the Jewish Community Archives will be drawn. When the existing backlog of material in the two chief repositories is under control, it is hoped that these trained workers will be available to aid those organizations and individuals who wish to keep personal possession of their holdings, but to maintain them according to recognized archival methods.

The Canadian Jewish Congress and the Jewish Public Library plan to move into new buildings, Congress in 1970 and the Library within a space

of three or four years. The Archives Section in each structure is being planned to include proper atmospheric conditions and space adequate for present and future storage. Areas will be provided for listening to tape-recordings, research and reference, microfilm readers and offices. For the present, microfilming and repairs will have to be executed by others, but future plans envision the addition of these departments.

Today, the Library continues its manifold activities in severely limited, rented quarters, but still retains its traditional position as a centre of the Jewish community. The goal of a building of its own is not forgotten, and plans go forward to realize this ambition. Thus, the Library story has come full circle.

The fifty-five years of the Jewish Public Library's existence mark a period of constant growth and service, particularly to the Yiddish speaking section of the Jewish community. Originating from two small, specialized libraries, those of the Zionist and Labour Zionist Groups, the institution launched in 1914 broadened its scope to include all aspects of Judaism, both ancient and modern. Its own archives program forging ahead, an active participant in the proposed Jewish Community Archives, the Jewish Public Library faces a future bright with many plans. To the Jewish community, the Library symbolizes the dedication of "Everyman" to the spirit of education and culture.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. "Our Library", pub. by the Jewish Public Library, Montreal 1957, p.14.
2. "Judaism", I. Epstein, Pelican Ed. 1959, pp. 289, 299.
3. "Handbook of Mechanics' Institutions", W.H.J. Traice, Longmans, Brown and Co., London, 1856.
4. "Language and the Mother Tongue of the Jews of America" In Louis Rosenberg, "Our Library", 1957, p. 98.
5. "Studies on Jewish Immigration to Canada, 1870-1900", Dr. J. Kage, Montreal, 1958, p. 9.
6. "The Jew in Canada", A. D. Hart, Editor, Jewish Publications Ltd., Toronto and Montreal, 1926, p. 14.
7. "150th Anniversary Booklet of the Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue", Montreal, pub. 1918, p. 7.
8. "History of the Jews", H. Graetz, Jewish Publication Society of America, pub. 1894, p. 387.
9. "Our Library", *ibid.*, p. 12.
10. "Seekers of Zion" Group.
11. The Labour Zionist Organization.
12. The Workmen's Circles, Jewish National Workers Alliance, etc. "The Jew in Canada", *ibid.*, p. 460.
13. "Our Library", *ibid.*, p. 17.
14. *ibid.*, pp. 14, 15, 17.

15. *ibid.*, pp. 20-22. 16. "Our Library", *ibid.*, pp. 26-27, 59, 67-69, 71, 72.
17. St. Laurent, in the Beth Ora Synagogue; Cote St. Luc, in the Beth Zion Synagogue; Chomedy, in the Young Israel Synagogue.
- 18-19. "Our Library", *ibid.*, pp. 19, 26. 20. "Our Library", *ibid.*, pp. 79-80. 21. "Our Library", *ibid.*, pp. 39, 46.
22. Reuben Brainin, late author and journalist, one-time editor of Canada's first Yiddish daily newspaper, "The Daily Eagle", Jewish Public Library "Bibliography" (Periodicals), 1969.
23. Canadian Jewish Congress, a national association composed of representatives of all Jewish Community organs.
24. Allied Jewish Community Services, planning agency for overall community services and for allocation of funds raised by the Combined Jewish Appeal.

Archives Section, Canadian Historical Association, 1969-70

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