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A Chimney on the Canadian Prairies

Yiddish-Language Libraries in Western Canada, 1900 to the Present

FAITH JONES

ABSTRACT

Yiddish book culture did and does exist in Western Canada, even outside the vibrant Jewish culture of Winnipeg, in communities whose geographic isolation from the Yiddish-speaking centers may seem extreme. Two libraries may serve as examples of the variety of manifestations of Yiddish reading in these localities: the library of the farm community of Edenbridge, Saskatchewan, which may be said to be emblematic of cultural organization in these rural colonies, which existed from before World War I until the 1960s; and the Kirman Library at the Vancouver Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture, itself an unusual example of a Yiddish secular school, which is now the last specifically Yiddish library in Western Canada. Finally, the meaning of Yiddish books in these independent libraries, far from institutional support or a critical mass of Jews, is examined.

YIDDISH CULTURE IN WESTERN CANADA

To anyone interested in Yiddish language and literary history, the phrase “Yiddish in Western Canada” will almost certainly provoke the response “Winnipeg.” Winnipeg’s vibrant Yiddish culture is so vast and deeply important to that city’s social history that it is surprising not to find a single secondary resource specifically devoted to this topic. But while Winnipeg’s unique status as a Yiddish center in Western Canada remains unexplored in academic circles, perhaps less well-known—even to cultural activists—is the history of Yiddish in the smaller Western communities, which is necessarily different from developments in the large cities of the United States, or in Eastern Canada. This paper does not explore the Winnipeg milieu but focuses on smaller and farther-flung regions.

An active if tiny Yiddish cultural life did exist in Western Canada from early on. A photograph taken circa 1890 of Abraham Klenman, the founder of the

Wapella, Saskatchewan farming colony, shows him reading the New York daily *Di Yidishe gazetn* (no doubt weeks, if not months, out of date).¹

It is, of course, no coincidence that many Jewish farmers spoke and read Yiddish. Farming, though not a traditional occupation among Eastern European Jews, was promoted as an answer to the nineteenth century problems of poverty, brutal oppression, and lack of political or material rights that characterized Jewish life under Tsarist rule. Western European Jews saw the opening of immigration to the Americas as offering particular hope for the redemption of the Eastern European Jews, whom in general they regarded as superstitious, backward, and lacking in economic initiative (Kosak, 2000). While not wishing their co-religionists to continue to starve by the thousands annually, neither did these relatively privileged Western European Jews wish to absorb them in their countries. The opening of immigration to North and South America offered both physical rescue of the Jews from impoverishment and brutality in the depressed economy of imperial Russia, and a chance to prove that Jews were fit to farm and otherwise perform productive labor. Philanthropists such as Baron Maurice de Hirsch funded massive efforts to move Jews to the farmlands of Argentina and Brazil, as well as New Jersey, California, and the Canadian West (Joseph, 1935).² Through his Baron de Hirsch Fund and its subsidiary organization, the Jewish Colonization Association, he facilitated the move of many thousands of Jews out of Eastern Europe.³

To some extent, almost all the Canadian Jewish farmers were assisted by the Jewish Colonization Association. Some attended Baron de Hirsch training schools in France in advance of emigration, thus gaining skills unavailable to them in the small towns of Eastern Europe where Jews were largely excluded from agrarian pursuits. Many of them had their passage paid by the JCA, and were advanced loans for the purchase of farmland or equipment. Some had already immigrated to Canada, and were eking out an unsatisfactory living in Montreal or Toronto, when they decided to take up the JCA on its offer of assistance and move west (Hoffer, 1960; Stein, 2003 interview).

These settlers used Yiddish, not exclusively, but as an integral part of their communal life, as evidenced in a photograph of prairie farmers involved in the efforts to send money or goods to the devastated Jewish communities of East-

¹ This photograph appears in *Papers Read before the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba*, Series III, Number 27 (1970–1971), Supplement.

² De Hirsch did not consider the nascent Zionist movement, with its goal of settling what was then British Palestine, to be realistic, and therefore concentrated his efforts on North and South America.

³ The Am Olam movement and other smaller groups of utopian socialists put forth a less patronizing vision of Jewish farming. These groups settled independently in socialist Jewish agrarian communities in Oregon, Utah, North Dakota, New Jersey, Michigan, Texas, and Louisiana. While sometimes appealing to large, centralized Jewish organizations for assistance (which was often refused), these groups emphasized political rights, communal action, and self-direction as the necessary components for Jewish liberation (Herscher, 1981).

ern Europe in the years following World War I. Dated around 1918, some indication of the differing roles of languages in these communities can be inferred from the different texts in this picture. The English proclaims neutrally: “Saskatchewan and Alberta Conference for the Relief of the War and Pogrom Zones.” The Yiddish exhorts: “Jews! Save our future generation!” Meanwhile Hebrew is reserved for Biblical language: “The voice of thy brother’s blood crieth unto Me” (Genesis 4:10).⁴ This reference to the story of Cain and Abel would have been familiar to this generation of Jews as an often-invoked metaphor for the persecution of Jews by Gentiles.

In essence, Yiddish was the language in which these immigrants could convey in-group messages exclusively to each other, while English served as an aspect of their new and highly valued Canadian-ness and Hebrew maintained their connection to Jewish history and ethical life (whether or not the individuals involved were religious). In one sense, use of Yiddish was not programmatic but pragmatic. It should be noted, however, that there is no context in which use of Yiddish has ever been neutral. The push-pull dynamic of immigration and assimilation provides the context for the North American manifestation of the complex of symbols through which Yiddish gained and lost status, became associated with group, sub-group, or individual identity, or otherwise embodied social or political meaning.

In the larger cities of Western Canada, with Jewish populations of varying sizes, Yiddish literary clubs, dramatic groups, and one literary journal made their appearance. These activities were sometimes connected to a larger communal organization, often one with a particular philosophical attachment to Yiddish. In 1929, Calgary’s small but very united and cohesive community founded a Peretz Shule⁵ that served as a center for all kinds of Yiddish activity. A day school, a library, discussion groups, readings, a literary club, and a particularly active drama group were among the Shule’s offerings (Gutkin, 1980).

As another example of Yiddish cultural production, Vancouver, which has never included a large Yiddish-speaking community, has the distinction of being the only Western Canadian city to produce a Yiddish literary magazine. *Di Idische velt* (The Jewish World), published six times over the course of the seven years between 1928 and 1935 (though purportedly a monthly magazine), was

⁴ This photograph appears in *Seventy Years of Canadian Jewish Life, 1919–1989*.

⁵ Both parts of this name require clarification. Whereas the Yiddish word *shul* can mean a synagogue or a school of any nature, the term *shule* only refers to Yiddish secular schools. The name “Peretz” pays homage to the classic Yiddish writer I. L. Peretz, one of the founders of modern Yiddish literature. While Peretz himself supported a left-wing agenda, he was widely adored across the political spectrum, partly because of his nuanced and non-dogmatic stories illuminating aspects of Jewish spiritual life. There were many schools named in his honor, and they were not necessarily affiliated with one another. The two discussed in this paper, the Vancouver and Calgary Peretz Shules, have never had any official institutional connection, though members often move from one to the other, as migration between the two cities is common, and at the closing of the Calgary school the Vancouver school inherited its teaching materials.

edited by Mordche Yofe, a left-Zionist from Kaunas, Lithuania, who later left Vancouver for the United States and Israel, and became an editor and translator of modern Hebrew into Yiddish (Fox, 1980, p. 141). *Di Idische velt* is of a surprisingly high quality, showing the same kinds of concerns as other literary magazines of the era, and including essays and topical articles on education, Zionism, and the like. *Di Idische velt* was typeset in Vancouver by a Gentile typesetter, using a system devised by Yofe: after editing the text for each article, he re-wrote it in numbers, correlating to numbers he had written on the tubs containing each Yiddish letter.⁶ This painstaking process appears to have been successful, as very few errors appear in the finished product.

Western Canada is also the subject of Yiddish literature, showing up in poetry and memoirs as well as literary prose. Anthologies of Canadian Yiddish literature usually include some panegyric to the landscape, or portrayal of *shtetl* Jews toiling and suffering in this remotest outpost of civilization. One example is Yeshaye Rabinovitch's long poem "A koymen af Kanader preyris" (A Chimney on the Canadian Prairies), about an Orthodox scrap dealer travelling through Manitoba by horse and buggy in the early days of western settlement (*Kanader Yidisher zamlbukh*, 1982, pp. 233–236). The anthology *Kanadish* (1974, p. 146), one in a series of Yiddish anthologies devoted to national literatures produced in Buenos Aires, includes J. I. Segal's "Oyf mayn bruders farm" (On My Brother's Farm). Neither of these writers, it should be noted, ever lived in Western Canada.

An odd addition to the Yiddish literature of Western Canada is the first chapter in a book called *Fun Vankuver biz Eilat* (From Vancouver to Eilat; 1965), A. M. Orzhitzer's memoir about selling encyclopedias door-to-door. Vancouver's Peretz School produced one Yiddish writer, the journalist and essayist Yeshayahu Zarhi or Shayke Zarkin, known in English as Sid Sarkin. He produced one book, *Zikhroynes: in der alter heym* (In the Old Country, 1973).⁷ A quintessentially Canadian story about the far north leads off the collection of short stories *Treyder Ed* (Trader Ed), by Alberta labor and left activist Elkhonon Hanson (Hanson, 1957; see Figure 1).

A not-insignificant cultural undertaking in these communities was the establishment of libraries. Through the efforts of the Jewish Colonization Association and other utopian movements, fifteen Jewish farm colonies were eventually established on the Canadian prairies. Most probably had Yiddish-language libraries.⁸ Book stamps from these libraries can be found in books still

⁶ This process was described by Yofe to the late historian of Canadian Jewry, David Rome, who in turn described it in a letter to Brad Sabin Hill, dated November 10, 1986. My thanks to Mr. Hill for sharing this information with me.

⁷ This memoir about his life in the labor movement was intended to be in two volumes, the first covering his years in Lithuania and the second covering his life in Canada. Unfortunately for historians of Canadian Jewry, only the first volume was ever published.

⁸ According to Cheryl Jaffee of the National Library of Canada, who has examined numerous stamps in books in her collection there is some indication that the JCA itself prepared books for distribution to the farm colonies. I am grateful to her for bringing this to my attention.

in collections in synagogue and community center libraries across Canada, having made their way there after the farm colonies folded up in the 1950s and 1960s. In the large cities of the prairies, at least two Yiddish libraries existed: the large and active Peretz Shule in Calgary had one, and there was at least one short-lived Yiddish library in Edmonton (see Figure 2).

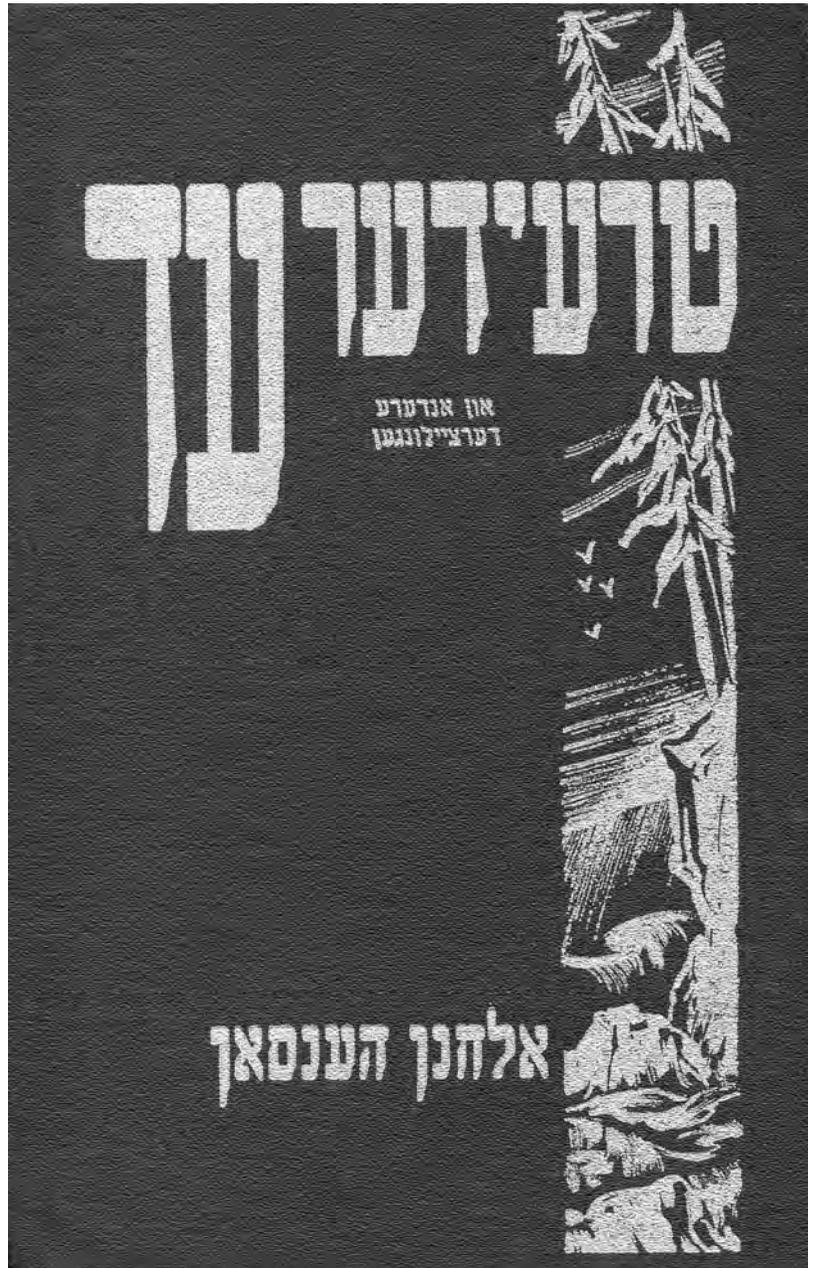


FIGURE 1 *Treyder Ed* [Trader Ed], stories by the Alberta left-wing activist and Jewish community leader Elkhonon Henson (Hanson). The lead story in this collection won the literary prize of the New York literary journal *Tsukunft* [Future], indicating a fair level of literary merit.

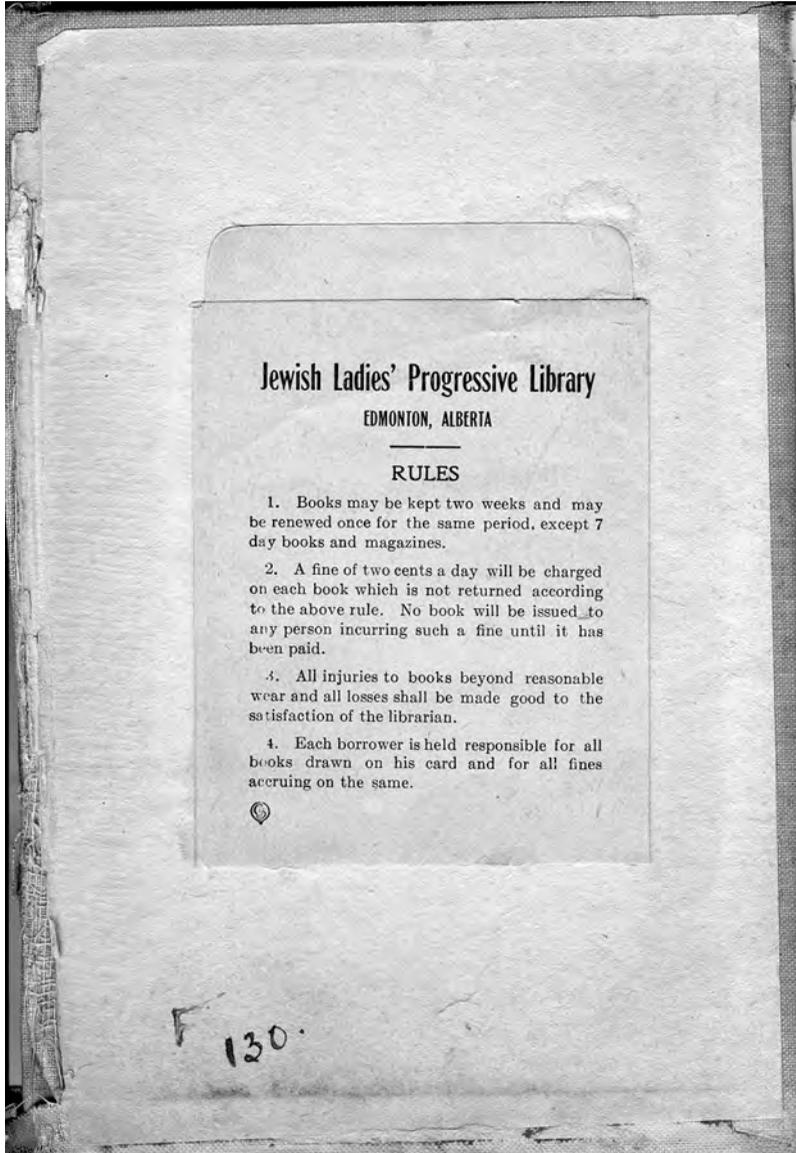


FIGURE 2 A mystery library in Edmonton, Alberta, whose existence is thus far only evidenced by this book pocket, found in a copy of the book *Tage-bukh fun a elende meydel*, a Yiddish-language D. H. Lawrence-type novel, now in the collection of the Kirman Library in Vancouver.

These histories of surprisingly diverse and active Yiddish book culture offer us a number of stories from which we can construct some sense of how Yiddish functioned in the enormous and varied geography and cultures of Western Canada. This paper focuses on only two of those stories, to illustrate different aspects of this history.

EDENBRIDGE, SASKATCHEWAN, 1906–1964

Text of the plaque on the former synagogue in Edenbridge, Saskatchewan:⁹

On this site stood the Beth Israel Synagogue built in 1908 by a group of immigrants whose first settlers migrated from South Africa in 1906 to found the Edenbridge Hebrew Colony.

For over half a century this institution served a thriving Jewish farming community which in the early 1920's numbered fifty families. The lure of urban life, the advent of farm mechanization, and father time all combined to reduce this once flourishing centre to less than five families.

In 1964 the original synagogue ceased to operate as a place of worship. It's [sic] few remaining members having already transferred to Melfort.

Five hundred yards west of this point is situated the well kept Edenbridge Hebrew Cemetery where many of the community's pioneers lie at rest.

The founders of Edenbridge were Lithuanian Jews who had spent a few years in South Africa while arranging passage to Canada. Edenbridge is located north-east of Saskatoon on relatively good land capable of sustaining a farming community. The name itself is an Anglicized version of "Yidns Brik" or "Jews' Bridge," but the English name also conveys the utopian perspective of the colony's founders.

By a stroke of luck, the single full-length memoir of the Edenbridge farm colony was written by an individual with a strong connection to books and literary culture. Mike Usiskin came to Edenbridge shortly after its founding, following his elder brother. He was a young teenager at the time. His memoir, *Oksn un motorn* (Oxen and Tractors, 1983; see Figure 3) details the founding of the Edenbridge library:

It was at the festivities of the birth of the baby that we laid the foundation for yet another great achievement in the growing social life of Edenbridge, the establishment of a library. It was suggested that anyone who was interested should donate the grand sum of fifty cents. If this was difficult to put out all at once, it could be done in five cent installments. Right then and there we collected \$3.85 and sent it off directly to a bookstore in New York.

There is a vast difference between a library in the city and a library in a small community such as ours. Because of the density of the bush, the lack of good roads, and the great distances between

⁹ Reproduced in <http://web.ncf.ca/lavitt/jewishfarmcolonies/edenbridge/ebplaque.html> (August 7, 2005).

one neighbour and another we had to devise an ingenious method of circulating the books. We decided that the problem of distance and bad roads could best be diminished if we established three branches of the library in various sections of the community. . . .

My brother insisted that I abstain from heavy work for the first winter, and so I was given instead the job of making regular treks to the post office. En route I passed many of the library members' homes. . . . I began taking books to and from people's homes as I



FIGURE 3 *Oksn un motorn* [Oxen and Tractors], Mike Usiskin's memoir of life in the Edenbridge colony.

passed them on my outings. Before long, I became a “walking library,” supplying the community with a never-ending well of culture.

The trips to and from the post office took me from one to five days. . . .

And so I carried books back and forth; accepting returns and bringing new books to the reading community of Edenbridge. . . .

There were many times that my outings were extended by a few days because some of the readers were interested in drama. They wanted to get together and read some three- or four-act plays. These readings would take a whole evening. . . .

. . . [T]hough we never got around to founding a bank or becoming Rockefellers, we never lacked good reading material. The books were passed from hand to hand so that anyone wishing to read could do so. Not only did our little settlement benefit from the library, but the records show that many of the adjoining communities were grateful to us for supplying them with books from our famous library.¹⁰

(Usiskin, 1983, pp. 63–65.)

Not only does Usiskin give us this detailed story of the founding of the library, he also describes throughout the memoir the various ways books were used by members of the community. He describes his roommate staying up late one winter evening reading *A velt ohn threren* (*A velt on trern* = *A World Without Tears*), the Yiddish translation of Robert Ingersoll’s *How to Reform Mankind*. Ingersoll was a nineteenth-century American freethinker, one of the most influential secular humanists of all time.

At another point in Usiskin’s narrative he describes a community gathering just after the outbreak of World War I. By this time the community had a synagogue, which also served as school and meeting hall, and where one of the libraries was housed. Sensing the bleak mood of the gathered individuals, most of whom had family members in the war zone, Usiskin chose something to read to lift their spirits. He selected a poem by Morris Winchevsky, “A bezem un a ker” (“A New Broom Sweeps Clean”), about the lower classes overthrowing the old regime and eliminating inequality. According to Usiskin, this reading was such a hit that the entire community spent the rest of the evening learning the poem by heart. In 1916, at the death of Sholem Aleichem, the Edenbridge com-

¹⁰ While the translator, Marcia Usiskin Basman, at times condensed material that she considered less interesting for a modern audience, the section quoted here is a close translation of the original. It is almost unfathomable for contemporary readers to understand that a four-day walk, carrying pounds of books in the Saskatchewan winter, can be considered light work suitable for a teenager not yet physically able to take on the full tasks of an adult farmer. Presumably, regular winter activities would consist of clearing and burning underbrush, digging out trees by the roots, shifting boulders, and otherwise preparing more land for farming—by comparison with which carrying a rucksack, no matter what it contains, cannot be considered taxing.

munity honored the request made in his ethical will that he should “rather be remembered with laughter”¹¹ and gathered to read one of his humorous stories.

And finally, Usiskin actually lists the colonists’ favorite books. Thus, we can establish a pretty good idea of what was on the shelves in the Edenbridge Central Library circa 1916. In addition to the writers already mentioned, there were the poets Morris Rosenfeld, Joseph Bovshover, and David Edelstadt, all, like Winchevsky, members of the literary movement known as the “sweatshop poets.”¹² He also lists Shimen Frug, a Russian- and Yiddish-language poet, socialist Zionist, and proponent of Jewish agricultural labor; the Russian anarchist Pyotr Kropotkin; Yankev (Jacob) Dineson, writer of sentimental realist novels and an influential proponent of secular education; and Tolstoy. While these writers may be diverse in their geographic origin, political outlook, original language and genre of their writings—not to mention literary quality—thematically they all deal with how societies organize themselves.

One important caveat about the image presented by Usiskin in his memoir is that he was aligned with the left-wing sector of the community. There was a religiously Orthodox and politically liberal segment of the Edenbridge community, and it is likely they did read many of the books Usiskin mentions, since Orthodoxy in the farm communities in that era was not as strict as it is today. It is equally likely that additional, traditional texts such as Bibles, Talmuds, and prayer books in Hebrew, were in use in the colony, and perhaps also collections of sermons and other homiletics in Yiddish, a popular genre at the time.¹³ None of these are mentioned by Usiskin.

¹¹ Sholem Aleichem’s famous ethical will, still read annually by his descendants, has been published numerous times, including in *Ethical Wills: A Modern Jewish Treasury*, edited by Jack Riemer and Nathaniel Stampfer (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), p. 151.

¹² These poets wrote primarily on the suffering of the then-new urban underclass of industrial workers and the need for revolutionary action to combat their oppression. Three of the four were industrial workers themselves: Edelstadt died at 25 of tuberculosis contracted as a result of working conditions in a sweatshop. (For information on the sweatshop poets, see Itzik Gottesman’s excellent “Yiddish Culture in America” website, <http://www.laits.utexas.edu/gottesman/>.) Although the sweatshop poets were members of an urban, industrial movement of workers, the Edenbridge farmers, themselves mostly former town or city dwellers, would have identified with their struggle as a part of Jews’ historic quest for equality.

¹³ While no written or anecdotal evidence specifically mentioning religious books in Edenbridge has come to my attention, it is impossible for any religious Jewish community to function without certain basic written texts. Due to the high level of literacy—in a large number of languages—among Eastern European Jews, even communities unable to find or support a rabbi (and this includes most of the Canadian farm colonies during most of their existence) were able to use lay knowledge to pass on religious learning. For example, in the farm colony at Rumsey, Alberta, one community member was designated as the Hebrew teacher for boys approaching bar mitzvah—a community member who was himself a committed atheist (Stein, 2001). As this anecdote shows, Jewish unity sometimes trumped political dogma in the functioning of the colonies. The same person also taught Yiddish reading and writing to the children in families that were secular and committed to Yiddish culture. This would all be in addition to his duties as a farmer. Such stories abound in personal reminiscences of the farm colonies.

Several Yiddish literary figures also visited Edenbridge, between stops on reading tours of Western Canada. One such figure was Leib Malach, author of melodramatic plays and novels. Malach was asked to read for the community. It seems Malach was a particularly effective writer (and reader) of his sort. Usiskin describes an old man sitting near him who cried continuously through the reading, while occasionally complaining that the material was only *shund*, trash, fit for old women.

Edenbridge did not yield a second generation of Jewish farmers. As the plaque on the synagogue attests, whatever pioneer spirit was not destroyed by the dustbowls of the 1930s was certainly strained by the out-migration of most young men to the Second World War—not a temporary phenomenon, since those who survived active duty usually did not return to the farm. The mechanization of the 1950s was the final nail in the coffin, not just for the Jewish farmers but also for most family farming in Canada.

THE VANCOUVER PERETZ SHULE, 1945–PRESENT

The development of Yiddish secular schools in North America took place in a context quite different from that of the farm settlements. While most of the Yiddish-speaking population originated in Eastern Europe, the secular schools were born of an urban experience of immigration. Although these immigrants too were associated with utopian movements and/or Western Jewish philanthropy, these ties underwent profound changes during the first years after immigration, in an atmosphere relatively free of censorship (such was not the case with Eastern Europe) and occurring at the same time as other transformative social movements, such as unionization, were sweeping North American society. Yiddish secular schools emerged from the ramified community of proponents of Yiddish, most of whom were secularist and leftist, but some of whom were religious and a few even Orthodox.

Contested areas of ideology quickly became the source of splits and regrouping, sometimes the same small groups of discontented parents leaving to form a new school and returning to a larger school several times over the years. Common reasons for splits were the level of commitment to Zionism (ranging from anti-Zionist through left-Zionist to religious Zionist), and level of religious instruction (ranging from no religious teaching, through the teaching of religious history or values but without religious practice, to a strongly religious education).

The most influential and widespread approach was that espoused by the ideologist of Yiddishism Dr. Hayim Zhitlovsky (Chaim Zhitlowsky), who believed that rather than religion, Jewish culture and a philosophical commitment to the most progressive principles of Judaism would prevent Jews from assimilating and ensure the continuity of specific forms of Jewish expression. Zhitlovsky's influence was felt among many of the branches of Yiddish secularism and within many of the different schools irrespective of their political alignment. Yiddish secular schools began to appear in North America before World

War I. In Montreal and Toronto schools were established around 1911 (dates given vary). Winnipeg's several Yiddish schools were established between 1914 and 1930, with the usual splits and mergers occurring after that time. Under Zhitlovsky's influence, Calgary's Peretz Shule was founded in 1929 and operated until the 1990s. While making Yiddish its major focus, it embraced Hebrew and Zionism, and was unaffiliated religiously, making it accessible to families with a variety of religious observance. Its primary concern was with the teaching of Yiddish language as a source of Jewish continuity (Eichler, 2003 interview).¹⁴

It has been noted that these schools, while currently comprising a minuscule part of Jewish educational life, were in their heyday instrumental in leading other forms of Jewish education—including traditional Talmud Torahs and supplementary Hebrew schools—into a more modern form. This included such innovations as teaching girls, raising the qualification levels of teachers, and creating materials that dealt with Jewish ideals and philosophies rather than simply inculcating the forms of ritual and liturgy (Kage, [196-?], p. 5).

The Vancouver Peretz Shule was founded in 1945, rather late in the day for a Yiddish secular school. Although plans for such a school had been discussed informally among like-minded families a number of times, they came to fruition just as Vancouver's Jewish community was growing with an influx of ex-servicemen and their families from other parts of the country, eager to re-start lives that had been put on hold during the war. The school's first principal, Ben Chud, was hired while still serving in the Canadian Army, and the school had to delay opening until he was decommissioned. According to Chud's widow (1993, 1997 interviews), he was determined to take the job at the Peretz Shule because he had witnessed the destruction of so much Yiddish culture while serving overseas.¹⁵

Unlike the Calgary Peretz Shule, Vancouver's Shule was never a day school and did not produce the same level of cultural activity, probably because the two decades that had passed between their founding dates saw a dramatic reduction in Yiddish literacy in North America, and because Vancouver's Jewish community was never as cohesive as Calgary's. The Vancouver Peretz Shule did, and continues to, provide supplementary school education, adult education programs, clubs including reading groups, and communal holiday celebrations. In the early years, it had two separate parents' groups, one conducted in English, which sponsored programs on education and child rearing, the other—the *Muter Fareyn* (Mother's Union)—conducted in Yiddish and interested not in the improvement of the child but in the improvement of the parent. The *Muter Fareyn* read literature and sponsored philosophical lectures, in addition to running many of the Shule's everyday activities.

¹⁴ This goal appears to have been somewhat successful. The most famous alumna of Calgary's Peretz Shule, Toronto actor and singer Theresa Tova, recently produced a CD of Yiddish songs.

¹⁵ Gallia [sic] Chud, interview by Naomi Katz, June 17, 1997; see also Galya Chud, interview by Josette McGregor, May 20, 1993.

On February 19, 1953, a notice appeared in Vancouver's community weekly, the *Jewish Western Bulletin*:

LIBRARY AT PERETZ SCHOOL AVAILABLE FOR PUBLIC USE

The Peretz School Library is available for public use. The library has now 340 Yiddish books and 140 in English, all pertaining to Jewish life, and many of the books are now very difficult to buy.

Anyone interested in making full use of the library can do so by contacting the library chairman, Mr. J. Greenberg, at phone #: CE-8643.

The timing of this announcement could not have been more unfortunate. From the time of its founding in 1945 until early 1953, the Vancouver Peretz Shule enjoyed a perfectly cordial relationship with the rest of the organized Jewish community in Vancouver. The Shule had a representative on the community's umbrella committee, the Vancouver Jewish Administrative Council, and participated in the annual United Jewish Appeal. The Council unilaterally ended these associations in early 1953. Many of the Shule's founders and early leaders were members of the Communist Party, and while the Shule itself remained unaligned politically, it found itself floundering in a McCarthy-era witch hunt, which was all the more painful because it emanated not from a government source but from the Vancouver Jewish community itself (Jones, 1998).

There is no indication that the nascent library managed to weather this political storm. No further mention of it is made in the *Jewish Western Bulletin* or in the Peretz organizational archives, nor is there much memory of it among members. It is likely that the books themselves remained in the building, but there were probably no library activities or an active cataloging effort. No doubt everyone involved in the school had to regroup and concentrate efforts on raising funds through alternative means, now that support from the UJA had been cut off. In fact, the continued existence of the Peretz Shule as a whole was in peril, and it may be that it managed to continue due to a fresh infusion of energy from a group particularly dedicated to the cause of Yiddish: Holocaust survivors, who had witnessed first hand the destruction of so much of Yiddish-speaking culture. This group slowly made its way to Vancouver, following the War, DP camps, and sometimes a brief stay in another Canadian city or in their former homes in Europe. Often one family member came ahead, and the rest of the family joined them later. Thus, Vancouver did not see a significant influx of Holocaust survivors until the 1950s.

One of this group of survivors was Paulina Kirman, who arrived in Vancouver from Warsaw in 1958, with her husband and children, following her brother who had already established a home there.¹⁶ The family immediately joined the Peretz Shule in order to provide Yiddish education for their children. Kirman

¹⁶ Unless otherwise noted, information about Kirman and the library are taken from Paulina Kirman, interview with the author, February 4, 1999, tape recording.

had been an economist in Poland, but in Canada found her language skills to be the most marketable ones she had, and eventually became the Slavic languages cataloger at the University of British Columbia. She also had responsibility for collections in Yiddish and Hebrew, and in the Latin alphabet.

In 1972 Kirman and her husband founded a Yiddish reading group at the Peretz Shule, using their personal collection of Yiddish books. The group included both immigrants and Canadian-born members who had Yiddish as their first language. By that time, Kirman had ten years' library experience. She realized that there was a demand for a Yiddish library in Vancouver and that the Peretz School had some books (probably those gathered for the original library in 1953), although they were scattered in classrooms and offices. In 1976 she got permission to use one of the classrooms to shelve and organize the books. Beginning in 1977, Kirman seriously began making this collection a real library (see Figure 4). Although both she and her husband worked full-time and still had children at home, they spent hours at the school organizing the books into a working library, shifting books, cataloging, and labeling spines.

In 1979, the library opened, with not only the Shule's books but also donations from the Kirmans' personal collection, books weeded from local libraries, and donations from members. Paulina Kirman solicited donations of subscriptions to periodicals, and about 500 books were cataloged at that time. Children's books in English were included to support curriculum. For a number of years following, the library was used for reading groups and as a resource of materials for school activities, with a limited amount of lending. Kirman appears to have been particularly adept at community relations. Her connections at UBC allowed her to acquire discards and exchanges, as well as outdated library supplies such as a wooden card catalog. In honor of the 1979 official opening, the Ukrainian Fraternal Association made a donation requesting that it be used to purchase a book



FIGURE 4 The Peretz Library in 1977. On the newspaper rack: *Morgn Frayhayt* [*Morning Freiheit* = Morning Freedom], originally a Communist Party publication (New York); *Di Prese* [The Press], (Yiddish newspaper from Buenos Aires); the Romanian Jewish weekly *Ketav-'et* [Journal]; *Folks-shtime* [People's Voice], also necessarily Communist given the era and its place of publication (Warsaw); *Forverts* [Forward], formerly Socialist Party but in this era unaffiliated and liberal (New York); and the *Jewish Western Bulletin*, at that time a right-wing community weekly (Vancouver). Paulina Kirman's approach to materials for her Yiddish library could be called inclusive.

on Jewish-Ukrainian relations.¹⁷ Jewish seniors' groups not associated with the Peretz Shule were frequently invited to readings of Yiddish literature.

It is impossible to know to what extent the library was used by individuals, since only those books that Kirman cataloged before the 1979 opening have card pockets. However, a search of those items with borrower cards revealed the following information regarding circulation:

- ◇ About one in twenty volumes was ever signed out, and no item showed more than two loans;
- ◇ Only literature (poetry and fiction) was borrowed, except one volume of Zhitlovsky's philosophical writings;
- ◇ The most popular single author was Sholem Asch, showing about a dozen loans of his various novels;
- ◇ During the 1980s and early 1990s, one reader worked his way through the complete works of S. Y. Abramovitsh (Mendele Moykher-Sforim), one of the three Yiddish "classic" writers;
- ◇ No one has ever borrowed Guy de Maupassant.¹⁸

Paulina Kirman took care of the library until the mid-1990s, when her health began to deteriorate and space constraints made the library a source of some contention within the Peretz community. For several years the library stayed in its location but was used as a meeting room, without any programming or regular staffing to facilitate use by teachers or members.¹⁹ Kirman died

¹⁷ Vancouver Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture. Organization Papers. File: "Library History." This is not as odd as it may seem. Older members of the Peretz community who hail from Winnipeg report excellent relations between Ukrainian and Jewish children while they were growing up in the North End of Winnipeg between the wars. Beginning with their generation, the goal of Jewish-Ukrainian rapprochement was not unachievable. In addition to feelings of familiarity engendered by their historic and linguistic knowledge of each other, Ukrainian-Canadians of this era were simply less anti-Semitic than later immigrants. The Ukrainian immigrants of this era were often fleeing the same czarist repression as the Jews, and were more likely than later immigrants to have been influenced by revolutionary ideas of national autonomy. It was not a huge leap to extend this idea to Jews as a national group. In the wake of the failed 1905 Russian revolution, Jews and Ukrainians who immigrated to Canada shared more political and social bonds than at any other time (Aster, 1988).

¹⁸ The complete works of de Maupassant, in Yiddish translation, are famous for being the most over-represented (and least required) books at the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts, which collects and re-distributes old Yiddish books.

¹⁹ In fact, from 1997 to 1999 I performed many librarian duties at the Peretz Shule, sometimes with another volunteer, David Kaetz, who lived only part of the year in Vancouver. The two of us combined could never approach the workload that Kirman invested in the library. The best we could do was to maintain a holding pattern. Our one true accomplishment was saving a number of books that had been packed in boxes and put in the basement during re-painting, only to be damaged in a flood; a subsidiary activity was sorting many boxes of donations either to put on the shelves or to ship to the National Yiddish Book Center.

in the fall of 1999, about the same time that the Peretz Shule was packing up to move out of its building into temporary quarters, while its old building was demolished and a new building developed. The new facility was completed late in 2001, including a purpose-built library named after Paulina Kirman. The organization as a whole renamed itself the Vancouver Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture, to better describe its purpose now that it is not primarily a school for children.

At about the time of the inauguration of the new building, a new member joined the Peretz community, a native Yiddish speaker with a love of books who had just retired to Vancouver, Al Stein (see Figure 5). Stein took over the duties of volunteer librarian. He obtained a small grant for the computerization of the library catalog. Even the existing cards represented only a fraction of the current holdings, which continue to grow. With the grant he hired a librarian and several technical assistants to enter romanized catalog records using inexpensive, Roman-alphabet, Web-mounted software. Since none of this staff read Yiddish, a band of volunteer seniors provide romanized versions of titles: all of them had to learn library romanization to do this. The library's holdings are now cataloged and donations are regularly added and, if requested, they are willing to send any non-rare item anywhere in the world by mail to make the books available to users. This will, they hope, provide access for users who may not have borrowing privileges at a library with a Yiddish collection, or who may lack a local Yiddish collection entirely.



FIGURE 5 Al Stein in the Kirman Library of the Vancouver Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture, 2003. Stein has deep connections to Western Canada's Yiddish cultural life: born into a Yiddish-speaking family in Calgary, he spent childhood summers with his grandparents in the Jewish farm colony of Rumsey, where his two cousins still farm. His uncle was the Yiddish and Hebrew educator in Rumsey.

CONCLUSION

A Library Full of Living Jews

I was in a library packed with books
and quickly ran out with confused thoughts:
it's not books I seek, let them browse in peace—
I seek a library full of Jews, living Jews.

(Sutzkever, 2003)

While neither of the experiments in Jewish culture explored in this paper—the farm colonies of the Canadian prairies and the Yiddish secular school movement—has continued in a form extensive enough to influence mainstream Jewish consciousness, their importance lies in precisely how they enlarged the Jewish experience of the twentieth century, not to mention their implicit challenge to conceptions of what does and does not constitute Jewish life in the modern era. The community of Edenbridge, Saskatchewan, used books as an intrinsic part of its mission, which strove to locate new sources of Jewish independence. Its members' particular situations led them to create a Jewish community from scratch in an unknown locality, Saskatchewan, with an unfamiliar way of life, farming. This can be seen as part of the much greater quest to formulate new conceptions of who Jews were or who they could become in an unfettered public arena. The books mentioned by Usiskin as a source of regeneration and comfort during pogroms, war, at the death of a cultural figure, or even merely as something to read during a long Saskatchewan winter, reveal a broad, international perspective in which Jewish struggles were linked to each other across history, and contemporary Jewish struggles were linked with the struggles of others against oppression.

A generation later, yet further removed from the Eastern European homeland, another assortment of utopian dreamers created a Yiddish secular school in Vancouver, motivated in part by an urgent post-Holocaust need to formulate a response that would nurture their community in its grief. Transmitting values through books is a culturally resonant practice for Jews, even those who are not religious, and it seems fitting that Holocaust survivor Paulina Kirman, when she joined the Vancouver Peretz Shule, was motivated to keep Yiddish books active in the community for as long as she was able.

In spite of the differences, a thread connects these stories, over and above their geographic location in Western Canada. These libraries form one component of Yiddish language activism, which literary critic Irving Massey has identified as a highly “group-aware” movement in which the needs of the community and the greater good of its members become inextricably bound up with the language. Massey's mother was the poet and Montreal *klal-tuerin* Ida Maze (among other things, she was an active volunteer at Montreal Jewish Public Library, Canada's premier Yiddish collection). Massey describes the dynamic at work in the artistic endeavors of his mother's generation:

[In Ida Maze] we encounter the poet's responsibility to her group as the very essence of her writing. No doubt this is so in part because she

was working in a minority language, which necessarily carries with it a high degree of group awareness; the matrix of her culture could not disappear from her consciousness as readily as it might have done from that of a poet working in the medium of the cultural majority.

(Massey, 1994, p. 97)

The distinction between Maze and the Peretz activists, however, is that the Yiddish language does not play a central role in the lives of virtually any Peretz members: they do not use Yiddish to express themselves as a natural part of their lives, as Maze did. It is only at the Peretz school that they use any Yiddish at all. They struggle, therefore, to train a child to read the *fir kashes* (the Four Questions) in Yiddish for the annual communal seder.

To an outsider this kind of activity seems odd: if Yiddish is not their language, why bother with Yiddish? The answer lies in their belief in the Yiddish-speaking Jewry of the past as in and of itself important, yet strongly underrepresented in traditional forms of Jewish education. They believe that they must bring special awareness to this history in order to make it part of the living consciousness of the next generation. If Ida Maze was highly group-aware because she worked in Yiddish, the current workings of the Vancouver Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture are Yiddish because they are group-aware.

The maintenance of a Yiddish language library in Vancouver, against all odds, can only be ascribed to a certain stubbornness of spirit. The Peretz community continues to insist on the importance of a Jewish past that most Jews—including its own members—cannot access directly. That this past will inevitably be filtered and condensed due to translation, and that it will need constant re-examination in order to keep it a living and sustaining component of Jewish identity, does not reduce its power.

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IMAGE CREDITS

1. Collection of the Dorot Jewish Division, The New York Public Library.

2. Collection of the Kirman Library, Vancouver Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture.
3. Collection of the Dorot Jewish Division, The New York Public Library.
4. Vancouver Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture archives.
5. Photo by Faith Jones.

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