Yiddish Books in the Canadian Hinterland: Some Collectors and Collections in Western Canada

Faith Jones

Abstract: Yiddish book culture in Western Canada can be said to fall into two categories: Winnipeg and not-Winnipeg. This paper examines the latter only, looking in detail at one library in the farm community of Edenbridge, Saskatchewan, which may be said to be emblematic of cultural organization in these colonies; and at one unusual manifestation of the Yiddish secular school library, the Kirman Library at the Vancouver Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture.

Biographical note:
Faith Jones is a librarian in the Dorot Jewish Division of The New York Public Library. She wrote her master’s thesis on the Vancouver Peretz Shule (now the Vancouver Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture) and its Yiddish-language library. She is currently working in a three-person collective to translate the complete poetic works of Celia Dropkin. Her other areas of research interest include women’s, gay and lesbian, and labour studies.
Email: fjones@nypl.org

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 to find not a single secondary resource specifically devoted to this topic. But while Winnipeg’s unique status as a Yiddish centre in Western Canada remains unexplored in academic circles, perhaps even less well-known, even to cultural activists, is the history of Yiddish in the smaller Western communities, whose Yiddish history is necessarily different from the story of Yiddish as it evolved in the large cities of the United States, or in Eastern Canada. Thus this paper does not explore the Winnipeg milieu but focuses on smaller and more far-flung regions.

An active if tiny Yiddish cultural life did exist in Western Canada from early on. A photograph taken circa 1890 of Abraham Klenmen, the founder of the Wapella, Saskatchewan farming colony, shows him reading the New York daily Di Yidishn Gazetn.
This photograph was likely taken by Abraham Klenman’s son, Alexander Klenman, later an important early photographer of Western Canada. It is probably because of this circumstance that we have this document at all.

It is of course no coincidence that many Jewish farmers spoke and read Yiddish. The Jewish Colonization Association specifically targeted Yiddish speakers when promoting the idea of Jewish farm settlements.

JCA pamphlet circa 1910, entitled “Important questions and correct answers for those who are considering setting on land in Canada”
The settlers used Yiddish, not exclusively but as an integral part of their communal life, as evidenced in a photograph from around 1918, with text in English, Yiddish and Hebrew.

In the larger cities, Yiddish literary clubs, dramatic groups, and at least one literary journal made their appearance.

Western Canada is also the subject of Yiddish literature, showing up in poetry and memoirs as well as literary prose.
Treyder Ed, stories by the Alberta left-wing activist and Jewish community leader Elkhanen Henson. The lead story in this collection won the Tsukunft literary prize in 1945, indicating a fair level of literary merit.

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.¹ Book stamps from these libraries can be found in books still in collections in synagogue and community centre libraries, having made their way there after the farm colonies folded up in the 1950s and 60s.

The Montefiore community was located on the Alberta-Saskatchewan border. This book stamp is in a Yiddish book in the collection of the Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta.

In the large cities of the prairies, at least two Yiddish libraries existed: in Calgary, the large and active Peretz Shule had a library, and in Edmonton at least one short-lived Yiddish library existed.

¹ There is some indication that the JCA prepared books for distribution to the farm colonies, according to Cheryl Jaffee of the National Library of Canada. I am grateful to her for bringing this avenue of inquiry to my attention.
These histories of surprisingly diverse and active Yiddish book culture offers 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. I would like to focus on only two of those stories, to illustrate different aspects of this history.
By a stroke of luck, the single full-length memoir of the Edenbridge, Saskatchewan Jewish 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 at the time a young teenager. His memoir, *Oksn un Motorn* [Oxen and Tractor] 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 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 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 3 or 4 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.2

Not only does Usiskin give us this detailed story of the founding of the library, he also throughout the memoir describes the various ways books were used by members of the community. He describes his roommate staying up late one winter evening reading A Velt unh Thveren, the Yiddish translation of Robert Ingersoll’s How to Reform Mankind. Ingersoll was a nineteenth-century American free-thinker, 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 central building, the synagogue, school and meeting hall, where the library was also housed. Sensing the bleak mood of the gathered individuals, most of whom had family members in the war zone, Usiskin chose from the library something to read them to lift their spirits. What he chose was the poem of 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 community honoured his request to “remember me with laughter” and gathered to read one of his humourous stories. And finally, Usiskin actually lists the colonists’ favourite books. Thus, we can establish a pretty good idea of what was on the shelves in the Edenbridge Central Library circa 1916.

2 Quoted in Marcia Usiskin Basman’s translation, published as Uncle Mike’s Edenbridge, (Winnipeg: Peguis, 1983), pp. 63-65
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.” He also lists Shimen Frug, the Russian and Yiddish-language poet, socialist Zionist and proponent of Jewish agricultural labour; the Russian anarchist Pyotr Kropotkin; Yankev 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, and genre of their writings, not to mention literary quality, they do share thematically the examination of how societies organize themselves.

Image 10:
The cover of David Edelstadt’s *Shriften* (London, Arbayer fraynd: 1909) illustrates the sweatshop poets’ ruling ethic with the shackles of oppression broken on the lyre of poetry, from behind which the Jewish star rises, emanating light.

Several Yiddish literary figures also visited Edenbridge, between stops on reading tours of Western Canada. One such figure was Leib Malach, the writer of melodramatic plays and novels. Malach was asked to read for the community, and according to Usiskin, Malach was a particularly effective writer of his sort, in that an old man sitting beside Usiskin cried continuously through the reading while complaining from time to time that the material was only *shund*, trash, fit for old women.

Edenbridge did not survive to a second generation of Jewish farmers, though its cemetery is now a designated national heritage site.
The Vancouver Peretz Shule, 1945-present

The Vancouver Peretz Shule was founded in 1945, rather late in the day for a Yiddish secular school. Unlike the much earlier Calgary Peretz Shule, it was never a day school and did not produce the same level of cultural activity. It did, and continues to, provide supplementary school education after school and on Sundays, adult education programs, clubs including reading groups, and communal holiday celebrations. In the early years, it had two separate parent groups, one conducted in English which sponsored programs on education and child rearing, the other (the Muter Farein) conducted in Yiddish and interested not in the improvement of the child but in the improvement of the parent. The Muter Farein read literature and sponsored philosophical lectures, in addition to performing much of the activity of day-to-day running of the shule. The Peretz Shule was also home to one Yiddish-language author, Sid Sarkin.

Image 11:
Zikhroyynes: In der Alter Heym, by Yeshayahu Zarhi or Shayke Zarkin, known in English as Sid Sarkin (Toronto: Farlag Vokhnblat, 1973). This memoir about his life in the labour movement was intended to be in two volumes, the first covering his years in Lithuania and the second covering his life in Canada. Unfortunately, at least for historians of Canadian Jewry, only the first volume was ever published.

The Peretz Shule ran into a great deal of community friction during the McCarthy era, with accusations of Stalinism making the mainstream community eager to withdraw
support as fully and publicly as possible. In spite of the withdrawal of both monetary support and the use of communal networks, the Peretz Shule weathered the storm partly due to the 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 Yiddish-speaking culture. One of this group of survivors was Paulina Kirman, who had made her way to Vancouver from Poland.

In 1977, she started the Peretz Shule library, using as a start-up collection books from her and her husband’s personal collection, books weeded from local libraries, and donations from members. She solicited donations of subscriptions to periodicals, and cataloged on cards about 500 books. Children’s books in English were included to support curriculum. Initially the library was used for reading groups, to find material for school activities, with a limited amount of lending.

Image 12:
Paulina Kirman. An economist in Poland, in Canada she became Slavic languages cataloguer at the University of British Columbia, also taking care of books in Yiddish, Hebrew and Latin.

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3 For a complete description of this history, see my article “Between Suspicion and Censure: Attitudes towards the Left in Postwar Vancouver,” *Canadian Jewish Studies* Vol. 6 (1998), pp. 1-24.
The Peretz Library in 1977. On the newspaper rack: *Morgn Freiheit*, a Communist Party publication (New York); *Di Prese*, (affiliation unknown, Buenos Aires); unidentified periodical called *Ketav-Et; Folks-Shtime*, also necessarily Communist (Warsaw); *Forverts*, formerly Socialist Party but in this era moderate-liberal (New York); and the *Jewish Western Bulletin*, at that time a right-wing community weekly (Vancouver).

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. When I was a library student, 1997 to 1999, I took care of this library with guidance from Mrs. Kirman. She died in the fall of 1999; I left Vancouver in the spring of 2000 to take my current job in New York; and the Peretz Shule packed the library, and the rest of its operations, into boxes and moved to temporary quarters for a year while its old building was demolished and a new building was developed. The new facility was completed late in 2001, including a purpose-built library named after Paulina Kirman. By a stroke of luck at about this time a new member joined the Peretz community, a native Yiddish speaker with a love of books who had just retired to Vancouver, Al Stein.
Mr. Stein is very ambitious about what the Peretz library can accomplish now that most of the readers for Yiddish are gone. He obtained a small grant for the computerization of the library catalogue. Even the existing cards represented only a fraction of the current holdings, which have continued to grow. With the grant he has hired a librarian and several technical assistants to enter romanized catalogue records using librarycom.com. 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. They have perhaps 1,000 books to catalogue in total and have completed a few hundred. When completed, their hope is that users anywhere in the world will be able to search the library catalogue, 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.

I took these pictures on a recent trip to Vancouver, when I visited the Peretz Shule and interviewed Mr. Stein. As we were finishing up, the library began to fill up with people coming in for a committee meeting. I was trying to get out of their way as efficiently as
possible and apologized for running overtime, and Mr. Stein quoted me a few lines from
a poem he recently translated from Abraham Sutzkever, a poem about thinking about the
vanished, pre-Holocaust world while sitting in a library:

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.\(^4\)

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\(^4\) Translation by Al Stein of Abraham Sutzkever’s “Dermonen Zikh”, published as “Reminiscing” in *Canadian Jewish Outlook, May/June 2003.*
Photo credits:
4. Collection of the Vancouver City Archives.
8. Collection of the Kirman Library, Vancouver Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture.
11. Collection of the Kirman Library, Vancouver Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture.
12. Vancouver Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture archives.
13. Vancouver Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture archives.
14. Photo by Faith Jones.
15. Photo by Faith Jones.
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