

Smith, Cherie. *Mendel's Children: A Family Chronicle*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1997. 175 pp.

My first introduction to Cherie Smith's book *Mendel's Children*, took place shortly after the book's debut, when Cherie was undergoing treatment for the cancer that later claimed her. A friend of Cherie's gave a public reading of excerpts from her book. My first impression was that the book typified that genre which is best called "Jewish pioneers". I recently picked up the book again and saw it as everyone's autobiography. *Mendel's Children* is not just another story about the immigration experiences of eastern European Jews. I recently uprooted my family from Vancouver to Montreal, and this opened me to the nuances that make a family chronicle. I could readily identify with Cherie's great-grandparents David and Sheindel Finn, who moved across thousands of miles to obtain a better life for their children.

Between 1880 and the First World War three million Jews walked and rode out of Russia and its demeaning laws against Jews. *Mendel's Children* is a chronicle for the descendants of these early refugees. Many similar books emphasize life in the new country and the East European past of the newcomer ceases to exist. Cherie Smith balances life in the new world with vignettes of life in the old. Not enough grandchildren and great-grandchildren know why their grandparents and great-grandparents left Eastern Europe. It was not just the poverty, or the humiliation, or the narrowness of the life. It was all of these. Cherie Smith describes how "poverty and terror [became] an integral part of Jewish life throughout Eastern Europe"(12). Getting to Canada was no less perilous: "Everyone was desperately ill. Babies vomited their mother's milk...the stench and the accumulated filth became intolerable, the washrooms indescribably foul."(14) Yet none of this mattered. What mattered was leaving behind Eastern Europe. The Finns and the Shatsky's were Cherie Smith's maternal relatives. Weary of the pogroms and the poverty, they immigrated to Canada in 1882. In describing

her family Cherie Smith doesn't mince words. Her chronicle illustrates how her extended family "made bold by their desperation, found their way to the Canadian West where they scrambled, scrounged and sometimes scoundrelled their living." (10). Each member of her extended family is characterized with a deft and succinct pen. Her descriptions are sparse but telling. In describing her great-grandfather, Mendel Steiman, Cherie notes that "[he] was a good-hearted, gentle dairyman, not unlike Shalom Aleichem's Tevye" (72).

*Mendel's Children* is the saga of one family's efforts to integrate into this new life, but it is much more than this. Cherie shares with us anecdotes about her various relatives, and through her generosity we get glimpses of life in both Czarist Russia and Western Canada. Her stories provide an interesting and alternative perspective on how the small towns of Western Canada developed, as well as how the various newcomers contributed to their adopted communities.

When the Finn family arrived in Winnipeg in 1882 there were thirty-eight Jewish families to help them get settled. By the 1890's the Finns had established themselves. She notes that "physically powerful, Great-Grandfather [Finn]" also had a reputation for being strong-willed and opinionated ... "[he] was one of the leaders responsible for building the Rosh Pina Orthodox Synagogue" (18). Cherie recalled her maternal grandmother Elizabeth Shatsky as "slim, fragile. Fine-featured ...out of place among the slop pails, hand pumps, ... and hen houses ... [yet] never put on airs or complained of the life she was to play out with Grandpa Sam" (27). Her stories also provide a stimulating and alternate perspective on the development of the small towns in Western Canada and how the various newcomers contributed to their adopted communities. By the 1920s "in most of the little towns along the CP and CN Railway lines, one could be sure of finding a Jewish doctor, lawyer or dentist and a storekeeper or two or three, depending on the size or importance of the town" (128). Cherie comments that "in 1928 the small town of Kamsack [where she was born]

included twenty Jewish families, a number that would double within the decade”(6).

The main theme of the history of Jewish immigration and settlement in the United States and Canada tends to address the inhumanity of the sweatshops and the work of unions such as the International Ladies and Garment Workers Union. In the histories of western settlement, Jewish agricultural settlements such as Wapella, the Hoffer Colony, and other agricultural settlements in Manitoba and Saskatchewan are well studied. The building of the railroads, however, does not bring to mind images of Jewish labourers. Cherie Smith describes how her great-grandfather, David Finn, “worked for the Canadian Pacific Railway splitting ties ...grading and ballasting the rail line and laying the track to Medicine Hat.”(16) The notion of Jews helping to build the railways is not a common image of Jewish settlement in Canada. One tends to think instead of British foremen, Chinese workers, and the North West Mounted Police keeping order in the camps.

Cherie Smith’s family stories join her childhood to the lives of her ancestors and in doing so gives all Jews, but especially those born and raised in the Canadian West, a sense of history, creating a seamless connection between their lives, hers, and ours. One of the ways she does this is through recipes belonging to different members of her family. She comments “an old family cookbook has become as much a book of remembrance as of recipes”(44). A recipe for cookies conjures up the image and stories of her great-aunt Bessie who labeled Cherie the *vildeh hyah*. Other recipes recall her mother’s move to Winnipeg with her two daughters while Cherie’s father Iser was in Yale, translating documents for the war effort during World War II.

I particularly enjoyed the last chapter, which details the search for her father’s younger brother. Cherie’s description of the burning phone-lines, the questions, and the anxiety recalled for me the stories of other, more recent, Russian newcomers to our shores. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

In her notes Cherie Smith calls this book a “labour of love”. The book reads this way also. Her appreciation of her family’s struggles, their successes and their failures, comes through in her writing. For those of us who have yet to write our stories Cherie Smith has given us something with which we can readily identify. It is both informing and entertaining.

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*Tulchinsky, Gerald. Branching Out: The Transformation of the Canadian Jewish Community Toronto: Stoddart, 1998. 470 pages*

Although Jews are considered “the people of the book”, they were not inspired to write the history of their own community in Canada until the 1990s. Journalists Abraham Rhinewine and Benjamin Sack wrote histories of the community in 1932 and 1945 respectively, but these works, important for the time, stopped at the turn of the twentieth century, and were descriptive rather than analytical. It was not until 1992, when Gerald Tulchinsky’s *Taking Root* was published, that a serious, scholarly perspective of Canadian Jewish life emerged. That study examined the evolution of the community until 1920. *Branching Out* is the second volume of Tulchinsky’s opus, tracing the developments of the community from the 1920s until the late 1990s. These two volumes are sober, scholarly, and well written. Tulchinsky has covered most of the major themes of Jewish life in Canada, and, in *Branching Out*, has opened some heretofore unexplored aspects of Jewish contributions to Canadian society. We finally have a history of a community that is comprehensive and intelligent, one that should be read by all Canadian Jews, and all students of Canadian ethnicity, immigration, and social adaptation.

The theme that runs through Tulchinsky’s analysis of the community in the last eight decades of the twentieth century is that while it became more diverse in terms of culture,