

Michael Mandel, *The Jewish Hour: The Golden Age of Toronto Yiddish Radio Show and Newspaper* (Toronto: Now and Then Books, 2016), 325 pp., ISBN: 9780991900978.

Despite its name, Michael Mandel's *The Jewish Hour: The Golden Age of Toronto Yiddish Radio Show and Newspaper* is not an historical study of the Jewish-oriented radio and newspaper scene in Toronto during the years straddling the Second World War. Rather, as the cover copy suggests, it is Michael Mandel's memoir-like effort to discover and celebrate his father. Michael Mandel was four years old when his father, Max Mandel, something of a Yiddish cultural impresario and Jewish broadcast pioneer in Toronto, passed away. This is not to say that the book is a simple exercise in filial piety. It isn't. Drawing on a rich cache of press, photo, and other materials related to early Jewish-focus broadcasting in Toronto, much of it in Yiddish, as well as storied family lore, Michael Mandel draws attention to the important place of his father in the development of local Yiddish radio broadcasting and, by extension, his impact on the social, political, and cultural life of the overwhelmingly-immigrant Jewish population of Toronto from the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s.

As explained by Michael Mandel, the backstory to the pre-Second World War emergence of Jewish-oriented radio in Toronto, a Sunday mainstay in many Yiddish-speaking homes, begins with Dorothy Dworkin, powerhouse Jewish social and political activist and entrepreneur in Toronto. Dworkin was involved in a number of different enterprises, but she was primarily known as a travel agent. As Mandel notes, in an earlier day a travel agent played a much different and far greater role in immigrant community life than is the case today. "The travel agent in those days was a combination lawyer, politician, immigrant aid society and vocational agency." (p. 25) Indeed, in the Toronto Jewish street, Dworkin was widely regarded as a proverbial rainmaker. She was said to know the right people and, for a fee, she could make things happen. She could guarantee that hard-earned remittance money was delivered safely to family in Poland or Russia; she could assist community members, many functionally-illiterate in English, to fill out applications to sponsor the immigration of family from Europe; and, it was hinted, she could get results when communal agencies like the Jewish Immigrant Aid Society weren't able.

Amidst her other enterprises, Dworkin was the Toronto distributor for a number of widely-read New York Yiddish newspapers. Ever the entrepreneur, in 1935 she also began publishing a local Yiddish daily, the *Kanader Nayes*, inserted as a free supplement into the New York newspapers Dworkin sold, much to the displeasure of freestanding Jewish newspapers struggling to survive in Toronto. The *Kanader Nayes* not only offered Toronto buyers of New York newspapers the bonus of a free

Toronto-content Yiddish paper, it also provided Dworkin a vehicle by which to promote her other business interests while recouping her costs through the sale of advertising space. The formula worked so well that a year later, Dworkin applied much the same promotional and funding recipe to radio. She bought broadcast time on a local private radio station for a weekly *Jewish Hour* that combined entertainment, community news, and of course, advertising. Just as one hand washes the other, the *Kanader Nayes* newspaper promoted heavily the *Jewish Hour*, and the *Jewish Hour* promoted heavily the *Kanader Nayes*. To make all this work, Dworkin relied heavily on Max Mandel who, for three decades, sought to ensure that listening to the *Jewish Hour* was as much a part of Jewish Toronto life as was schmaltz herring.

However, as Michael Mandel makes clear, there was a fundamental difference between the *Kanader Nayes* and the weekly radio broadcast the *Jewish Hour*. The *Kanader Nayes* had a decided editorial slant – secular, pro-labour and Poale Zion, but bedrock anti-communist. The *Jewish Hour*, largely overseen by the author's father, was less editorial and more entertainment-driven. It offered listeners news of Jewish interest, but was more religiously and politically neutral in content than was the *Kanader Nayes*. The *Jewish Hour* also relied heavily on live musical performances by local talent and visiting stage performers – each and every one of them, it would seem, meriting their name being mentioned in Mandel's book. The heavy musical content of the radio show was interspersed with public service-like announcements about forthcoming Jewish organizational events, and, to pay the bills, commercials. This was all in Yiddish initially, though as the years passed an increasing amount of the *Jewish Hour* was in 'Yinglish' and English that came to dominate the Toronto Jewish street.

As Mandel remarks, one cannot separate the three-decades-long story of the *Jewish Hour*, nor the *Kanader Nayes*, from the major currents of Jewish concern washing over the Toronto Jewish population from the mid-1930s through the mid-1950s – the privations of the Great Depression, the bitter battles between communist and non-communist needle-trade unions, anxiety at the rise of Nazism abroad and antisemitism in Canada, the Canadian war effort, including the encouragement of recruiting Jews into the Canadian military, and the fate of European Jews. In the post-war period, focus shifted to the plight of survivors, the birth of a Jewish state in the Middle East, and the generational transition from a Yiddish-speaking and largely working class immigrant population to an English-speaking, middle class, and Canadian-aculturated population. It was this last point that gradually spelled the end of the *Kanader Nayes* and the *Jewish Hour*. If the newspaper and the radio program mirrored the strength of Yiddish life in Toronto, by the mid-1950s the decline of Yiddish in favour of English foretold the end of both the *Kanader Nayes* and Yiddish (but not Jewish-oriented) radio programming in Toronto.

Ultimately, I found the book to be ‘homey,’ often entertaining and revealing of a little-explored aspect of Toronto Jewish life. However, I also feel it necessary to add a cautionary note for would-be readers. If Mandel is strong on the chronology, he is weak on historical analysis. Enthusiastic as Mandel was to recover the world of his father (the cover copy states his book is “a labour of love”), Mandel’s enthusiasm cannot make up for shortfalls when it comes to the art of historical inquiry. Too often Mandel foregoes opportunities to probe issues in depth, demonstrates skewed understanding of historical currents of the day, or confuses gossip with fact. At times he simply gets facts wrong. Thus, rather than view *The Jewish Hour* as finely-crafted history, readers should regard it more as a loving work of nostalgia.

I understand fully that nostalgia has its place. Mandel’s book stirred memories of my own childhood home. I was born into a Yiddish-speaking, working-class immigrant family in Toronto. Every Sunday at 10:00 a.m. the *Yiddishah Shtundah*, the *Harry Harris Jewish Hour*, dominated our kitchen. The program, a later addition to the local Jewish broadcast scene, was pumped out of CHML in Hamilton. By the mid-1950s more of the show was pre-recorded and contained more English than Max Mandel’s *Jewish Hour*. Otherwise, it was not appreciably different. It too provided listeners with a mixture of organizational announcements, cantorial, or what I would describe as bar mitzvah-style music, Jewish-interest news of the day, and a seemingly-endless series of commercials for everything from plastic slipcovers and kosher bakeries to denturists and matchmakers. Some commercials contained catchy jingles that I remember to this day. As I write this review, the jingle for Crown Bread Cakes and Rolls has become an earworm.

Harold Troper
University of Toronto