

**Pierre Anctil, *Jacob Isaac Segal: A Montreal Yiddish Poet and His Milieu* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2017), 400 pp., ISBN: 978-0776625713.**

Pierre Anctil's *Jacob Isaac Segal: A Montreal Yiddish Poet and His Milieu* is a literary biography of a significant founding figure of Montreal Yiddish literature that paints him as a solitary writer, a communal activist, and a friend, an intensely modern urban writer and a soul yearning for the religious authenticity and purity of a remembered East European past. The work, which is interspersed with translations of Segal's poetry, places Segal's writing in life in the context of the burgeoning Montreal Yiddish literary scene, and it also functions as a collective portrait of Yiddish literary Montreal in the early twentieth century. Anctil's analysis centres on Segal as a figure of international renown as well as a writer whose attention to local spaces helped to establish a Montreal Yiddish literary tradition.

In many ways, the work is not a traditional biography. The author eagerly shows his hand, describing the archival texts from which he draws his narrative and including translations of documents in the appendix. He does not dwell on Segal's personal life – his wife, children, teaching career, and siblings are mentioned only a handful of times. Instead, the primary focus of the work is to demonstrate that Segal was essential to the existence of a Yiddish literary world in Montreal. The work was originally published in French, and it was translated by Vivian Felsen in a remarkable feat of multilingual literary and scholarly creativity and collaboration. Felsen translated Segal's poetry for the volume directly from the Yiddish originals.

The work primarily describes Segal's life in terms of the development of his writing and the cultural environment in which it was produced, including quotations from Segal's contemporaries that illuminate his personality and style. Jacob Isaac Segal (1896–1954) was raised by his mother in his grandfather's home in Korets, Volhynia, after his father's early passing. Segal experienced extreme poverty while in his grandfather's home as a result of his grandfather's cruel and humiliating refusal to support his daughter and her family. He arrived in Montreal in 1910 at the age of eighteen already a budding poet whose scars from, and nostalgia for, his Korets youth made an indelible impact on his later writing. He began writing poetry independently of any literary movement, and his literary career flowered alongside, and spurred the growth of, the Montreal Yiddish literary scene.

As Anctil convincingly argues, Jacob Isaac Segal was celebrated as a founder of Montreal Yiddish literature. He received attention from Montreal's Yiddish-speaking literati early on, upon the publication of his first poems in the newspaper, in part because they were so eager to note literary production in the city, which they saw as evidence of Jewish cultural uplift. H. M. Caiserman, a labour leader and activist,

introduced the shy, introverted poet to the members of the Writers Association. Anctil describes this moment as pivotal to Montreal Yiddish literary history. Caiserman went on to be a lifelong supporter of Segal's work, providing him and his family steady piecework with which to make a living in the needle trades and promoting Segal's literary career. His draft biography of Segal significantly informs Anctil's research, and Anctil weaves Caiserman's activism and life into his biography of Segal. Segal's work garnered praise within and beyond the Montreal Yiddish community, especially from poet Melekh Ravitch, who was living in Vienna at the time. Segal's work also caught the attention of American Yiddish writers who had organized loosely into the literary movement *Di Yunge* in 1907. Segal carried on an extensive correspondence with these writers, as well as with leading Yiddish literary figures in Vilna and Warsaw. In addition to his poetry, Segal became an accomplished reviewer of Yiddish literary works, and Anctil claims: "It is not an exaggeration to say that... Segal reviewed all the Yiddish literature produced during his lifetime, and that he made himself its interpreter for a Canadian public" (144).

Within the Montreal Jewish community, Caiserman was able to convince communal activists to financially support Segal in order to establish Montreal as the hub of Yiddish creativity. By interspersing information about Caiserman's own biography in his writing on Segal, Anctil demonstrates modern Yiddish literature's dependence on Yiddish *kultur-tuers*, communal activists who took it upon themselves to sponsor, celebrate, and further the Yiddish literary enterprise.

Segal found it difficult to pursue an enriching literary career in Montreal, where the small number of Yiddish-speakers were all poor recent immigrants who could not sustain a literary school. In 1923, he left Montreal for New York, where he hoped to be reenergized by joining a circle of writers in the capital of Yiddish culture in North America. Unfortunately, his stay was marked by material deprivation and the tragic death of his six-year-old daughter. He returned to Montreal in 1926 but maintained friendships and relationships with the New York poets through visits and extensive correspondence, and his sustained contacts with New York poets gave Segal greater influence in the Canadian Yiddish world.

Upon his return to Montreal, Segal continued to publish his poetry despite the serious economic depression of the 1930s. Anctil attributes Segal's success in this regard to his popularity among disparate Yiddish-language cultural factions who took it upon themselves to promote his work as a communal project to ensure the prestige of Yiddish literature in Montreal. As Anctil explains, Yiddish literature came into its own during an economic downturn because of communal financial support and small-scale sponsorship of Yiddish publication ventures.

Anctil describes with immediacy and compassion the shock felt by the Yiddish lit-

erary world of Montreal as news of the Holocaust reached Canadian shores. It was a crisis in which writers felt that their themes and literary pursuits lacked relevance, their world was cut off from its foundation. Segal paid tribute to those who perished through poems that “emphasized the idyllic and saintly character of a place forever lost, yet continuously recreated in his poetic imagination,” writing determinedly and reverentially about the Yiddish language and the destroyed world of his childhood. At the same time, Segal increasingly wrote poetry that thematized Canadian subject matter (257). As Anctil explains: “For Segal, the turning point finally came with the realization that the country of his birth and his childhood no longer existed, other than in the hidden recesses of his imagination and the lines of his poetry. He transferred to the city of Montreal his emotional attachment to his native land of which only a distant memory remained” (262). Through his work, he transformed Montreal into a symbolic landscape through which to express his Jewish identity.

Segal died from cardiac arrest in 1954 at the age of fifty-seven, leaving behind several uncompleted manuscripts and projects. His death marked the close of an era of Yiddish literary production in Montreal, as a new group of Yiddish writers settled in Montreal in the wake of the Holocaust and shifted the priorities and character of the Yiddish literary sphere in the city.

In describing Segal’s life, Anctil provides ample, and occasionally superfluous, contextual information about Jewish history that sometimes threatens to swallow the salient points of the biographical narrative. He provides a thick background about the literary activities of Yiddish Montreal that help to place Segal as unique in his generation for his “creative and evocative use of language” (29) at a time when such writing was rare. In the biography, he also demonstrates the precarious nature of Yiddish writing during this time, which was the work of passionate, impoverished writers relying on communal support for publication and distribution of their work. At times repetitive, Anctil’s biography is also curiously non-linear, returning to key moments in Segal’s life repeatedly as they prove relevant to different circumstances. Thus, the chapter “Arrival in Montreal” precedes the chapter “Leaving Korets,” and Anctil traces Segal’s literary relationship to Canadianness toward the end of the biography, introducing a poem from 1930 in a chapter ostensibly about “The Holocaust and its Aftermath.” Though disorienting, this unorthodox sequencing also has the effect of emphasizing the relevance of Segal’s childhood to his later writing, and highlighting key moments, such as his introduction to the Yiddish literary world in Montreal, or his short interlude in New York, as pivotal to his writing career. Nevertheless, this impressive work of scholarship could have benefitted from more careful editing to reduce its repetitiveness, occasionally overwritten passages, and especially its hard-to-follow chronology.

In his thorough work, Anctil balances literary analyses with the representation of political events, communal structures, and the economics of publishing, as well as translations of the poetry itself. Scholars of Yiddish and diasporic literatures, the literature of Montreal, and the literature of trauma will benefit greatly from Anctil's close readings and his amassing of contextual materials that explain the significance of Segal as a poet in his own right and as a central figure around whom Yiddish literary Montreal was formed.

**Jessica Kirzane**

University of Chicago