

Annie Ousset-Krief, *Les Hassidim de la Belle Province: De la Pologne à Montréal* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2017), 242 pp., ISBN: 978-2343108940.

Annie Ousset-Krief's recent publication, *Les Hassidim de la Belle Province*, is an important contribution to the popular literature on contemporary Hasidism – equally vital is its appearance in French. The Hasidic communities of Quebec have long been of great interest to the larger society and even more so since the late 1980s, when demographic growth highlighted their presence in the Mile End and Outremont. Sadly, on the first day of Rosh Hashana, 1988, *La Presse* called this development “Outremont's Jewish Problem,” a characterization that continues to colour inter-cultural relations. As media coverage of Hasidim increased, so too did distortions, misrepresentations, and caricatures, including a sensationalistic series in the *Journal de Montréal* in the spring of 2012, focusing almost exclusively on social control and dissatisfaction within Hasidic communities. These exposures highlight the importance of Ousset-Krief's easily accessible text with its illumination of many of the issues, while emphasizing misunderstanding over hostility.

Ousset-Krief concisely tracks the roots of Hasidism to Europe through to their arrival in Montreal. The chapters address the most important issues facing Hasidic life in Montreal, both the positive and the negative. She writes about the distinction of Chabad Hasidim; the Tasher community of Boisbriand; and some of the challenges in Outremont, such as the eruv, the limitations on sukkot, zoning disagreements, and Purim busses, as well as the strength of family, the strong intra-communal ties, and the joy of holidays. Ousset-Krief presents fairly and evenly both sides in the Outremont affair, without judgement or distortion. She discusses the specifically distinct Montreal reality that includes a grassroots multicultural community group founded by a Palestinian activist and a Hasidic woman – the latter is one of the first Hasidic women to hold public office anywhere in the world.

One of Ousset-Krief's strengths as an author comes from participation as well as observation. Making contact and being invited into a Hasidic home gave her insight into private Hasidic life that is often poorly understood in the outside world; for example, underscoring the modernity of her host's husband helping clear the table. She tries to demystify the Hasidim and allows outsiders a peek inside. This is perhaps best illustrated in her chapter on Hasidic women and their role. By her own admission, her feminism coloured her expectations, but she allows her informants to speak for themselves. She reminds the reader that no matter how one objectively views the status of women in the Hasidic world, many – if not most – speak about their satisfaction. Rather than searching for an academic definition of feminism, she uses an organic one that permits the inclusion of all perspectives, leaving it possible to believe that despite the objective evidence, many Hasidic women are fulfilled and happy.

When I first began reading Ousset-Krief's volume, I was completely taken and I did not put it down for fifty pages. After finishing the book, one of the strengths is her eloquence and directness of language. Ousset-Krief is attempting to write about broad sociohistorical phenomena in a concise volume – not an easy task. The challenge of succinctness lies in simplifying history without distorting it, a fine line to negotiate, but Ousset-Krief does it admirably.

Despite the many virtues of this volume, it also falls victim to historical inaccuracies and hagiography. For an example of the former, documentation has shown that Rabbi Hirschprung did not come to Canada as described, but was on the same ship, the *SS President Pierce*, as the nine Lubavitcher rabbis described in the next paragraph (p. 66). An example of hagiography can be seen on the same page where it is noted that the nine rabbis who arrived on the same ship “traversèrent à pied le continent.” Such a dramatic account – of a 10,000-kilometre trek by foot from Vilna to Vladivostok over the Ural Mountains – is more likely hagiographical than historiographical. Finally, the author echoes the same myth that has engaged many scholars: that Hasidim only arrived in Canada in 1941. Montreal's Hasidic roots can be traced to 1887, and by the interbellum period, there were several Hasidic synagogues and close to a half-dozen rebbes in Montreal. While 1941 arrivals would leave important legacies, and the post-war arrivals would dominate and modify the community even more, Hasidic roots in Montreal go back almost a century and a half.

However, the strength of this book lies in its contemporary profile of the community, especially in explaining its inner workings and how Hasidim fit into Quebecois society. Ousset-Krief summarizes the long and detailed history of Outremont's battle with its Hasidim in a comprehensive way, adding objective clarification to a complex social juggernaut. The author is ultimately optimistic about the turmoil and notes that: “il est clair qu'un pont a été jeté entre les deux communautés et cela laisse augurer d'un meilleur avenir – si chacun fait preuve de la même bonne volonté.” Annie Ousset-Krieff's book offers a concise, informative, and easily accessible overview of the Hasidic communities of Montreal. With insights, historical references, and strong organization, she provides an important contribution to the history of Hasidim in Quebec to a francophone audience.

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