

Frank Myron Guttman and Alexander Wright, *The Sir Mortimer B. Davis Jewish General Hospital* (Montreal: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 2018), 327 pp., ISBN: 978–0773553064.

The imperative of *tzedakah*, commonly translated as charity, but more accurately rendered as justice, has informed Jewish practice for millennia. The recent publication of *The Sir Mortimer B. Davis Jewish General Hospital* by retired physician Frank Myron Guttman, which expanded upon a 50th Anniversary booklet compiled by archivist Alexander Wright to mark the occasion in 1984, demonstrates how Jewish traditions of philanthropy and specific local societal conditions in Montreal combined to launch the founding of a Jewish hospital there in the late 1920s.

Like so many Jewish hospitals in Canada and the United States in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries, the Jewish General Hospital in Montreal was founded to address an underlying antisemitic atmosphere that made it challenging for Jewish doctors to secure postgraduate training and staff appointments at local hospitals, as well as to offer kosher food to patients. The book begins with an overview chapter about the general need for Jewish hospitals, followed by a review of the role Jews have played in the development of medicine over the ages. Guttman then turns to a brief biographical sketch of Mortimer Davis and the state of the Montreal Jewish community in the 1920s before focusing on the founding and development of the Jewish General.

The founding of a Jewish hospital in Montreal was a community effort that can be traced back to 1907. Although an initial effort to establish a hospital did not succeed, realistic plans began to be solidified after a 1928 investigative report confirmed the need and will to raise the necessary funds for such an institution. At a Jewish community-wide meeting in May 1929, the project leaders were able to announce that a significant sum had been pledged toward the building of the hospital, leaving only \$135 000 to be raised by public subscription. The projected plan for an impressive edifice garnered enthusiastic support of all segments of the Jewish community, both from members of the established elite as well as more recent Eastern European immigrants. According to a contemporary observer, “It seemed that the unnatural demarcation of a barrier separating a people into east and west had been completely wiped out.” (77) According to Guttman, the May 1929 gathering was the pivotal moment when the idea for the hospital “could be transformed from theory into bricks and concrete. But first, money had to be raised.” (77) Results exceeded expectations; by the time an architect had been chosen and construction was ready to begin, the campaign had already raised over \$1.5 million, including significant Canadian provincial government funds. More than \$1.2 million of the total had come directly from the Jewish community.

The official groundbreaking for the Jewish General Hospital took place on 3 August 1931, and Lord Bessborough, the Governor General of Canada, performed the honours of inserting the first spade to mark the momentous occasion. The trust funds left by Sir Mortimer B. Davis toward the hospital did not become available until 1978, when it was renamed in his honour. Although contributions towards the hospital had been received from rich and poor alike, most of the funds had come unsurprisingly from wealthy and prominent Jews. These “Uptowners,” such as President-elect Allan Bronfman, a member of the elite family associated with the Seagram’s successful distillery and wine business, were elected to most positions on the Board of Administration. The hospital opened in fall of 1934, the day marked by a host of elegant, festive events. Governor General Bessborough, highly prominent, was moved to praise the new institution as “an ornament to its city, a notable addition to that city’s social services, the Jewish General Hospital stands up fully equipped and full staffed... It is a monument to that spirit of charity towards your fellow men which has always been the characteristic of Jewry throughout the world.” The Jewish commitment to the hospital continued over the years as funds were donated regularly, particularly through the Ladies Auxiliary, that enabled continued resources and services for patients as well as funding for research. At the same time the Canadian government continued to provide varying degrees of support that was supplemented by generous private contributions.

Despite challenges, including financial pressures during the Great Depression, the Jewish General Hospital became known as a model of modern health care, a reputation it has sustained to the present day. From 1933 until 1968, Samuel Cohen, from New York City, served as Superintendent of the hospital, providing stability and continuity for over three decades. Under his direction as well as his successors, the Jewish General continued to provide robust services to patients. Over the decades it has expanded its services and opened myriad specialty units, including those focused on cancer treatment and the Lady Davis Institute for Medical Research. Catering to the kosher dietary needs of the Jewish community continued as a priority throughout the hospital’s existence. When it closed its children’s department in the 1970s, for instance, it agreed to arrange to supply kosher food for Jewish children in other hospitals. Training of physicians and nurses also continued as a focus. Since its inception, the Jewish General Hospital has maintained many important aspects of its Jewish character, including kosher food services. Guttman concludes that the “Jewishness of the hospital will in future largely depend on how much support it receives from the Jewish community.” (193)

Histories of Jewish institutions are always welcome, as they not only preserve important information that might otherwise be lost to posterity, but they also offer broad and welcome insights into the development of Jewish communities over time. To that end, Guttman (and Wright) have provided a wealth of details about the founding, development, and impact of a major Jewish hospital located in a large

urban center. Guttman clearly has a deep appreciation for the history of the hospital that he was associated with as a physician, and is at times an engaging writer. However, he is not a trained historian. The book often reads like a celebratory dinner journal or an institutional annual report, and fails to put the history of the institution into a broader historical context. Still, this volume provides a valuable resource for future historians as they delve into the complex story of Jewish philanthropy in North America.

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