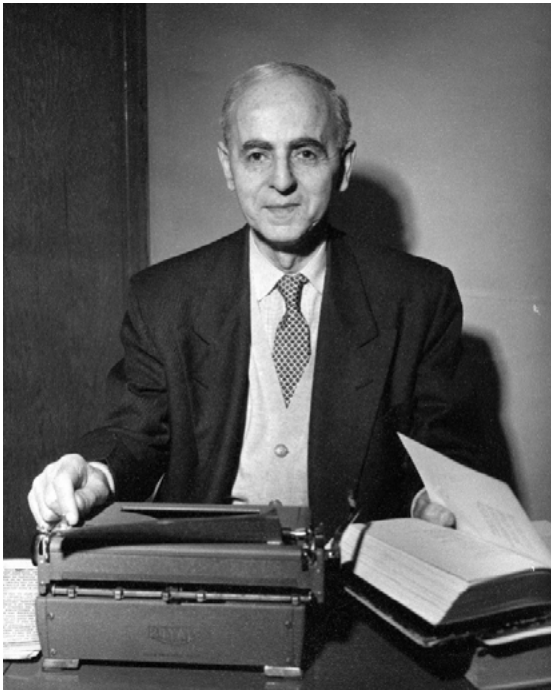


Teigan Goldsmith

**Pieces of a Poet:  
Hyman Edelstein and His Life Lived Through Prose**

In 1987, people in Ottawa's Jewish community gathered at the Chapel Street JCC to attend a lecture given by Nat Edelstein on the life of his father Hyman Edelstein. Hyman was an Irish-born Jew who was best known for his poetry and editorial position at the *Canadian Jewish Times* and later, the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle*. Nat began his lecture by stating that he prepared for his talk by performing some research on his father's life, and to his surprise, discovered a lot about him he hadn't previously known. Nat and Hyman's relationship didn't extend far past his adolescence; at the age of 24, Nat joined the War effort and then, shortly after, moved to Toronto where his contact with his father was sporadic until his death in 1957.



Hyman Edelstein, 1957.  
Photographer: Newton OJA 1-138

He continued by telling the audience about his father's life in Ireland, his academic achievements, and finally, about his life in Canada. From what I've heard, the lecture was well attended by the community because of the interest in his poetry which Nat shared with his audience throughout the presentation.

Little is publicly known about Hyman and the life he lived. Even in the Ottawa Jewish Archives collection, specific information pertaining to Hyman is scarce. The Hyman Edelstein fonds consists of two boxes amounting to 36 cm of textual records, almost all of which are Hyman's poetry, publications, and a handful of photos. Aside from a few financial diaries from his school years, our collection contains nothing that tells us about the man behind the poems beyond, perhaps, the poems themselves. I've

always been a firm believer that no matter what a poem is about, you can see pieces of the author in the words. Hyman's work is no exception.

Hyman Edelstein was born 9 September 1889 in Dublin, Ireland. His parents, Jane Moisel and Abraham Edelstein had immigrated to Ireland from Lithuania, which at the time had been under the rule of Tsarist Russia. Hyman's father made a living framing photos and had a frame shop out front of the family home. The frame shop and home are the subject of one of his better-known poems, *Holy Pictures*.

His book *Spirit of Israel and Other Poems* the introduction is written by an old friend from Dublin named A.J. Leventhal. Leventhal writes about the oddity of someone from Hyman's past writing the introduction for a book published in an entirely different country but quickly follows this up with how right a decision it was. He talks about how Hyman's poetry always shows a window into the past and how "one has not to look far in his work to find nostalgic yearnings for the surroundings of his childhood and youth."

*Holy Pictures* is a great example of Hyman's poetry giving us a window into his past and conveying this nostalgia for his home.

*Holy Pictures*

In my father's house . . . everywhere. . .

Holy Pictures. . .

In the shopwindow in front stood the Ecce Homo

Alongside it the Madonna. . .

In the workshop right behind it stood my father

Sawing away by the mitre-block or hammering stern by the vise

Hewing a pathway for the Lord, for the Temple of Beauty,

Framing Holy Pictures for few pennies of the pious poor. . .

His "fine workmanship" the best Art in the Beauty of Holiness:

Out of the meanest Irish Landscape he wrought a Holy Picture

That the gilt moulding flared about the sea of unblemished glass like the  
sunshine of the golden whins

Around the bog it enclosed: or like a burning Temple-censer

Issuing incense of bog-myrtle. . .

. . . And right behind the workshop, shining,

The kitchen!

—The kitchen shining as with the Shekhinah, shining with my mother,

Golden Sabbath-candlelight of my home . . . my holy mother. . .

*Holy Pictures* perfectly describes the landscape Hyman grew up in in Ireland. It mentions holy images seen around the frame shop, exemplifying the presence of faith felt in the country. Ireland has generally been a predominantly Christian/Catholic country with small Jewish communities centered in major cities like Dublin. By 1901, when Hyman was two, there were approximately 3,700 Jews in Ireland, making up 0.07% of the total 4.4 million population. While the Edelsteins were a Jewish family, the country's faith had an impact on their home life through the art his father framed. He talks about the *Madonna* and the *Ecce Homo*, both of which depict Christian theology, something you traditionally wouldn't find in a Jewish household.

The wording used to describe each scene—the shop and the kitchen—is also indicative of the roles they played in his childhood. While the majority of the poem refers to his father's work, using words such as “stern” and “pious,” the portion about the kitchen and his mother arguably has the most vivid emotions. He talks about how the kitchen shined with his mother and the light of the Shabbat candles. His home, unlike his father's work shop, embodied family values and faith and the language shines with warmth, conveying a more welcoming feeling than the lines about his father's shop. It also shows the divide between the two religions. It could be considered representative of the feelings he felt about being Jewish in a predominantly Christian country.

From a young age, Hyman had an aptitude for writing. By the age of 15 he had won prizes in a poetry contest through the *London, England Weekly* and was published in the *Dublin Evening Telegraph*. In 1905, he was “first in all of Ireland in Classics, first in German, head honours in Mathematics and in 1908, he was first finalist in all Ireland in intermediate exams.” In this same year, he was admitted into Trinity College in Dublin and wrote a poem about his feelings towards leaving high school.

*Leaving School*

One eve—not yet did star bedeck the sky —  
I sat alone and sad, in our pavilion,  
The setting sun, with tear-suffused eye,  
Tinted the house-tops with a sweet vermilion.

I dreamt of things, already but a dream,  
Whose memory and I shall ne'ver be riven,  
Of cricket matches, summer glow and gleam —  
Such golden days as angels have in heaven.

I dreamt of football games in winter's light,  
When th' air re-echoed with boys' cheery whooping,  
While mounted on black, stormy clouds, the night

Came winging on, like some black eagle swooping.

The sun had almost set. Of speech bereft  
 I sadly turned me home. None seemed to mind me;  
 The gate gave forth a clanging as I left –  
 I thought the gate of Youth had clanged behind me.

Well, let us part – my heart's too choked to sigh,  
 My soul seems dead at such a farewell greeting:  
 No more, no more for ever! – Well, good bye!  
 We stay too long. – In dreams, in dreams our meeting!

*Leaving School*, gives us a glimpse into Hyman's adolescence. The poem, which was written about leaving high school behind, emulates his feelings towards ageing. The line "I thought the gate of Youth had clanged behind me" exemplifies this thought and portrays a reaction I think we all have to significant times in our lives coming to an end. It is clear from his academic recognitions and scholarships that school was an important aspect of his life and he is feeling nostalgic for it already.

By 1908, Hyman had been admitted as a scholarship student to Trinity College and won a scholarship with poetry for free tuition, books, and accommodations. He remained at Trinity until 1912, when he and his family moved to Canada.

Hyman and his family settled at 351 Bay Street in Ottawa, Ontario. Here he taught civil service exams privately in a classroom over a store on Bank Street. In 1912, he began contributing articles to the *Canadian Jewish Times* in Montreal. The people at the *Times* eventually came to visit Hyman in Ottawa and soon offered him the position of editor. Upon accepting the position in late 1913, Hyman moved to Montreal where he remained until 1921.

As luck would have it, Montreal held other plans for Hyman. In 1913, he was asked to speak at a meeting of the Young Jewish People's Club. He requested to speak with the president of the club, Elsie Hornstein, who had been quite involved in the Montreal Jewish community. In Nat's words "the rest was history." Hyman and Elsie were married one year later in 1914.

It is not hard to see how deeply Hyman loved Elsie. In a poem entitled *A Picture of My Love*, Hyman describes a photo of his wife taken in the snow and describes her with the same warmth and love he does in his poem *Holy Pictures*. "

*A Picture of My Love*

See, there she stands, in snowshoe strapped,  
Her vigorous, joyous form  
In the familiar sweater wrapped  
That hugs her, snug and warm,  
And dazzling o'er that Mount, snow-capped,  
Like sunburst after storm!

Her laughing eyes defy the sun,  
Her teeth bemock the snow;  
And, red and moistly-fresh, upon  
Her cheek I spy the glow  
Of Kisses left by snowflakes spun  
'Mong winds that chilly blow.

There in the gloomy, still background  
The naked trees repose,  
Weaving a dreamy shadow round –  
While she such radiance throws,  
As glad from those dark wilds to bound –  
A Naiad of the snows!

And well this wood and snowy sea,  
Should frame her pictured laughter,  
Sure 'twas some smiling god to me  
From mystic haunts did waft her –  
Vision of light, love, purity,  
And heaven forever after!

Elsie and Hyman Edelstein  
with their son Nat Herzl,  
1916. OJA 1-137



It's clear from the way he describes her in this poem that Elsie was deeply loved and admired by her husband. He frequently uses light as a way of portraying his feelings and emotions in the moment. He says she is like a "sunburst after storm" and that "her laughing eyes defy the sun." Her brightness fills the world around him in a most spectacular way. In his poems *Holy Pictures* and *Leaving School* Hyman also uses light as a vehicle for portraying his feelings. In *Holy Pictures*, it is the light and warmth of the kitchen that shines and makes him feel at home. In *Leaving School* it was the setting sun that set the scene of sadness over his lost youth. In 1921, Hyman and Elsie and their small family moved back to Ottawa where he would remain—except for a brief move to Toronto and back—until his death in 1957.

Despite what little public information is known about Hyman, a description of his life and his accomplishments was possible because of the documents that were saved. Archives make a difference. He may not have been the most widely known and published poet but his items were kept and his poetry and publications give light to the man behind them. In writing this piece, I deliberately used three of the poems Nat Edelstein recites during his 1987 lecture. In his lifetime, Nat didn't know a great deal about his father. When performing research these are poems he chose to share with his audience. They were poems he picked because they coincided with moments in Hyman's life that he felt best exemplified who his father was. I agree with this choice. *Holy Pictures*, *Leaving School*, and *A Picture of my Love* all tell stories from important moments in his life; his childhood, his education, and his wife. Their collective themes and overall descriptions really allow us to understand who Hyman was. A great Canadian Jewish poet.