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**History and Idiosyncrasy in William Kurelek's
*Jewish Life in Canada***

Jewish Life in Canada

Edited by Sarah Milroy

McMichael Canadian Art Collection and Goose Lane Editions, 2023

140 pp., hardcover

Jewish Life in Canada is at least three things. First and primarily, it refers to a suite of sixteen paintings William Kurelek completed in 1975. Each intimate vignette represents a quotidian episode of Jewish social existence in Canada over the previous century told through the telltale illustrational frankness, vivid palette, and frenetic linework that had, by then, made the Ukrainian Canadian artist a household name. It also denotes a book published by Hurtig one year later containing reproductions of the paintings along with an introduction and commentary by Kurelek and a contextual essay by Abraham Arnold, journalist and champion of Canadian Jewish history in Canada. Finally, it refers to a new book published by Goose Lane that, while preserving some content from the 1976 volume, also expands, updates, and shines a fresh light on the artist and the 1975 series.

While Kurelek's statements about the individual paintings are reprinted in this 2023 book, his original introduction and Arnold's historical recount of Jewish experience in Canada are replaced by new companion analyses. These include contributions from Sarah Milroy and Ian DeJardin, respectively the current and former executive directors of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection. Milroy provides the grounding entrée to Kurelek's world, while DeJardin gets into the glorious minutiae of the picture frames that the artist, whose skills in this area were sharpened in postwar England, crafted for his paintings. (Wisely, the frames themselves feature prominently in the 2023 book; they were excluded from reproduction in 1976). Historian David Koffman's essay is at once a meta-analysis of the *life of Jewish Life in Canada*—its backstory—and an update on Arnold's overview of Canada's Jewish community into the present. Curator John Geoghegan looks under the hood, examining the series' photographic sources—both archival and the artist's own. The book concludes with a conversation between Milroy and the contemporary Ukrainian Canadian artist Nattalka Husar. Curiously, their exchange, which succeeds in showcasing Husar's deep love and respect for Kurelek's work, never mentions *Jewish Life in Canada*. Instead, the dialogues centre on the artist's 1960–63 cycle, *The Passion of Christ According to Saint Matthew*. This is not only disjuncting but also a little discomfiting since the much earlier series has, today and in its time, courted criticism for disclosing anti-Jewish bias. Overall, beautifully designed and lavishly illustrated, *Jewish Life in Canada* is a welcome addition to Kurelek scholarship, providing opportunity to reassess the achievement and motivations behind a series that is very much a product of its time.



Jewish Wedding, Calgary, 1975
 mixed media on board
 40.6 × 40.6 cm
 McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg
 Photo: Michael Cullen

There are reasons that explain, in one sense, the reappearance of *Jewish Life in Canada* in 2023 and, in another, its dissimilarity from the previous publication of the same title. In the 1976 book, Kurelek's art seems secondary to the primary objective of providing an accessible introduction to Jewish history in Canada. While the artist's perspective is privileged, the series is illustrational, functioning to support the book's broader historical purpose. The present volume centres the paintings more, not least of which because the book is effectively a McMichael catalogue, marking the suites' year-long installation at and acquisition by the institution. Before going on display at the McMichael in April 2022, *Jewish Life in Canada* appears to have been publicly and comprehensively displayed only once previously, in the spring of 1996 at Toronto's Koffler Gallery (today the Koffler Centre of the Arts). Prior to entering the McMichael, the series had resided with the Toronto Jewish Congress (today United Jewish Appeal), which had received the work from the Ontario Heritage Foundation (OHF) in 1991. The series had been gifted to the OHF in 1983 by grocery scions and art collectors Jules and Fay Loeb, who purchased it for \$22,000, in its entirety, from Isaacs Gallery, likely in 1976.¹

While Kurelek no doubt intended and expected the paintings to be displayed at some point (otherwise, why put so much effort into framing them?) by the time he began his research in 1974 it was clear that the 1976 book would serve as their original and primary public organ. As the artist would elucidate in that version's introduction, his ambition in the early 1970s had been to create something to honour Avrom Isaacs, the Toronto-based Jewish art dealer who had "discovered" him more than a decade earlier and "took the risk" of exhibiting and introducing him to the Jewish collectors who were among the artist's "first patrons." Motivations of identification and atonement were also at play. Milroy points out in her erudite and ranging introduction that Kurelek recognized the "immigrant struggle" that Isaacs's forebearers and many other Jewish Canadians shared with his own parents, who had fled Ukraine on different waves of migration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Kurelek also knew that "immigrant struggle" did not always lead to virtue. When the devastation of the Holocaust became clear, Kurelek came to nurture a deep shame for the pro-German sympathies he held for a brief period as a boy in the 1930s, a stance he attributed to discrimination his immigrant parents had faced from Anglo-Canadians. A mature convert to Roman Catholicism, by the 1970s Kurelek would also acknowledge the antisemitism in Christian history and doctrine.



Jewish Dairy Farm Outside Winnipeg, 1975

mixed media on board

40.6 × 62.2 cm

McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg

Photo: Michael Cullen

The seeds of both the paintings and the first publication were sown in 1973 at the second biennial Canadian Ethnic Studies Association, held in Toronto. At that conference Kurelek met Abraham Arnold, who would go on to not only play a key role in realizing and promoting the 1976 book but also, as Koffman writes, provide the artist with “a kind of immersive tutorial” on the history and contemporary experiences of Jews in Canada. It was only after meeting Arnold that Kurelek conceived the *Jewish Life in Canada* series as the container in which to consolidate and materialize homage, recognition, and public expiation.

As it is important to remember about his productivity in general, Kurelek's personal motivation did not obviate professional stratagem. *Jewish Life in Canada* was also conceived as celebration, as Milroy puts it, of “Canada itself.” Specifically, it was the ideal of a multicultural Canada, imperfectly encoded in federal policy and growing in the popular imagination over the decade following the country's 1967 Centennial, that had “served Kurelek well.” For Kurelek multiculturalism, whatever its other merits, was also a means to garner audience and patronage. It's worth remembering that after he painted Jewish Canadians, Kurelek devoted himself to a handful of equally ambitious, if less critically and commercially successful, series on the experiences of Polish, Irish, French, and Inuit people in Canada; projects on German and Chinese Canadians were being planned when he died prematurely at the age of fifty in 1977.

At this point, under a contemporary light, *Jewish Life in Canada* might begin to take on a suspect hue. What are the implications of Kurelek's multiculturalism—what was that concept, and by extension a series like *Jewish Life in Canada*, in service to? Was he blind to the nuance and complexity than might otherwise obtain from a more clear-sighted, historically rigorous, understanding of Jewish life in Canada? For instance, Kurelek alludes to antisemitism only once in his series—obliquely, in the figure of a scrap collector being interrogated on the street by a policeman in Toronto. As Koffman righteously enumerates,

What we don't find here are paintings of roving gangs of ‘Swastika Club’ thugs in Ontario; the *Achat chez nous* anti-Jewish boycotts in Quebec in the 1930; the rise of the antisemitic Social Credit party in Alberta or Ku Klux Klan meetings in Saskatchewan before the Second World War; or the Canadian government's refusal to allow 937 Jewish refugees attempting to flee Nazi Germany to disembark from the MS St. Lous in Halifax Harbour in June 1939.

Koffman's noble speculation that none of this appeared because Kurelek was guided by the “hope that antisemitism, on the wane in the mid-1970s, would eventually disappear from Canadian life altogether” seems reasonable until you remember most of the paintings in the series are set well prior to the 1970s.



Jewish Home Life, Montreal, 1975
 mixed media on board
 40.6 × 71.1 cm
 McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg
 Photo: Michael Cullen

Another aspect to Kurelek's celebratory approach to cultural diversity in Canada that many audiences today will find more problematic is the way in which his serial approach to the subject can also be serializing. Considering titles such as *Jewish Home Life, Montreal*, *Jewish Dairy Farm Outside Winnipeg*, or *Jewish Wedding, Calgary*, the paintings conspire to represent culture and history a neatly circumscribed, essentialized, inventory of people, places, and activities. It's something Koffman gently illuminates when he describes Kurelek as offering up a "somehow timeless" vision of Jewish Canada as existing in "a hermetically sealed cultural world ... rather than as integrated Canadian citizens, diverse among themselves" and in "dynamic flux." This essentialism is complicated by Kurelek's self-conscious tendency to blur historical events with his own personal memories—an interchange Geoghegan's forensics surgically uncovers.

Despite these caveats, the book overall, in Koffman's words, advises that we allow ourselves to be shamelessly "warmed" by Kurelek, beguiled by his "telling" (albeit not always correct) attention to historical and cultural particulars, and indeed charmed by the highly original tack of his creative output. I agree, but I also think that when Kurelek's art succeeds, as art, it usually does so despite itself. That is, when audiences can see beyond those serial and serializing strictures the artist loved to work within—whether the inventory of quasi-documentary detail we witness in something

like *Jewish Life in Canada* or, as is the case in his more fervently Christian output, the lessons of faith and codes of doctrine. Today, we can continue to appreciate *Jewish Life in Canada* as a kind of time capsule, while acknowledging the ways it addresses its subject are perhaps no longer live for us today. Alternatively—and this is where the commentary offered by Husar is absolutely on the mark—we can and should continue to open ourselves to the wonderful, almost inarticulable, moments of weirdness that make Kurelek special and persist throughout an oeuvre that remains, for this reason, just as irresistible today as it was in his lifetime.

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The author thanks McMichael associate curator John Geoghegan for providing this provenance.