

PROLETPEN: AMERICA'S REBEL YIDDISH POETS

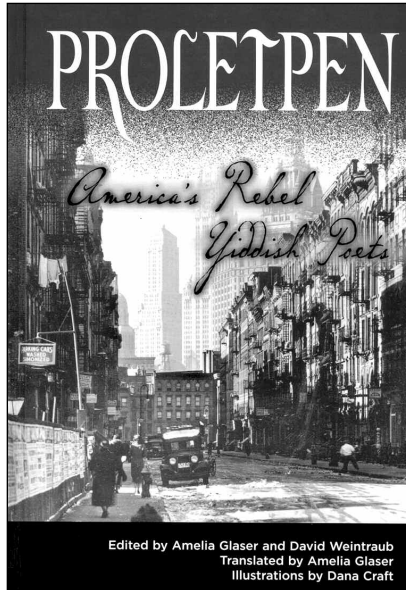
A bilingual anthology, edited by Amelia Glaser and David Weintraub. Translated by Amelia Glaser. Illustrated by Dana Craft. Published by the University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wisconsin, in association with the Dora Teitelboim Center for Yiddish Culture, Inc., 2005

Reviewed by Al Stein

With the kind permission of the editors and publisher of *Proletpen*, readers of *Outlook* have for the past year (and in this issue as well) enjoyed reading the poetry of a group of Yiddish proletarian writers whose work this unique anthology translates for the first time. These are the American Yiddish poets who identified politically and poetically with the Left from the 1920s to the early 1950s and who, because of McCarthy-era "American Yiddish political correctness" have been conveniently forgotten. *Proletpen* corrects this erasure by recovering the selected work of thirty poets and reveals "the depth and power of Yiddish literature through the backdrop of twentieth-century world politics."

The Dora Teitelboim Center for Yiddish Culture, the initiator of this anthology and eight other acclaimed volumes for adults and children, "continues the dream of its namesake (an internationally renowned Yiddish poet included in this volume) by promoting Yiddish poetry and prose to new generations, thereby cultivating a new harvest of Yiddish educators, writers, speakers and performers."

"The Days of Proletpen in American Yiddish Poetry" is the title of the comprehensive introduction provided by the renowned Dovid Katz, author of *Words On Fire: The Unfinished Story of Yiddish* and Professor of Yiddish Studies at Vilnius University. This lucid and impassioned introduction must be read to fully appreciate the historic, economic, cultural and political conditions that nurtured the development of



the Proletpen writers and that ultimately led to their eclipse. Katz writes eloquently about the sharp Left-Right political divisiveness that marked Yiddish literature in America at this time and suggests that the intense literary competitiveness between the two camps and their respective newspaper champions, *Freiheit* and *Forverts*, stimulated a magnificent flowering of Yiddish literature in New York. Katz points out that, "rather than try to sell papers at the lowest common denominator through sensationalism, *Freiheit* taught tens of thousands of immigrant workers to appreciate the creativity of the most serious Yiddish culture. The *Forverts* camp became known in Yiddish as Di Rekhthe (those of the Right); the *Freiheit* camp as Di Linke (those of the Left)." In fact, "both newspapers were proudly socialist and far to the left of the American center ... the twin mottos on the front page of every day's *Forverts* ... were 'Workers of the world unite!' and 'Liberation of the workers depends on the workers themselves!' " And that was the "right wing" paper!

Most of the Proletpen poets were young, and many, inspired by the early successes of Yiddish in the

Soviet Union, "where Yiddish prose and poetry flourished and Yiddish writers were *paid* for their work," joined the Communist Party and during the 30s were in the forefront in exposing Nazism for what it was. Soon, however, the Soviet paradise became hell on earth and "the balance of a rapidly evolving history was tipping in the direction of the Rekhthe," leading to a series of defections from the *Freiheit* and the Linke.

Katz writes with special insight about the intense and prolonged literary debates within Proletpen. "The debate about poetry within Proletpen circles went beyond the narrower question of whether poetry should serve the social and political aims of the leftists. It reached the universal question of whether poetry should serve *any* good purposes other than art for its own sake." Katz's father, Menke Katz (included in this anthology) was probably the most prominent and controversial of the protagonists.

The poetry in this anthology is divided into sections such as, "Urban Landscape," "United in Struggle," "Matters of the Heart," "The Poet on Poetry," "Wars to End All Wars," "Matters of Life and Death," and each section is placed in context by the editors' preface. Most of the poets presented will be recognized by anyone familiar with twentieth-century Yiddish literature, but some will no doubt be unknown and provide the reader with the double pleasure of acquaintance with new artists and new translations by Professor Amelia Glaser of the University of California at San Diego. These translations have recently won the Modern Language Association's Leviant Memorial Prize in Yiddish Studies.

A brief biography of each poet is provided, as well as an extensive bibliography, a note on modern Yiddish orthography and a helpful chronology. I unreservedly recommend this bilingual anthology to all who recognize that "politics has always been a driving force in Yiddish culture" and who wish to acquaint themselves with some of the best, but largely ignored, Yiddish American poets of the twentieth century. ♦

Al STEIN is a member of the Vancouver Outlook Collective, and is active with the Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture. He is a lover of literature and Yiddish. His review of Harvey Fink's *Fun Mentsh Tsu Mentsh (From Man to Man)* appeared in our January/February 2007 issue.

The Hebrew Ladies and Other Jewish Pioneers of British Columbia

PIONEER JEWS OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

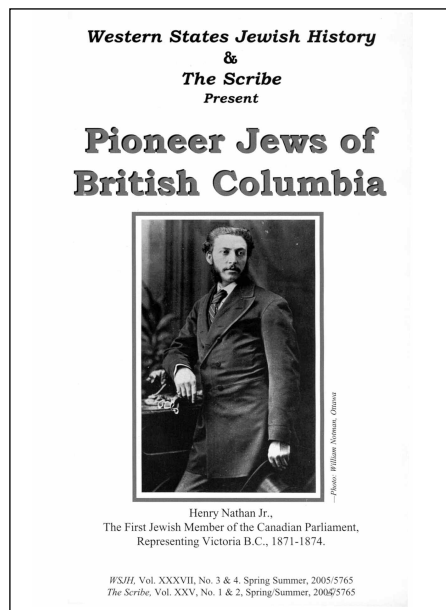
Western States Jewish History and The Scribe: Journal of the Jewish Historical Society of British Columbia. Produced for WSJH and JHSBC by the Isaac Nathan Publishing Company, Woodland Hills, CA. 288 pages, 2005.

Reviewed by Abraham Arnold

This book is mainly about people, the Jewish pioneers of British Columbia, most of whom arrived in Victoria, beginning in 1858, from many far-flung corners of the world, then often moved to the interior of B.C., to the Yukon and beyond. It begins with the story of Canada's oldest existing Jewish institution, Victoria's Temple Emanu-El Synagogue, and the people who built it. This story is recounted by Cyril Leonoff, now senior historian of the Jewish Historical Society of B.C., and its founding president.

Leonoff's opening essay, "The Hebrew Ladies of Victoria, Vancouver Island, 1858-2003," relates the part played by the women in the founding, building and survival of Victoria's Jewish congregation and the Temple Emanu-El (opened in 1863). It's really a history of the synagogue where the women played a paramount role, even though the original constitution of the Congregation, incorporated in 1864, provided only for "male Israelites" 18 and over as voting members. A widow could become an "associate member" without voting rights. This changed gradually as the women's suffrage movement grew in the community at large, and is reflected in Leonoff's essay. From the beginning, however, the women were instrumental in raising the

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funds needed to keep the synagogue going with grand balls, bazaars and other events, even while they sat in the gallery.

When the synagogue was built the congregation had the foresight to purchase an adjoining piece of land for future development. Victoria and its Jewish community were always affected by economic vagaries, particularly in the 19th century gold-rush years. But by 1890 a boom period and the arrival of Russian Jewish immigrants led the Emanu-El Congregation to begin planning a building expansion. The Hebrew Ladies again led the way in raising funds, and in 1892 the women were placed on an equal footing with the men for the first time when five women were appointed to a building committee along with five men. The new building, with classrooms, meeting rooms and a social hall, was operated by the women for ten years after it opened in 1893 and was known as the Hebrew Ladies Hall.

Leonoff also gives an account of some of the rabbis who served the

Victoria congregation over the years and the problems involved in finding, and keeping, a spiritual leader. While Temple Emanu-El was at the outset officially Orthodox, its members always included a strong Reform element. Whether the rabbi was Orthodox or Reform, there were always arguments about ritual practices. In the early years there were objections to the use of English in the service, followed later by arguments about introducing a choir or an organ. Gradually these differences were settled in favour of modernity, and eventually Congregation Emanu-El became officially Conservative. There were also frequent periods when the congregation couldn't afford a rabbi and was hard-pressed to obtain the services of a professionally qualified person to lead the High Holiday Services. Lay members of the congregation often filled in to lead the services, a not unusual practice in Jewish congregations.

In 1895, long before the women had achieved equality, the board of the congregation actually hired a woman, "Miss Ray Frank" a popular lay preacher of Oakland, California, to "officiate" during the High Holidays. As Leonoff relates, she became "the first woman to mount the pulpit" of Victoria's Temple Emanu-El.

After the turn of the century the era of the "Hebrew Ladies" came to an end; yet the women continued to serve the congregation with due diligence, eventually achieving equality. In fact, Alice Mallek, living in Victoria with her husband and family since 1913, and with notable business achievements of her own, became, in 1950, the first woman elected president of the Victoria congregation or of any Jewish congregation in Canada. Her husband Harry and her son Edward served as president before her.

Leonoff's historical essay was written as Victoria's Temple Emanu-El was approaching its 140th birthday. He writes that "in 1982 the congregation beautifully restored and rededicated its synagogue to original mint-1863 condi-

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tion.” But he fails to give an account of how the restoration came about. All is revealed, however, in one of his endnote sources: Martin Levin, “The Founding and Restoration of Canada’s Oldest Surviving Synagogue” (*Canadian Jewish Historical Society Journal*, 8/1, Spring 1984). A physician, formerly of Winnipeg, Martin Levin lived in Victoria in the 1970s and 80s. His article is based on a paper given at the CJHS annual conference at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, June 1983; it is noted that he was an active participant in the Victoria Synagogue’s restoration.

After reviewing the founding of Temple Emanu-El, Levin reports:

“In 1948 it was decided to ‘modernize’ the synagogue: The original brick structure ... [was] covered with stucco. The handsome massive wooden doors were removed and subsequently disappeared [A] false ceiling was dropped into place ... destroying the traditional [ladies] gallery. A seven-foot skylight at the centre of the vaulted ceiling was taken out ... and it too disappeared.” Levin then relates how, in 1978, a few members of the Victoria Jewish community “resolved ... to restore its unique historical building to

the original character and beauty of 1863” at a time when “the synagogue counted less than 100 members.” In 1863, Leonoff reports, the “whole cost of building the synagogue was \$9,196.60.” In 1982, Levin says, the “ultimate cost” of the restoration was \$370,000.

I believe Martin Levin and his restoration committee deserved mention in the body of Leonoff’s essay. Nevertheless Leonoff presents a first-rate account of the Synagogue’s history. He actually begins with the *Simchat Gedolah*, of April 2003, celebrating the 140th anniversary of the synagogue with the consecration of its new Educational and Cultural Centre on the site of the earlier Hebrew Ladies Hall. The new building, in the style of the restored synagogue, was made possible because the Jewish population of Vancouver Island had grown to 3,870 by 2001, most of them residing in Victoria and suburbs.

In the 19th century many Jews came to B.C. because of the gold rush, in 1858 along the Fraser River, then in the Cariboo district and later in the Yukon. While some actually tried their hand in the gold fields, many opened business ventures in Victoria and other places. Some stayed in B.C. for many years and put down roots, others stayed for a very few years before moving on. All made their mark as “pioneers” and many recorded colourful experiences and adventures.

Among the first Jews to arrive in Victoria from San Francisco in 1858 were Abraham and Reina Belasco and their five year old son David. Under the title “David Belasco: From Frontier to Fame, 1853-1931” Sarah H. Tobe relates the eight-year stay of the Belascos in B.C., where they were storekeepers. Abraham went off peddling into the Cariboo for a season while his wife had to look after the store and their growing family of six children. Then the article turns to David, whose theatrical ambition, sparked in Victoria, developed after the family returned to San Francisco in

1865. David Belasco became the leading theatrical producer in New York by 1890 and his career flourished into the early decades of the 20th century. Two of his plays, *Madame Butterfly*, first produced in London in 1900, and *The Girl of the Golden West*, on Broadway in 1905, were chosen by the Italian composer Giacomo Puccini to be turned into operas.

Other articles include “Shipwrecked,” on a Victoria-San Francisco trip involving 1858 pioneer Frank Sylvester, who had tried his luck in the gold fields (not much), then went to work for Judah Davies, whose daughter he married; Sylvester became a pillar of the Victoria community. Then there’s an article on Jewish “Indian Traders of Early British Columbia, 1858-1910” (Geoffrey Castle) and another on “Victoria’s Curio Dealers 1870-1918,” by Sarah Tobe, who writes again on “Hannah Director’s Album of Memories, 1908-1975.”

The latter essay is exceptional, dealing with the experiences of Hannah and Isidor Director, who started out as store-keepers in Prince Rupert. When times got bad there during World War I, they moved to a farm homestead near Prince George, then into Prince George in 1917, where Hannah was elected to the school board and became the first Jewish woman to hold public office in Canada. After the war the Directors moved back to Prince Rupert for four years, where Isidor worked as a longshoreman, then on to Vancouver in 1922, where he first worked as a stevedore. Eventually they opened “The Printery,” a small printshop which endured for the rest of their working lives, while they became very active community workers.

Mrs. Director’s election to Prince George school board was one of a series of political firsts by Jews in B.C. dating back to 1860, when Selim Franklin was the first Jew elected and permitted to sit in a British North American legislature. In 1866, Lumley Franklin (Selim’s brother) was elected the second mayor of Victoria. Also in 1871, when B.C. joined Confeder-

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ation, Henry Nathan Jr. (his photo is on the cover) was the first Jew elected to the Canadian House of Commons. Cyril Leonoff notes all these “firsts” in his opening essay, as well as the election of David Oppenheimer as Mayor of Vancouver (1888-1891) and in 1972-75 the election of David Barrett as the first Jew to serve as Premier of a Canadian province, in his closing article “Jews in Greater Vancouver, 1872-1997.” The full and highly significant story of Jews in

B.C. politics remains to be told, however, and the article on Jews in Vancouver is much too brief. Each topic deserves a book of its own.

One more article worth noting is “The Adelbergs: Homesteading the Peace, British Columbia, 1906-1919.” The Adelebergs farmed in very difficult conditions, first in Alberta, then in B.C.’s Peace River Country. Eventually they ended up in Vancouver.

This is an easily readable book,

and the Jewish Historical Society of B.C. is to be congratulated on the constructive relationship they have developed with the California-based Western States Jewish History, which publishes studies on Western, North American, and Pacific Rim Jewry. ♦

Note: Abe Arnold served as editor/publisher of the Jewish Western Bulletin of Vancouver, 1949-60, and has visited the Victoria Synagogue on several occasions.

A Kaleidoscope of Jewish Culture

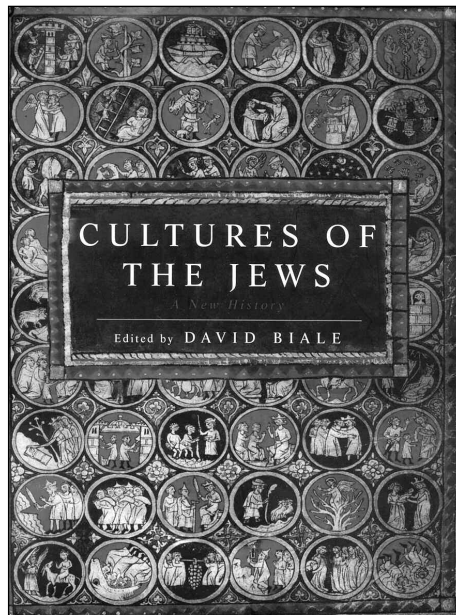
CULTURES OF THE JEWS: A NEW HISTORY

Edited by David Biale. Schocken Books, New York, 2002. 1232 pages

Reviewed by Michael Luftmensch

Cultures of the Jews—the use of the plural in the title hints at the volume’s premise: in every historical period, it has been **interaction** with the non-Jewish majority that has been critical in the formation of the plurality of Jewish cultures. Granted, it’s a rather simple point, but it’s one that needs reiteration, owing to the prevalence of essentialism as the dominant mode of Jewish historical self-understanding. The ethnocentric and all too prevalent view of Jewish relations with other cultures is that the Jews have been “a light unto the Gentiles.” That makes for a kind of one-way street between Jewish culture—a static and unchanging essence—and “Civilization” at large, with the traffic moving from the moral high ground of Judaism down a slippery Gentile slope.

But evidence of a two-way traffic is easy to come by. Jewish identities have shifted and changed according to the different historical contexts in which Jews found themselves. Hence the variation



and diversity of Jewish cultures and religious practices across time and space.

The question of what defines Jewishness, and where the border lies between what is Jewish and what is not, is of course debatable. Indeed, that seems to have always been the case, as a cursory reading of the Bible reveals. One need only scratch the surface of the Jewish foundation myths, for instance, and it quickly becomes apparent that they draw on a common Near Eastern storehouse of belief and mythology. Akhenaton is the spiri-

tual sire of Moses. Gilgamesh and Noah were shipmates. And far from being a “people that dwells alone,” the ancient Israelites’ hankering after “strange gods” reveals the extent to which they lived **among** the Canaanites, their monotheistic cult being bound up with the polytheism of the surrounding groups in a social matrix that was porous and ambiguous.

Juggling religious, ethnic and political affirmations within an environment that was never exclusively Jewish, the ancient Israelites imported ideas about the divine from surrounding groups—particularly from the Canaanite pantheon, whose god, El, served as a model of sorts for Yahveh. Body modification rituals, such as circumcision, and a variety of dietary taboos, were likewise incorporated into ancient Judaism by way of cultural cross-fertilization.

Indeed, given the fact that Jewish self-definition has always been bound up with the non-Jewish environment in which the Jews constituted one of many elements, the insistence of so much of the Torah on drawing lines of demarcation between Jew and non-Jew becomes more comprehensible. The laws in Leviticus were not, as religiously-inclined interlocutors would have us believe, either primitive health regulations or randomly chosen as tests of the Jews’ commitment to God. Actually, these laws were about symbolic boundary-maintenance.

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MICHAEL LUFTMENSCH appeared in our July/Aug. 2003 issue with a review, “Half a Dozen from the Vancouver Jewish Film Festival.”

And yet, the boundary was always being eroded through the give and take of social intercourse. Jewish and Hellenic culture, for instance, were far from being mutually exclusive, to the consternation of ancient zealots. Archeological excavations of Jewish sarcophagi decorated with a variety of mythological motifs, such as Leda and the Swan, and Greek inscriptions; ritual baths with statues of Aphrodite; and Jewish inns with murals of Dionysus all testify to the syncretic impulse of ancient Jewish culture.

With the dispersion of the Jewish people throughout Babylonia and the Roman Empire, and their subsequent migrations into Christian Europe and the Islamic countries, the acculturation process was greatly accelerated. And yet, conventional Jewish histories tend to gloss over this phenomenon, whether in regard to the cross-pollination between the institutions of synagogue and church, or the import into Rabbinic Judaism of Hellenistic legal concepts.

This is particularly true in regard to Medieval Europe, where, incongruous as it may initially seem, the Hasidim/Pietists of the Middle Ages borrowed profusely from the ascetic and penitential practices of the Franciscan order.

Kidush Ha-shem, the medieval concept of Jewish martyrology, is substantially a Jewish import from prevailing Christian concepts and concerns. Closer to home, Yiddish, the language of East European Jewry—which came to mark a linguistic boundary between Jew and non-Jew—is easily discernible as a Jewish dialect of German, thus bearing the mark not of Jewish segregation, but of social interaction. But the standard image of Jewish-Christian relations in Medieval Europe in Jewish history books is that of the ghetto and unrelenting persecution suffered at the hands of the Christian majority.

In short, a revision has long been in order, and in this book we have a first attempt in that direction. Weighing in at over a thousand pages, this collection of essays by some two dozen Jewish scholars moves across the millennia, from the Mediterranean origins of the Israelites, through the medieval diversities of Diaspora Judaism, to the Modern Era. Cultural artifacts—a map, an amulet, a *ketubbah*, a literary text—are used as lenses through which to examine various aspects of Jewish life in a given time and place. Not a linear history of cultural formations so much as a patchwork quilt, *Cultures of the Jews* can be used as a kind of kaleidoscope of Jewish history. Turning the pages of this tome, reading about the different permutations of Jewish culture, one encounters a succession of designs created by a kind of cultural mirror reflecting the constantly changing patterns made by the interaction of Judaism and the surrounding environment. Jews living in Islamic countries, from Muslim Spain to Afghanistan and Bukhara, as well as the Jews of Ethiopia, are given their due. That alone makes for a welcome change from the Eurocentric Jewish histories that have held sway up till now.

This volume's forte lies in imparting something of the lived experience of Jews through the ages. Stories of the intrigues of Jewish families and their fortunes in early modern Italy, as recounted

by Eliot Horowitz, replete with chapter headings such as “Servants, Sons-in-Law, Sodomy and Slaughter” read like a kind of Jewish Decameron, full of scandal and skullduggery. Concomitantly they uncover a Jewish culture at sharp variance with our notions of Jewish religiosity of times gone by.

Indeed, that is one of the book's virtues. We tend to read Jewish orthodoxy back in time, so that the religious Jews of times past, whether in Europe, North Africa or the Near East, are imagined as being as pale and parochial as 21st Century Orthodox Jews, sequestered in their ghettos, filled with anxieties about cultural contamination. Yet Jewish orthodoxy, as David Biale argues in his essay on the modern era of Polish Jewry, is basically a response to the growing influence of nontraditional influences making inroads upon Jewish communities. Jewish orthodoxy, it seems, is every bit as modern as “Jewish secularism” and certainly not an age-old phenomenon.

Raymond P. Scheindlin's essay on Judeo-Arabic culture confronts those who would project Jewish-Muslim animosities back into the distant past. That key texts of Jewish religious thought, such as Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed*, were written in Arabic, drawing upon Islamic philosophy, or that when Jews wrote in Arabic they would often refer to God as “Allah,” reveals the great openness of Judeo-Arabic culture to the Islamic world which existed a millennium ago.

The discussion of Jewish secularism is likewise informative, particularly in describing the secular movement in Eastern Europe as the product of a singular constellation of political, economic and social barriers preventing the kind of bourgeois assimilation that Central and Western European Jews experienced in the 19th century. Thrown back on their own resources, in revolt against their archaic heritage and the repressive authority of rabbinical leaders, East European Jews were forced to create their own secular society. One may conclude that

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the waning of rabbinic authority and political anti-Semitism has rendered Jewish secularism a relic of a bygone era, bereft of the oppositional spirit which once animated the movement.

The valorization of diversity that runs through this book clearly bears the mark of a marriage of sorts between post-colonial studies and Jewish Studies. This process is not without its ironic aspects, given the fact that the ostensibly Jewish state of Israel is the last outpost of colonialism in the 21st century. The editor argues that, although the situation of the Jews as a minority was not precisely analogous to that of non-Western colonized people under Western imperialism, there is a similarity in the way Jewish identity developed a rich dialectic

with the identities of the non-Jewish majority.

Yet, as with so much postmodern output, on closer reading the surface glitter fades, and the lack of critical insight becomes apparent. The political world both of Jewish communities down through the ages, and the larger constellations in which they existed, are largely ignored. Perhaps that is why the most disappointing chapters of the book are those dealing with 20th century Jewish history. Evasive at best, and dishonest at worst, the essayists skirt around the difficult questions posed by Israeli and/or Jewish culture and the assimilation of Jews into the American mainstream.

The discussion of Israeli culture, for example, consists of two

essays: one about the folk cultures of the Arab Jews living in Israel's "underdevelopment" towns, and the other an exercise in literary criticism dealing with Hebrew *belles-lettres*. As a result, Israeli mainstream culture does not really come into focus, nor do the major conflicts within that society.

Given the affirmative and even celebratory presentation of Jewish cultural identities, the darker forces at work in culture formation, particularly the coercive practices associated with rabbinical authority, are given short shrift here. What we have instead is basically a celebration of Jewish pluralism down through the ages. Yet that alone, with all its glaring faults, marks a welcome respite from the bulk of turn-the-pages-and-weep Jewish history writing. ♦

A 1948 Canadian Novel Explores the Ground Between Truth and Illusion

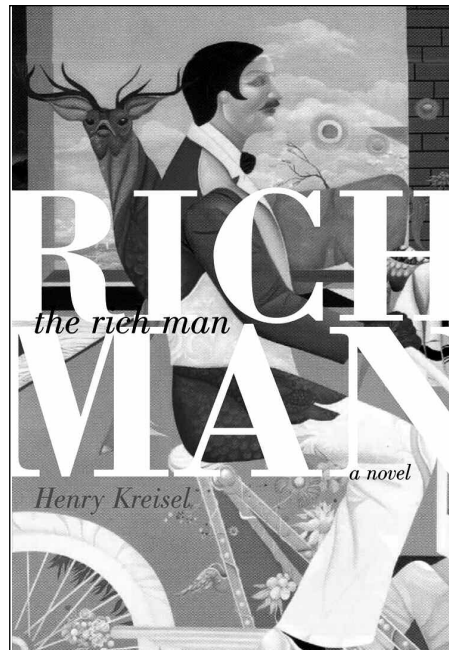
THE RICH MAN

Henry Kreisel. Red Deer Press, Alberta, 2006. 296 pages. Introduction by Norman Ravvin

Reviewed by Gene Homel

There's nothing special about Jacob Grossman, the protagonist of Henry Kreisel's recently reissued Canadian novel *The Rich Man*, originally published in 1948. Grossman is a 53-year-old presser in a Toronto clothing factory, the same job he's held since his arrival in Canada from Galicia 33 years earlier. He's "a short, narrow-shouldered, pot-bellied man. His face was round and of a reddish colour, a bit flabby and wrinkled, and there was a large bald spot on the pate of his head." In Grossman's imperfect English, "I am a ord'nary man..."

In one way, though, Gross-



man is far from ordinary when the novel opens. By scrimping and saving his meagre wages, the poor widower has amassed several hundred dollars. He plans to take a few weeks' trip to

Vienna in the spring of 1935 to visit his aging mother.

The way Grossman sees it, after decades of work and worries, "[o]nce in a lifetime a man has a right to be a little extravagant." Why shouldn't he visit his mother before she dies and pray at the grave of his father?

Grossman is subject to ordinary human vanity, and as an immigrant, he wants to be considered a success by his Old-World relatives. He's secretly pleased when his factory mates ironically joke that he's "J. Rockefeller Grossman" for asking Mr. Duncan, the manager, for a few weeks' leave. Grossman's daughter is bitter about her father's trip and sarcastically calls him "[a] rich man! A millionaire!" He buys himself a fancy white suit, which he's long coveted, along with an array of presents for his mother and sisters, who he hopes will view him "like a merchant arriving after long travels in foreign lands, bearing great gifts." Though poor, he is trying to sustain an illusion and "the dream of every immigrant—he was going back, a settled, prosperous-seeming man."

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