

INVENTING THE JEW: ANTISEMITIC STEREOTYPES IN ROMANIAN AND OTHER CENTRAL-EAST EUROPEAN CULTURES

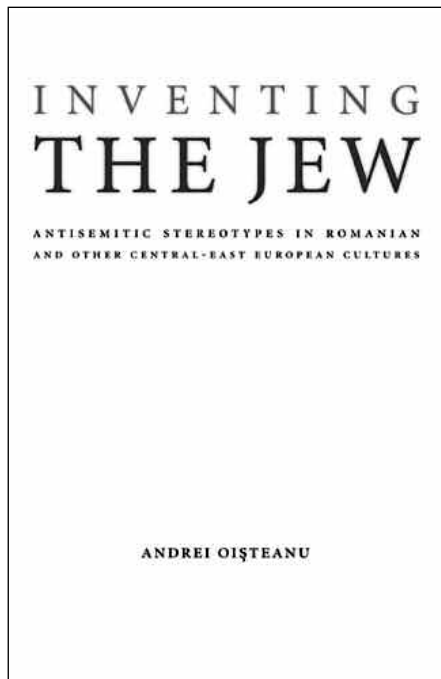
Andrei Oișteanu. Trans. M. Adscalitei. University of Nebraska Press for the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 2009. 468 pp.

Reviewed by Sheila Delany

“**R**oumania! Roumania, Roumania, Roumania...” Many of us have heard that famous Yiddish song nostalgically evoking a land of plentiful wine and sausages, good times, and untroubled social relations.¹ Andrei Oișteanu offers another Romania, one whose folklore produced Jewish stereotypes that worked their way into elite culture.

Oișteanu, professor at the Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Bucharest, specializes in Romanian myth, magic and religion. His latest book collects images of the Jew, including anti-Semitic stereotypes disseminated in the work of such internationally celebrated Romanian intellectuals as mythographer Mircea Eliade and essayist Emil Cioran, among others. As an exercise in cultural anthropology, the book examines various factors: how Romanian motifs compare with those of other Central and Eastern European cultures; the evolution of motifs over time; how images of “the imaginary Jew” compare with images of other “foreigners” in multicultural Romania over the centuries.

In 1940, Romania had about 800,000 Jews: the third largest Jewish population in Europe after Russia and Poland. According to some writers (e.g., Hannah Arendt), it competed with Poland as “the most anti-Semitic country in pre-war Europe” (p.7). Oișteanu contests this view as reductive, formulaic and “Jewish-centric” (p. 8); nonetheless his evidence shows that despite the vapidness of



such rankings, Romania was plenty anti-Semitic. For example, in 1831, the Romanian equivalent to a constitution required Christian affiliation as a condition for citizenship, thus demoting Romanian Jews to the status of disfranchised aliens (pp. 8-9)—a policy confirmed in 1866 (p. 10). We might recall that the French Revolution had emancipated French Jews in 1791, and that Napoleonic armies had dissolved European ghettos a few years thereafter. Oișteanu mentions 1919-23 as the period of emancipation of Romanian Jews (p. 10), but doesn't specify what happened to enable this liberation.

Despite this history, and despite the presence of anti-Semitic propaganda and practices down the years, Christian Romanians continued to congratulate

themselves on their religious tolerance and hospitality (pp. 10-25). During the 30s and 40s, these alleged virtues were condemned by the Romanian ultra-right as weakness. Oișteanu argues that a different discriminatory technique was the effacement of Jews (along with gypsies)² from public discourse after World War II under the Stalinist regime. He briefly considers the possibility that this censorship might come from a universalist or ethnic-neutral impulse, much as today a reporter might omit racial specificity in reporting an event; if so, this would be “an erroneous understanding of the fight against anti-Semitism” (p. 26).

All of the preceding information appears in the author's Introduction. The rest of the book exhaustively documents Romanian attitudes and practices over the centuries: the “kike” mask at Moldavian New Year festivals (p. 54); the stories about why Jews are freckled (pp. 57-59); why Jews don't eat pork (342-47); the jokes, tales, newspaper articles, legislation, massacres, and other social reality (if any) informing the stereotypes of Jewish looks, occupations, habits and religion. The documentation includes ancient and modern histories, fiction, memoir, letters, dictionaries, ethnography, journalism, etc. Chapter 1 (“The physical portrait”) has 428 footnotes, the other four chapters average a hundred fewer.

My only cavil about this meticulously researched work is the author's implicit acceptance of the already anti-Semitic assumption that a Jew cannot be a “real” Romanian and a “real” Romanian cannot be a Jew. This appears in his use of the two terms throughout the book, e.g., “Romanian journalist” or “Romanian merchants” (p. 140), “Romanian author” or simply “Romanians” (p. 233), in each case meaning “non-Jewish.” In order to counter this

SHEILA DELANY is Professor Emerita, Simon Fraser University, and author of numerous books and articles in literary history.

¹ My thanks to Stephen Aberle for providing lyrics to and commentary on “Roumania.” – S.D.

² “Gypsy” is the term used in the book, although “Roma” is the currently accepted term. – Eds.

binarism, the author could have specified “Christian Romanian” or simply “Christian” as the appropriate confessional (rather than national) contrary to “Jew.”

What, then, to make of our Yiddish song? It does start “*Geven amol*”: “There once was...” Is it a fairy-tale utopia? The memory of a very long-distant past? A parody

of immigrant nostalgia? Or can we infer that broad spaces of happiness were possible between the terrible events and oppressive legislation? Let’s hope so.♦

The World of Izzy Asper

IZZY: THE PASSIONATE LIFE AND TURBULENT TIMES OF IZZY ASPER, CANADA’S MEDIA MOGUL

Peter C. Newman. HarperCollins Canada, Toronto, 2008. 390 pp.

ASPER NATION: CANADA’S MOST DANGEROUS MEDIA COMPANY

Marc Edge. New Star Books, Vancouver, 2007. 326 pp.

These two books describe different sides of Asper’s character. But in the end they both portray a man who, I believe, damaged the mainstream media while making millions of dollars.

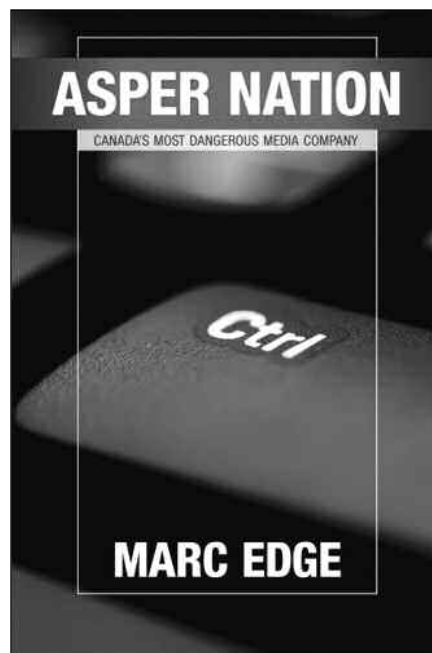
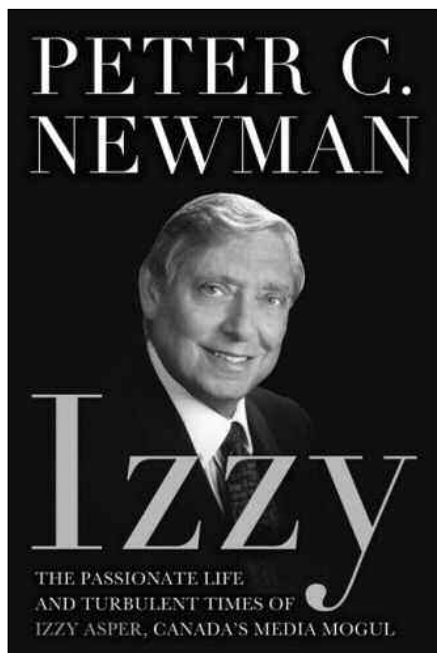
Peter C. Newman’s book *Izzy* stresses the supposedly wonderful side of the Jewish Winnipeg-based mogul. Newman has always been a groupie of the power elite. He worships the powerful and mighty, and seems never to have known people like carpenters, bus drivers, or sales clerks. For decades, Newman has composed hymns of praise to Canada’s power elite, and *Izzy* is no exception to this rule.

“He was a singular man,” writes Newman in his book’s opening pages, “whose defining brand was his refusal to distinguish the possible from the impossible. Early on, he evolved impressive characteristics that never varied, but grew more intense with age...”

Newman’s book is full of passages like this. But even he cannot praise Asper all the time. Marc Edge’s book stands at a different vantage point, and it’s the better book by far. “This book is less an indictment of Izzy Asper and his heirs,” writes Edge, “than of a system that allowed them to gain control over so much of Canada’s news media and use it to promote an ideological agenda.”

From small beginnings in Winnipeg, this son of a father who owned cinemas became a lawyer. Soon he was slamming the 1960s Liberal federal government for its proposed tax changes. His nationally syndicated newspaper column on taxes skewered then federal Liberal Finance Minister Edgar Benson for bringing in a capital gains tax.

In 1970, Asper took over the tiny Manitoba Liberal Party and tried to breathe new life into it. Voters preferred the Tories or the then-ruling NDP. Asper soon left political life to



Reviewed by David Jaffe

A New Democratic MLA smiled when asked in the hallways of the Manitoba legislature about the politics of the Liberal provincial leader. “We’ve got two conservative parties in this province,” he said. “One party’s Liberal and the other’s Conservative.” In fact, he continued, “The Liberal leader is probably

more conservative than the Tories.”

It was 1973, and this was how I first learned about Israel Harold Asper, then the leader of a Liberal Party with five members in the Manitoba legislature. When he died thirty years later, at the age of 71, Asper ruled a media empire. He owned the Global Television Network and six TV stations besides. He published dozens of newspapers, including the two major ones in Metro Vancouver. His media conglomerate, Canwest Global Communications Corporation, embraced four continents, and even as Asper lay ill and dying, his energies to accumulate more and more never weakened.

DAVID JAFFE, originally from Montreal, is a writer and visual artist. He appeared in our Sept./Oct. 2009 issue with a review of Nir Hefez and Gadi Bloom’s Ariel Sharon: A Life.