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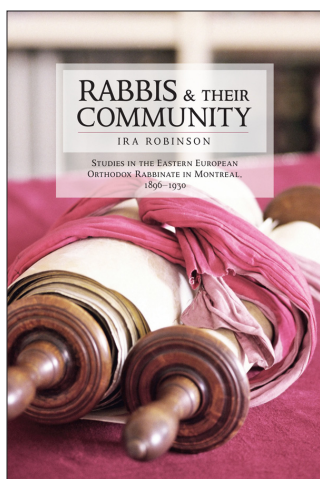
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RABBIS & THEIR COMMUNITY: STUDIES IN THE EASTERN EUROPEAN ORTHODOX RABBINATE IN MONTREAL, 1896–1930

by Ira Robinson

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*Rabbis and Shohtim: The Cases of Getsel Laxer
and Hyman Meir Crestohl*

In the countries of the United States and Canada, the rabbinate is based only upon an oral Torah. The rabbinical position is suspended in the air and [depends] upon the breath of the members much more than does [the position] of the cantor.
– Leibush Herzig (1916)¹

In this chapter, we will be talking about two men who did not quite achieve the status of Rabbis Cohen, Glazer and Rosenberg. They both were and were not “rabbis.” They certainly were rabbis in terms of their education. They possessed certificates of rabbinic ordination [*semikha*], which were certainly as valid as anyone else’s.² They also acted as rabbis in Quebec cities outside Montreal, delivering sermons in their synagogues on Sabbaths and holidays, presiding at weddings and doing all the other things that pertained to rabbinical posts in North American Orthodox synagogues. However, when they moved to Montreal, they were unable to make their living as rabbis alone, though congregational work was at least a part of their activity in the city. They were, therefore, forced to supplement their rabbinical activities, from which they may have derived a certain prestige, with the kosher slaughter [*shehita*] of animals, from which they could earn a living, but which was physically demanding and could not have been pleasant for some.³

These men are of great importance in the story we are trying to tell in this book. Insofar as anyone of the relatively neglected group of Eastern European rabbinic intellectuals in North America has gotten scholarly attention, it has been the rabbis at or near the top of the heap, men like

Rabbi Eliezer Silver in Cincinnati⁴ and Yudel Rosenberg in Montreal,⁵ who were relatively well known both in their home communities and beyond.

The reality for most rabbis, however, was quite different. Practically without exception, no North American Orthodox rabbi of the early twentieth century was able to make a living solely from being a congregational rabbi, because few congregations could afford to pay their rabbi a decent salary. As we have seen, consortia of Eastern European immigrant congregations coalesced in order to support a rabbi collectively. Moreover, the very concept of a "congregational rabbi" was one that had little resonance in the Eastern Europe of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where rabbis led entire communities and not individual congregations. Its adoption in Western Europe and North America marked a phase in the process of Judaism's modernization.⁶ Thus numerous Eastern European immigrant Orthodox rabbis, in an attempt to make ends meet, vied for the honourable (if often controversial) and remunerative position of supervisor of kosher slaughtering. Such jobs, however, were few in number compared to the number of immigrant rabbis, and rivalry between rabbis for these supervisory posts often led to ferocious conflict in city after city. Those men with rabbinical educations who did not achieve such positions had to turn to the difficult and exacting physical labour of slaughtering animals in order to earn a decent living. If we know much too little about these relative successes among Yiddish-speaking immigrant Orthodox rabbis, we have not yet begun to explore the dimensions of the lower levels of the Orthodox religious establishment in the New World.

Probably the best way to understand them is to think of them as the sort of people the progressive Hutchins Hapgood, in his pioneering 1902 study of New York's Jewish ghetto, called "submerged intellectuals."⁷

These were people of significant intellectual attainments who, in the atmosphere and economic climate of the Jewish immigrant community were not able to function full-time in an intellectual capacity. Under conditions of great privation, they continued to engage in their intellectual activities, but received little or no credit for doing so. We are speaking in this chapter about just such men. They never completely made it into the North American rabbinate, but nonetheless wished to use their often

considerable store of rabbinical learning in order to make a living. These men, not quite able to achieve one of the very few Orthodox rabbinical positions with some degree of economic security, were forced to take lower status positions as ritual slaughterers [*shohtim*] in the only industry in North America that required rabbinic expertise – kosher meat.⁸

The story is told that when Rabbi Moses Feinstein, one of the most famous Orthodox rabbis of the twentieth century first emigrated from Russia to the United States in the 1930s, and his supporters were attempting to find him employment, it was proposed to make him a ritual slaughterer. That he avoided this fate and became the premier halakhic authority of his generation was a tribute to his persistence in seeking another sort of work, but it is a telling illustration of the basic lack of opportunity that faced such men.⁹

In this chapter we are dealing with men who never came close to achieving Moses Feinstein's renown, who did not escape the slaughterhouse, but whose literary remains can serve to instruct us. The group they represented was not a small one. In 1931, Louis Rosenberg, the statistician of Canadian Jewry, noted that there were 291 Jews engaged in "Jewish religious services" in Canada, up from 117 in 1921. Of them, 33 were rabbis. Thus for every rabbi, there were almost nine other "Jewish religious workers." Of the 33 rabbis, 14 were in Montreal. In Montreal, therefore, there were likely over a hundred Jews occupied in some area of "Jewish religious services."¹⁰

The particular area of "Jewish religious services" that likely employed the majority of these workers was the kosher meat industry. The slaughterhouse work in which they engaged required not merely scholarly knowledge of the subject, but also physical strength and endurance in a factory "assembly line" slaughtering atmosphere in which speed had to be maintained. Insofar as the *shohtim* were conscientious, and desired to take the time to do things in the right way, they were thereby in conflict with the constant demand for speed.

When considering the circle of *shohtim* in Montreal in this era, one of the most interesting things is the number of men who were writers, whether they managed to publish their works in their lifetime, or else left them in manuscript. Thus, among the slaughterers in the Montreal slaughterhouses in the 1920s and 1930s, no less than five: Getsel Laxer,

Hyman Crestohl,¹¹ Hayyim Kruger, Aaron Rosenberg, and Abraham Stern wrote manuscripts and published books in Hebrew and Yiddish on Judaic subjects.¹²

Kruger was a Hebraic scholar who moonlighted as a journalist for the *Keneder Odler*. Beyond that, he published numerous articles in Yiddish¹³ on medieval Jewish philosophy, especially on Rav Saadia Gaon and on Maimonides.¹⁴ Rosenberg, son of Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg, published a volume of Biblical commentary.¹⁵ Stern published a volume of Talmudic essays [*hiddushim*],¹⁶ and another of Hasidic tales.¹⁷

*Getsel Laxer*¹⁸

We will speak first about Getsel Laxer (1878–1942).¹⁹ Who was Eliakim Getsel ben Yehiel Mikhl Laxer²⁰? Biographical details are few. He referred to himself as “Austrian” in one document, which signifies that he was born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.²¹ Family tradition gives his birthplace as Totris in the province of Bukovina.²² I have seen no reference to his life in Europe in his papers other than his 1898 marriage document [*ketuba*]. He came to Canada in 1900. According to the family tradition, he first tried living in New York but soon left it. The first documentary evidence we have from him is a draft of a letter dated 1904, written from Sherbrooke, Quebec,²³ where, from approximately 1900 to 1913, he served the Jewish community as rabbi, cantor, Hebrew teacher and *shoḥet*.²⁴

Laxer, apparently, had a somewhat interesting time in Sherbrooke. According to his family’s account, he arranged with a local Catholic bishop of Irish extraction to exchange lessons. He gave the bishop lessons in Hebrew, and, in return, the bishop taught him English. It is from this experience that, according to the family, Rabbi Laxer gained facility in speaking the English language.

However pleasant the conditions for Rabbi Laxer and his family in Sherbrooke, he faced the problem faced by all rabbis of small communities, in his day and in ours; the Jewish educational and social facilities of small towns could not compare to those of big cities. He did not want his family to suffer because of staying in a town like Sherbrooke, whose Jewish population peaked at 265 in the 1921 Dominion of Canada Census.²⁵

Thus, in 1913, Rabbi Laxer and his family moved to Montreal. According to the family account, the reason was to gain greater social and

educational opportunities for the children. The other reason for the move was, ironically, that Rabbi Laxer really did not like being a *sho^het*, which was an expected part of his job in Sherbrooke. He had hopes that he and his family would be able to make a living in Montreal producing and selling cottage cheese. Certainly, this was as far away from the slaughtering of animals as one can get. However, this attempt failed, and thus Rabbi Laxer became a rabbi and a *sho^het* in Montreal.

In his papers, there is an undated document in which Rabbi Laxer describes himself as having a congregational affiliation: "Getsel Laxer, rabbi of the Hevrah Tiferet Yisrael, Montreal."²⁶ That position, however, did not last long. An undated copy of his letterhead indicates that he lived at 7 Esplanade Avenue, and it bears no congregational affiliation. Family tradition informs us that for many years he led high holiday services in Chatham, New Brunswick, a town of barely four thousand, whose Jewish population peaked at 75 in 1911.²⁷ Had he managed to make a go of it in a Montreal congregation, he would likely not have had to travel as far afield as Chatham. One clue which perhaps sheds light on his failure to make a go in the rabbinate is contained in the notes for a high holiday sermon he preached on Yom Kippur of 5696 [1935], in which he sharply criticized those who "desecrated the Sabbaths and festivals all year and on Yom Kippur alone they 'correct' all of those Sabbaths." He went on to say that the prophetic reading [*haftarah*] of Yom Kippur morning, in which the prophet condemns those who fast hypocritically,²⁸ refers to such people. If the congregation which heard this sermon was typical, it was full of people who regularly transgressed the Sabbath and would likely not have appreciated the preacher's barbs.²⁹ In other words, he may have been considered too undiplomatic to last long as a congregational rabbi.

The best possible illustration of the ambivalence he felt about his rabbinical identity is the title, or rather titles, he gave himself in his letterhead. His name and title are printed in both Hebrew and English. In English, he gave himself the title of "Rabbi," whereas in Hebrew he styled himself "Reverend", a title adopted by many Orthodox para-rabbinical functionaries in North America.³⁰ Thus, for the readers of English, he could be a "rabbi," whereas the readers of Hebrew would understand that he made no such claim.

The last dated letter in the collection of documents in Laxer's hand dated from 1940 and was a letter of greetings from the *sho^htim* of the East

End Slaughterhouse of Montreal on the occasion of Rabbi Hirsh Cohen's eightieth birthday. The papers Getsel Laxer left behind³¹ tell basically two stories that will enable us to better understand who he was and what he stood for. They concern his life as scholar and would-be author, on the one hand, and his life as a *shohet*, on the other. Both stories are worthy of our attention.

Getsel Laxer was by no means an original scholar, one who desired to dazzle the reader with his brilliant and original insights. He was rather an anthologizer, someone who took what others had written and rearranged them for the benefit of his audience. The best example of this is Laxer's lengthiest and most finished manuscript, entitled *Gal Likkutim mi-Ba'alei Tosafot* [A Heap of Excerpts from the Tosafistic Masters]. It consists of an alphabetically arranged anthology of citations from the twelfth- and thirteenth-century Tosafistic commentary on the Talmud.³² The reader of this work would thus be in a position to find out readily and quickly what these important medieval scholars had to say about various personalities, objects, prayers, and concepts. Similar to that is his commentary on *Pirkei Avot*, which, at least in its manuscript form, consists of an extensive system of references to sources, from throughout rabbinic literature, bearing upon each and every word or phrase of the Mishnaic tractate. Whether he ever intended to flesh out this commentary further is a moot point. However, even in its "fleshed out" form, it would have surely consisted of an anthology rather than a vehicle for his own thoughts, as often happens in commentaries. Other major works of the same general nature, in greater or lesser states of preparation, were written by Laxer on the Pentateuch, the Prayerbook, the minor Tractate *Kallah Rabbati*, and the Laws of Ritual Slaughtering.³³

Even in his introduction³⁴ to these works, he scrupulously refrains from revealing anything directly about himself. Instead, the introduction consists of yet another anthology of rabbinical comments on the Biblical saying "Is Saul also among the prophets?"³⁵ Laxer was likely anticipating, though only by implication, surprise among his readers that such a man as he would engage in a literary enterprise. While it is true that rabbinic authors often expressed some diffidence in their introductions concerning their worthiness to write their works, Getsel Laxer's introduction is an extreme case. In all the commentary material I reviewed, only one comment I found reveals Laxer's own personal outlook. In speaking about

the wicked Esau and the righteous Jacob, he noted that the prophecy that “the elder will serve the younger”³⁶ has been fulfilled through the gentile’s serving the Jew as “*shabbes goy*”:

For without Esau, how would Israel observe the Sabbath in the time of cold to kindle fire on the Sabbath day.... Our eyes see that we are now in exile a mockery and a scorn [to the gentiles]. Nonetheless Esau the elder serves the younger.³⁷

In any event, it is most eminently clear that Getsel Laxer controlled and was able to organize in his mind an impressive range of works of Biblical and rabbinic literature and that he was recognized as a scholar of rabbinics by Montreal rabbis such as Joshua Halevi Herschorn.³⁸

What can Laxer’s works in manuscript tell us about Judaism in Montreal in the early twentieth century? The most important thing, and the major reason why, in my opinion, this material is worth such detailed study, is its very existence. These works, lovingly handed down to his descendants, testify to a compelling need on Laxer’s part to assert his expertise in the world of rabbinic learning. In this he was not alone among Montreal’s slaughterers of this era, as we have seen. Their literary productions need to be considered in some ways parallel with the works of many of Montreal’s Yiddishist educators of that era, who are seen by David Roskies as attempting to create a new Jewish civilization in the New World to replace the old one which was no more.³⁹

Though his writings are, as we said, of some significance for our understanding of who Getsel Laxer was and what he stood for, they were never published and hence never came to wide public attention. His significance in the public affairs of the Montreal Jewish community stemmed from his role as a dissident in many of the disputes concerning *shehita* in Montreal in the 1920s and 1930s. In the battle for the dominance of the Montreal rabbinate that was fought out between Rabbi Hirsh Cohen and Rabbis Simon Glazer and Yudel Rosenberg, Rabbi Laxer was a staunch partisan of Rabbis Glazer and Rosenberg, and thus often in bitter and violent opposition to Rabbi Cohen and his supporters. In the end, he turned on Rabbi Rosenberg as well, as we shall see.

Laxer became one of the most militant members of the guild of Montreal *shohtim* known as *Agudat ha-shohtim*. It is important to note that the profession of *shohtet* required not only expert knowledge of the

halakha of *shehita*, as well as the physical strength and prowess to carry out the act properly. Most importantly, to function as a slaughterer in the kosher meat industry of Montreal, one needed membership in the guild, which eventually registered as a union under the labour laws of Quebec. Gaining such a membership was not an altogether easy thing to do. Each member of the union had what was known as a *hazaka*, which signified that one had the right to practise the kosher slaughtering of cattle and sheep in the four abattoirs of Montreal in which kosher slaughtering was undertaken.⁴⁰ Like a seat on the stock exchange, a *hazaka* was worth money. Thus a newcomer could not merely show his credentials to the supervising rabbi to gain access to the profession. He also had to arrange to purchase a *hazaka*, e.g., from the widow of a deceased member. In the absence of a social safety net, the purchase of the *hazaka* meant some financial help for the widow at a difficult time in her life.

In the 1920s, a member of the *Agudat ha-Shohtim* of Montreal earned approximately \$40.00 per week. This was not a munificent sum, but in that period, it was a living wage for a family, especially considering that certain “perks” came with the job. These included taking home quantities of “organ meat” like liver and lung. According to the Laxer family tradition, Rabbi Laxer would regularly give packages of this meat to poor people. The supervising rabbis, whose job was considerably less disagreeable, got as much or more.

As one of the activist members of the *Agudat ha-Shohtim*, it was Laxer who was the principal plaintiff in the 1923 suit in Quebec Superior Court “Getzel [*sic*] Laxer et al., vs. The Jewish Butchers Society of Montreal et al.,” which was of great significance in the solution to the dispute over the supervision of kosher meat in Montreal in the period 1923–25.⁴¹

His leadership in this and other dissident movements within the Montreal kosher meat industry is sharply illustrated by two documents preserved in his papers, both of which add significantly to our available information on this subject. The first of these is a reply to a column in the *Keneder Odler* criticizing the rabbis and slaughterers of Montreal⁴² and was probably designed to be published as a handbill, since Montreal’s Yiddish daily sided decisively with the communal *kashrut* “establishment” and did not give its columns to dissidents.⁴³ It is undated but can be dated to the Spring of 1922.⁴⁴ In the letter, whose authorship is uncertain, we find the following description of tensions within Montreal *kashrut*:

We ask you householders: Do you wish to know what is happening among the rabbis and slaughterers? Do you wish to know whether the rabbis and slaughterers make a living? Do you invite rabbis to your weddings and circumcisions to give them a benefit? Do you send the rabbis holiday and Purim gifts as European householders do? Do you make the least effort to help the slaughterers in their cursed lot? ... One slaughterer seceded from the Association of Slaughterers ... which caused a disturbance in *kashrut* in the opinion of all the local rabbis.⁴⁵ This slaughterer sought out some other slaughterers who were never recognized by the local rabbis as kosher slaughterers. They have also adopted a new rabbi... All the local rabbis have certainly declared more than once that the[ir] meat is forbidden. Well, let's ask the question. Do you the householders heed what the rabbis declare to you according to the Torah? Do you therefore refrain from buying the meat from their forbidden slaughtering? You say rather that the revolution is a lucky stroke for Montreal, without which a pound of kosher meat might cost fifty cents.

Now there is a new trouble. Do you householders wish to hear about the dispute between the rabbis from which the city suffers in matters of *kashrut*? ... That the Borden Milk Company this year has asked Rabbi Rosenberg to give the certification for Passover milk.⁴⁶ However Rabbi Cohen says that since he once had given such a certification, no other rabbi can give the certification. Because Rabbi Cohen is a person of influence since he usurped the right to have the agreements with the meat companies in his name, the check for *shehita* money is in his name. He has demanded from Rabbi Rosenberg \$1,500 for the \$100 left him from Borden's certification and he has withheld Rabbi Rosenberg's wages from slaughtering. Until this week, *Parshat Naso* [June 10, 1922], Rabbi Cohen has seized \$400 from Rabbi Rosenberg's wages. However we the slaughterers cannot allow Rabbi Rosenberg to remain without bread, God forbid. You understand very well that all this leaves you cold.

Now we ask you householders whether you wish to interest yourselves in the cursed lot of the rabbis and the slaughterers and to make an end to the chaos and lawlessness which passes for calm in Montreal?

This document is of prime importance because it helps explain the underlying tensions between Rabbis Cohen and Rosenberg, at a period in which they were formally cooperating.⁴⁷ It sets the stage for Montreal's "Kosher Meat War" (1923–25), to be discussed in Chapter 7, which was precipitated by a rift between those two rabbis.

The second document brings us closer to an understanding of Getsel Laxer the *shohet* and his often stormy relationships with other slaughterers and rabbis. Whereas the previous document shows him to have been allied to Rabbi Rosenberg, this one will place them in an adversarial relationship. It is a draft of a letter presumably sent in 1930 to Rabbi Meir Shapira of Lublin, Poland, one of the most famous rabbis of the era.⁴⁸ There is no evidence that this query, if it was ever sent, was answered. In it, Laxer pours forth his frustrations and gives us a tremendously interesting portrait of the development of the kosher slaughtering industry in Montreal in the mid- to late 1920s:

May our rabbi teach us in the matter I will explain.... Now it is about five years since peace was made between all the slaughterers and the sides and we became slaughterers from all the sides. Then all of the [parties] came to a compromise that the slaughterers here would gain two-thirds of the money for *shehita*. This compromise lasted until *Parshat Nizzavim* of 5688 [September 8, 1928]. After that the verse was fulfilled “slaves have ruled over us”⁴⁹ and our rights were taken away. We, the slaughterers were given a weekly salary for slaughtering and not the two-thirds as previously. The slaughterers submitted to them, and all the workers of evil boasted, saying “our hand has prevailed and we will do with the slaughterers what we wish.” Thus was their rule for thirteen months. After that we three slaughterers, Getsel Laxer, Jonah Aspler and Leibush Herzig, all born in Austria,⁵⁰ placed our souls in our hands and went out to battle with them. That is, we found a wholesale company which came to us, the three slaughterers, to slaughter its cattle and sheep (from *parshat berakha* to *parshat tizave*, 5690 [October 27, 1929–March 15, 1930]), and [after that] the war was forgotten. We came to a compromise also at this time on the principle of two-thirds of the slaughtering money to the slaughterers as a whole. All of us now as then are free agents. All the city rested and was quiet. However we, the aforementioned three demand from the [other] thirteen slaughterers who remained subject to the Community Council [*Va’ad ha-Ir*] and during the strife (from *parshat berakha* to *tizave*) lay “on ivory couches,”⁵¹ the [monetary] loss that we have lost each and every week of the strife. It is our claim that they – the thirteen – not merely did not lose their weekly wage (which when the Community Council was in charge [consisted of] \$37 apiece for each slaughterer per week) whereas we, the three aforementioned slaughterers got only \$22 per week during the strife. Moreover we have improved the lot of the thirteen slaughterers who stayed with the Community Council while we

were fighting and we got them a percentage of the slaughtering money which gave them more than \$40 per week.... There is no doubt that we have improved the entire situation.... Therefore we the aforementioned three demand from the thirteen that they go back and divide the loss we have lost, approximately \$900, among all the slaughterers equally for those who went to war and those who stayed in peace.... We said to them several times previously that we were going out to save [the situation] and also on the first day we went out we said to the thirteen slaughterers that we were going out for all [of them].... They claim that they did not send us. Therefore we claim that since we went, even without [their] permission, to improve the situation ... our expenses and losses are due us.... Therefore we ask from your excellency that you will answer with your opinion of this, not as a practical decision [*halakha le-ma'aseh*] ... only with the legal discussion [*shakla ve-tarya*] for we have no justice on earth, here among the local rabbis, and we have no one upon whom to depend except upon our Father in Heaven.⁵²

As it happens, we have the other side of this story preserved in a responsum of Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg.⁵³ Laxer's reference to his inability to get justice from the Montreal rabbinate is probably the result of the hearing he received from Rabbi Rosenberg. Here is Rosenberg's version:

There came before me a *din torah* [hearing based upon Torah law] from the local Slaughterers' Association.... Some years ago there was founded in this city a [Jewish] communal [organization] called the [Jewish] Community Council. All the Association of Slaughterers, nineteen in number, stood under the Community Council which payed them a weekly salary for about three years. The Community Council also payed the rabbis. Then three slaughterers seceded from the Association and the Community Council to stand as independents to slaughter. They also established for themselves a rabbi to say that they are under his supervision even though the Community Council banned their slaughtering. This situation lasted for approximately three years.... After that another three slaughterers seceded from the Association of Slaughterers on the grounds that they wanted to increase their salary by two or three dollars. They went out to slaughter by themselves without any [supervising] rabbi. Though the Community Council banned their slaughtering they remained thus for four months fighting the Community Council and the Rabbinical Council. They caused the remaining slaughterers a loss by reducing the revenue of the Community Council ... so that the Community Council was forced to cut the salaries of the rabbis by ten dollars a week.

In the first month the Community Council as well as the thirteen slaughterers asked them to come back under the authority of the Community Council and the Rabbinical Council, promising to raise their wages. However they remained at war and refused by any means to make peace with the Community Council. They proposed ... that they would unite with the three slaughterers who had previously seceded from the Community Council and that the six slaughterers would stand alone in the slaughterhouse and not mix at all with the thirteen [remaining] slaughterers and that they would not receive any salary from the Community Council but rather [one] from the manufacturers [*zovhei ha-zevah*] of sixty dollars a week. However since the Rabbinical Council announced and publicized that their slaughtering was forbidden, revenues for slaughtering of the secessionists kept getting smaller until they submitted and agreed to make peace with the Community Council. When the thirteen [remaining] slaughterers heard that the secessionists submitted and wanted peace and also heard that famine ruled in their households, they had mercy on the three slaughterers and sent them a sum of money for sustenance in order to propitiate them ... to make the peace easier. Thus the matter was ended. When all the sides saw that the dispute caused loss to everyone, all of them sought to make peace. Since the manufacturers did not wish to add to the price of slaughtering unless the Community Council would add to the Association of Slaughterers also the three slaughterers who originally went out, the Community Council was forced, in making peace, to have them also enter under their auspices. The revenue from slaughtering was increased and the Community Council was enabled to add a small amount to the wages of all the slaughterers.

Rabbi Rosenberg's decision in this case went decisively against Getsel Laxer and his colleagues and in favour of the thirteen, and this served to strain relations between the two men who, as we saw in our 1922 document, were erstwhile allies.⁵⁴ Though they lived in close proximity to one another on Esplanade Avenue, they refused to speak to each other. In analyzing the claims of the three, Rosenberg noted that the three claimed that they were in fact tacitly supported by the thirteen slaughterers who remained, who were called by them "idlers and cowards, fearful of conflict with the Community Council."

Getsel Laxer's motivations in this incident are reasonably clear and straightforward. He knew himself to be a *shohet* expert in the laws of ritual slaughtering. He felt himself to be equal, if not superior in this respect, to

the greatest rabbis of his generation.⁵⁵ Thus he vented his frustration over the fact that the Jewish Community Council's rabbis were "slaves ruling over us" who, moreover, took one-third of the money earned by slaughtering for their salaries and overhead. If that "overhead" were eliminated and the one-third added to the slaughterer's wages, they would surely increase by the same amount from approximately \$40 to \$60 per week. It needn't be said that the tensions shown by these documents, both within the Slaughterers' Association and between the Association and the Community Council, shed considerable light on the conditions of the kosher meat industry of Montreal and on the role of Getsel Laxer and his colleagues in the development of both the material and the intellectual life of the Montreal rabbinate.

Hyman Meyer Crestohl

Hyman [Haim] Meyer Crestohl, rabbi and *shoḥet* in Quebec City and Montreal, was born in Russian Poland in 1865.⁵⁶ He married Rose Weitzman and had three sons.⁵⁷ He died in Montreal on May 5, 1928.⁵⁸ Crestohl received an extensive education in the literary sources of Orthodox Judaism in his native Poland and obtained his rabbinical ordination from eminent rabbinical authorities there.⁵⁹ He also was deeply exposed in his youth to an informal education in European literature and thought in a manner which was not uncommon among contemporary rabbinical students.⁶⁰ After his ordination, he served as rabbi of the Polish town of Siedlice.⁶¹ He was a Zionist by conviction and became an early member of *Mizrahi*, the religious faction of the Zionist movement. He became an activist and a propagandist for that movement. As such, he was in contact with many of the leaders of political Zionism in Europe, such as Chaim Weizmann, Naḥum Sokolow, and Rabbis Samuel Mohilever and Isaac Reines.⁶²

In 1904 he went from Warsaw to New York as an emissary of *Mizrahi*⁶³ and stayed in New York until 1911.⁶⁴ Among the Crestohl papers we have a letter of recommendation on his behalf, written by Rabbi Reines to *Mizrahi* activists in America. In that letter, Reines praised his public-speaking ability as well his rabbinical qualifications. Reines asked those who would read the letter to make an effort to help Rabbi Crestohl gain his livelihood. It is interesting to see the sort of thing that Rabbi Reines

recommended. The recipients of his letter were not asked to find him a rabbinical position. Rather they were given the following possibilities: a position as a *shohet*, or, possibly as a fundraising emissary for *Mizrahi* or for the Yeshiva of Lida, or, possibly, a vendor of lottery tickets. The choices for a man like Rabbi Crestohl in New York in 1904 were thus not all that promising. He evidently stayed in New York State for several years, including a period as rabbi in the town of Gloversville.⁶⁵ We find him living in Brooklyn in 1910.

In 1911, he emigrated to Canada, serving first as rabbi of a congregation in Quebec City from 1911 to 1919.⁶⁶ In Quebec City, Rabbi Crestohl was the rabbi of the second, breakaway congregation, Ohabei Shalom.⁶⁷ Whatever the original reason for the split in this small Jewish community in the year 1907,⁶⁸ the dispute between Rabbis Simon Glazer and Hirsh Cohen, both then vying for the leadership of the immigrant Orthodox community in Montreal, which had split the community there, played itself out also in Quebec. The loyalties of the established congregation in Quebec City, Beth Israel, went to Rabbi Glazer in 1909.⁶⁹ Thus, apparently, Rabbi Cohen's supporters coalesced around the new congregation. That there was bad blood between the two communities will be seen presently but can be also illustrated by the fact that one of the more prominent Jewish residents of Quebec, Mr. Montefiore Joseph, could inform Montreal's *Jewish Times* in 1910 that, "we have one synagogue," pointedly ignoring the existence of the other.⁷⁰

One piece of evidence supporting this tie between Ohabei Shalom and Rabbi Cohen is a series of three letters from Rabbi Cohen to Crestohl in 1916–18, in one of which he spoke of supplying Crestohl with two sets of *arba' minim*.⁷¹ Significantly, Rabbi Cohen did not address Rabbi Crestohl as "Rabbi," in these letters, but as "*shohet* in Quebec." There was a subtle but distinct line of hierarchy between the two. Much more to the point, however, is a draft of a letter Rabbi Crestohl wrote to Rabbi Glazer, in his role as editor of a short-lived Montreal Yiddish newspaper entitled *Di Idische Velt*.⁷² Rabbi Glazer had, apparently, published an attack on both Crestohl personally and on the community he led under the title "*Skandal in Kvebek*" shortly after Crestohl's arrival. In response, Crestohl wrote a long and detailed refutation.

He began this refutation by expressing his surprise and shock that the attack on him should come from a fellow rabbi. Using the strong and

pointed words of the Babylonian Talmud, he rhetorically stated: “Prostitutes do makeup for one another. How much more so should disciples of the sages [help each other]?”⁷³

The first charge in the article was that his position as *shohet* in the community was illegitimate, since he was trespassing on the territory of another slaughterer, authorized by Rabbi Glazer in his role as chief rabbi of the Beth Israel community, which he considered the only legitimate one in the city. Thus the meat emanating from the animals Crestohl had slaughtered was not to be considered kosher. The second charge was that Crestohl was a man who would issue Jewish divorces to anyone for a few dollars, strongly implying that financial, and not halakhic, questions determined the results.⁷⁴

The third charge involved an incident that reveals the tensions inherent in the relations between members of the two Quebec synagogues. On a cold winter Friday afternoon, January 5, 1912, a woman of the Ohabei Sholom community died. Though Quebec City had two synagogues, it had only one Jewish cemetery, controlled by Beth Israel. Thus the chief officer of the Beth Israel Cemetery was called and indicated that he would make all arrangements for the burial. The article charged or implied that Crestohl had instructed the gentile caretaker of the cemetery to dig the grave on Saturday afternoon, which would have been a violation of the Sabbath laws. Not so, replied Crestohl. The cemetery watchman had been informed that he should be ready to dig the grave after dark on Saturday night, because that Saturday, January 6, was the Catholic holiday of the “Three Kings” [Epiphany] and it was feared that, if not suitably informed, he might get drunk and not be there at the right time. Because it was terribly cold, and the watchman did not want to dig the grave at night, he took it upon himself to dig the grave on the Saturday afternoon. As to the article attributing consternation on the part of the officers of the Beth Israel Cemetery at this violation of the Sabbath, Crestohl sarcastically responded, “whoever knows the officers ... including the chief officer, knows how much they are aggravated by Sabbath desecration.”

Crestohl further stated that the Beth Israel Cemetery official told the husband of the deceased woman, who was himself bedridden with three children in the house, that they would not touch the body until they were paid \$15.00, and that, finally, they would not bury her in the plot of the family’s choice, but in another one.

At this point in the feud, Rabbi Crestohl was asked and gave permission for the body to be transported for burial out of Quebec City. Rabbi Glazer criticized Rabbi Crestohl for this and cited the authoritative Code of Judaic law, the *Shulhan 'Arukh*, which stated that one was not to transport a deceased's body from a city that possessed a Jewish burial ground. In his justification for his permission, which contained several learned references, Crestohl also indicated some of the ambivalence of the authority of an Orthodox rabbi in a community like Quebec. He had initially hesitated to respond to the halakhic query because he had determined not to answer halakhic questions in Quebec on the grounds that he had once issued an opinion in a matter of importance that was not obeyed. What swayed him, ultimately, was the plea of the deceased's bedridden husband that if she were buried in Quebec, he would die.

During his time in Quebec, Rabbi Crestohl maintained his ties with the Zionist movement in Canada, founding the Dorshei Zion Society of Quebec City and serving on the council of the Federation of Zionist Societies of Canada.⁷⁵ During World War I, he was also active in ministering to the religious needs of Jewish soldiers training at Valcartier.⁷⁶

In 1920 he moved to Montreal. As is the case with more than one small-town rabbi, including Getsel Laxer, the move was prompted by the desire to have the social and intellectual resources of a large Jewish community, such as Montreal, especially for the education and marriage prospects of his children. As early as 1918, he had inquired about the possibility of moving to Montreal and becoming a *sho^het*, for which he understood that he would be obliged to purchase a *hazaka* [membership right] in the *Agudat ha-Sho^htim* of Montreal.⁷⁷ Unfortunately for him, negotiations lasted a frustrating two years, including numerous trips to Montreal to confer with his potential colleagues. During this period, despairing of getting the position in Montreal, he actively considered another opportunity to become the rabbi of the Jewish community of Halifax. In one letter, Crestohl poured forth his frustrations and disgust in a letter to Meyer Cohen, a Montreal *sho^het*. He began by saying that he was writing this letter in Yiddish, instead of his usual Hebrew, so that he will be better understood, and so that he will not desecrate the Holy tongue by talking about such vile things. He had heard accusations against him that he did not put on *tefilin*, or that, alternatively, the *tefilin* he did put on were invalid and he was completely fed up with the hypocrisy of men who

hide “a large mound of dirt with the mantle of piety.” He spoke of one of the *shohtim* who was well known to be incompetent at his job, of another whose brother, also working as a *shohet* in Montreal and Quebec, was a bigamist, having one wife in Romania and another in Montreal.

Ultimately the dispute was settled, though ‘amicably’ is probably not a just description, and he moved to Montreal in 1920. By the late 1920s he was elected secretary of the slaughterers’ organization. He also was appointed as rabbi of the Russian-Polish Hadrath Kodesh Congregation (1920–28).⁷⁸ Even at this point, he hesitated to unequivocally identify himself as a rabbi. On his business card, the Hebrew side identifies him as “*ha-rov*” [rabbi], whereas on the English part he calls himself “Rev.,” a title more suitable to a lesser religious functionary than a rabbi.⁷⁹ Since it was not possible for him to make ends meet as a congregational rabbi, even with the additional income he derived as a *shohet*,⁸⁰ he also advertised himself on his card as a circumciser and performer of weddings. On the flip side of his business card, he also advertised that: “You can also get Chickens cleaned and fixed Retail to Wholesale Prices.”⁸¹ In 1920, he also became first president of the Mizrahi Organization of Canada.⁸²

As we have seen, Crestohl had plenty of opposition getting into Montreal. This did not completely cease when he arrived there to settle. As a partisan of Rabbi Cohen from his years in Quebec City, he was a target for Cohen’s opponents, chief among them Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg, who had taken over Rabbi Glazer’s rabbinical post in 1919. In a circular, Rabbi Rosenberg declared that Rabbi Crestohl’s slaughtering was invalid and not kosher. Rabbi Crestohl was called in this circular “an old former country *shohet*” [*an alter gevezener kontri shohet*].⁸³ True to his style of previous years, Rabbi Crestohl countered with a circular of his own in which Rabbi Rosenberg was charged with, among other things, acquiescing in the false testimony of one of the *shohtim* under his supervision, which was given in front of the Holy Ark of the Papineau Synagogue.

Crestohl, like many of his fellow *shohtim*, was well known as a scholar of rabbinic literature and wrote many works on that subject.⁸⁴ However, the fact that his works remained in manuscript served to limit his influence to the Montreal Jewish community. Only one of his treatises was published, posthumously, by his children.⁸⁵

Both Getsel Laxer and Hyman Crestohl illustrate the tensions, resentments, and conflicts that were inherent in the kosher meat industry of

Montreal and in its rabbinical functionaries, to the frequent consternation of the Montreal Jewish community. The situation cried out for reform. In the next chapter, we will consider one such attempt at ameliorating the situation through the founding of a body that would take over the regulatory apparatus of the kosher meat industry – the Jewish Community Council [*Va'ad ha-Ir*] of Montreal.