



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

by Ira Robinson

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Afterword

Now with the rabbis [the situation] is certainly not a happy one. However without the rabbis it would be truly sad. – Rabbi Hirsh Cohen (1934)¹

In conclusion, there is one major point that needs to be made. This book commenced with a discussion of the rabbis and *shohtim* of Montreal at the beginning of the twentieth century that describes them as “forgotten men.” They were forgotten, first of all, by those who wrote the histories of the Montreal Jewish community, who were both naturally more interested in and found more material relating to the non-religious sector of the immigrant community. I also stated that, within the Orthodox community itself, these are largely forgotten men. If you consider the Orthodox Jewish community of present-day Montreal, it is fair to say that its historical memory begins in 1941, with the arrival of the first European refugee rabbis in Montreal on one of the last ships crossing the Pacific from Shanghai prior to Pearl Harbor.² Thus the historical memory of Montreal Orthodox Jews begins with people like Rabbi Pinchos Hirschprung and Rabbi Leib Kramer. There is certainly justice in remembering these distinguished rabbis, who made their mark on their adopted community. However, it is equally important to point out that the rabbis who arrived in 1941 did not find a *tabula rasa*. They did not find Montreal without a unified – if flawed – rabbinical structure, or without a coherent – if flawed – *kashrut* supervision authority. There was also a considerable Jewish educational structure, with all its faults, in place when they came.

This book of studies in the Eastern European Immigrant Orthodox rabbinate of Montreal in the early decades of the twentieth century is not designed as a comprehensive history of the Montreal rabbinate in that era. It does, however, shed light on a number of individuals, organizations, and issues that were instrumental in the development of Orthodox Judaism in Montreal in this era. Furthermore, it has shown how presenting the Montreal rabbis not as individuals, but as part of a larger community, can provide us with added dimensions in our comprehension of the development of the Eastern European immigrant community of Montreal. This has important implications for the understanding of other major North American Jewish communities in the first half of the twentieth century. In all of them, immigrant Orthodox rabbis came, interacted with each other and with their communities, and painstakingly built up an institutional structure.

Had the refugee rabbis arriving in Montreal in 1941 not found an existing structure upon which they could build, they would have certainly not desisted from their task. However, theirs would have been a longer, harder, more uphill struggle than it was. In other words, this book has been discussing an era that ends with the onset of World War II. Of the rabbis we have discussed in any detail, Rabbi Crestohl died in 1928; Rabbi Rosenberg in 1935; and Rabbi Laxer in 1942. Rabbi Cohen died in 1950 but had been out of commission for a considerable time before that. Only Rabbi Herschorn remained active in the Montreal rabbinate after World War II. He died in 1969, though he, too, was incapacitated for most of the last decade of his life.³

A new generation of rabbinical leadership arrived in the 1940s, of whom Rabbi Hirschprung ultimately became the most prominent. But, important as it was that Montreal acquired Rabbi Hirschprung and the others, it was of equal, if not greater, importance that when Rabbis Hirschprung, Kramer, and their companions came to Montreal, there was someone to meet them at the station.