

## ***The Spice Box, Old and New: Defining the Field of Canadian Jewish Writing***

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Nearly four decades have passed since 1981, when Lester & Orpen Dennys issued *The Spice Box: An Anthology of Jewish Canadian Writing* under its historic imprint. At the time, few such anthologies existed and *The Spice Box*, co-edited by Gerri Sinclair and Morris Wolfe,<sup>1</sup> was hailed as a landmark collection. Among other works, it included English translations of Yiddish verse by J. I. Segal and Rokhl Korn, poems by A. M. Klein, Irving Layton, and Miriam Waddington, and prose by Ted Allan, Adele Wiseman, and Mordecai Richler, authors widely recognized for having brought Jewish writing to the fore in Canada. *The Spice Box* was instrumental in delineating the field of Canadian Jewish writing and soon became an important title for Lester & Orpen Dennys.

In 2015, when the Anne Tanenbaum Centre for Jewish Studies at the University of Toronto launched the New Jewish Press—in 2018, the imprint was acquired by the University of Toronto Press, giving it a new authority and a wider reach—co-publishers Andrea Knight and Malcolm Lester invited me to edit *The New Spice Box*, an anthology that would pay homage to its predecessor—long out of print—and bring together distinctive contemporary voices.

This essay probes the editorial imperatives underlying two complementary anthologies,

the one historic and the other contemporary. When *The Spice Box: An Anthology of Jewish Canadian Writing* was issued in the early 1980s, it marked the growth of Jewish literary activity in Canada over the course of the twentieth century. *The New Spice Box: Canadian Jewish Writing* was launched in May 2017 and its scope and perspective are expansive: the volume summons the past as it moves toward the present.

I contend that widespread notions of Canadianness, on the one hand, and Jewishness, on the other, influenced editorial selection of the specific representations of Canadian Jewish writing in the two iterations of *The Spice Box*. Much of the work included in the earlier collection, for example, was explicitly concerned with the various ways national and cultural identities converge. In a somewhat ironic reversal, writers in the 2017 collection are more inclined to explore their cultural inheritance by returning to a historical past that is rarely rooted in Canada. By surveying the editorial focus and literary content of *The Spice Box* old and new, this essay shows that each collection invokes prevailing ideas about nation and culture to further its larger project of defining the field of Canadian Jewish writing.

In their respective attempts to contest and realign the parameters of the Canadian literary canon, each of *The Spice Box* editors, whether or not they acknowledge doing so, traverses the valuable terrain of established cultural capital. In their introduction to *The Spice Box* of 1981, co-editors Sinclair and Wolfe claim they “just wanted to bring

together the best writing . . . on the subject of being Jewish in Canada” and did not establish “firm ground rules” for their project (v). In contrast, my editorial introduction to *The New Spice Box* self-reflexively outlines the methodological approach that guided my selection of “original and varied responses to the intersectional complexities of cultural and national identity” (xi). Nonetheless, both sets of editorial practice—the one implicit, the other explicit—effectively serve to intervene in the canon of Canadian literary works.

By overtly situating Jewish writing as Canadian writing, *The Spice Box* of 1981 sought to lay new cultural ground. Its editors saw a complementarity between Jews, whose long memory of “[c]enturies of hatred . . . forced [them] . . . to define themselves,” and Canadians, who had “the shortest” of memories and lacked a clear sense of themselves (vii). Thus, Sinclair and Wolfe mapped Jewish culture onto what they figured as the open literary landscape of Canada. In doing so, they posited the possibility that Jews had not only made the “journey from the *shtetls* of Europe into the mainstream of modern Canadian life”; in fact, they were suggesting that Canadian culture had made a place for and was enriched by Jewish sensibility, knowledge, and experience (Sinclair and Wolfe ix).

Canada served as a necessary backdrop for the probing of Jewish identity in *The Spice Box*. For much of the twentieth century, when the writing collected in *The Spice Box* was coming to life, Canada was perceived as a relatively new nation. This perception, though never tenable, proved to be liberating for many of the writers featured in the 1981 volume. Here, Canada offered a modern frame of reference and the opportunity to read Jewishness and its age-old struggles anew.

Authors such as Ted Allan, Miriam Waddington, Eli Mandel, and Shirley Faessler, for example, wrote in advance of

the 1982 publication of Irving Abella and Harold Troper’s *None Is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933-1948*, a signal text that exposed the systemic racism that denied refuge to European Jews during the Second World War—it has since been reissued several times and now serves as a dire warning against such malicious practices—and well before 1988, when multiculturalism as government policy was legally enshrined. For these writers, the arrival and settlement experience of Jewish immigrants to Canada was paramount. Thus, *The Spice Box* was an anthology of Jewish Canadian writing, its subtitle phrased so as to emphasize cultural and/or ethnic identity over national identity. By positioning Jewish writing as Canadian writing, however, co-editors Sinclair and Wolfe sought to broaden the literary canon, an undertaking that was as bold as it was deliberate.

The setting of Montreal is central to Ted Allan’s 1949 story “Lies My Father Told Me,” which evokes the adult narrator’s loss of childhood innocence and coming of age. The narrator lovingly recalls being seated atop a wagon with his rag peddler grandfather, pulled along by their old horse Ferdeleh “through the dirt lanes of Montreal . . . holding our hands to our ears and shouting at the top of our lungs, ‘Regz, cloze, botels!’” (83). The mood of the grandfather, who was born and raised in Russia and remains devout, improves when he reaches Mount Royal. The setting inspires him to extol the virtues “of the great land that Canada was, and of the great things the young people growing up were going to do in this great land” (84).

The climax of the story, which hinges on the death of both the grandfather and Ferdeleh and on the betrayal of the narrator by his own father, shows the influence of the modern setting of Canada on the traditions and values imported from Eastern Europe. The narrator’s father, who shows open

disdain for his father-in-law's faith, has embraced the secular life. His demeanour (he does not wear a beard) and his behaviour (he does not pray, attend synagogue, or observe the Sabbath) are governed by the freedom he claims and the agency he asserts in the new world of Montreal. More importantly, he eschews the moral strictures of Judaism by acting unscrupulously. In an ironic undercutting of the grandfather's prediction that native-born Jews will see great achievements, the story ends with rejection of the Canadianized father. Here, the loss of the old ways and the personal cost that comes of embracing the new is enacted ambivalently on Canadian soil.

The poet Miriam Waddington, for whom identity is a complex mix of recent and historical events, knows herself as "someone from / Winnipeg whose bones ache / with the broken revolutions / of Europe" ("The Nineteen Thirties" 111). She withstands the insult "*dirty Jew*" and the wounding question from a streetcar conductor on Winnipeg's Selkirk Avenue: "*your father is / a Bolshevik isn't / he little girl?*" ("Why Should I Care" 115). Later, as a social worker in Toronto, she feels a kinship with the "twice outcast . . . Jewish whore" who strolls Jarvis Street and who she salutes as a sister: "I will recognize your face[,] she asserts ("The Bond" 112-13). For Waddington, Winnipeg and Toronto engender a sense of divided cultural identity. Both cities, which serve as the loci for many of her poems, are the sites where her Jewishness is seen and experienced as a mark of shame and difference.

Poet Eli Mandel records a similar duality. Born and raised in Estevan, Saskatchewan, a small town near the Jewish farming colonies that were established in the province between 1886 and 1907, Mandel is unschooled in the Hebrew he reads on gravestones in the Hirsch Community Jewish Cemetery, now a historic site. Nonetheless, he so feels himself a "jewboy" that he takes part in a memorial service

marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, held at the YMHA (now the Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre) in downtown Toronto. Afterwards, he pays homage to his ancestry with a "poem becoming the body / becoming the faint hunger / ing body" of the millions who "drift / smoke from chimneys and ovens" ("On the 25th Anniversary" 119-20). Mandel's sense of Jewishness takes root in an unlikely place: the Canadian prairie that proved inhospitable to early Jewish settlers. Like Waddington, however, he, too, proclaims himself a Jew in a Canadian landscape far removed from the ashes of recent Jewish history.

Shirley Faessler's 1969 story "A Basket of Apples" unfolds against an earlier backdrop of historical suffering—the persecution of Jews in Eastern Europe—and private anguish. It tells of a long, arranged marriage that unites two impoverished immigrants, a husband from Romania, a contrary man whose first wife dies giving birth to their fourth child who does not survive, and his second wife from Russia, an accommodating woman who grows up as an illiterate orphan and whose childhood is one of servitude. Set in the insular Kensington Market neighbourhood of Toronto, at the time an enclave of Jewish newcomers, it describes a life of shared hardship in a city that is never truly home to the couple. Yet, Toronto fosters connections in the form of reconstituted families and new emotional bonds. As he lies dying in hospital, the husband finally admits that his wife is "a good woman" and entreats his daughter to care for her stepmother after his death (Faessler 105). First, however, she must take her stepmother to the Canadian National Exhibition: "It wouldn't hurt you to give her a little pleasure" (103). Although he was always averse to taking her himself—"Me?" he asks, "What would I do at the Exhibition?" (104)—he wants to convey appreciation for his devoted and hardworking wife who made a

loving home for him and his three children. Exhibition Place, a fairground far removed from the hardscrabble day-to-day life of Kensington Market, is a site of pleasure and promise amid profound pain and loss. By the story's close, having "booked two seats for the grandstand" to "see the fireworks" at the Exhibition, the stepdaughter signals the possibility of moving forward that comes of having laid down familial roots and having overcome trials in one's chosen home (Faessler 109). Toronto is no haven, but it is a city where families rebuild and new alliances form. In that, Faessler's husband and wife are equally fortunate.

Today, many prose writers and poets feel themselves adequately anchored in this country and the once pressing need to make sense of an unfamiliar land and culture has given way to a desire to scan the past. As a result, writers have turned to historical subject matter as a means of investigating and contextualizing the Jewish experience in Canada, past and present. In fact, the cultural contingencies of present-day Canadian life, as recorded by Helen Weinzwieg, Kenneth Sherman, Eva Hoffman, and Naim Kattan in *The New Spice Box* of 2017, have led to a transnational probing of profound historical complexities, which may be apprehended though never resolved through writerly explorations of Jewish identity. Consequently, in subtitled *The New Spice Box* I felt called to revise past practice and to put the accent on Canadian over Jewish writing.

In selecting material for the volume I was guided first by its title, with its emphasis on newness. *The New Spice Box* showcases work that is fresh and relevant, profound and lasting—problematic as it may be to assign such literary merit. A desire to uncover the twin touchstones of original expression and writerly craft, and to balance the representation of genres, styles, and authorial perspectives, underwrote my editorial deliberations.

The poems, stories, and essays featured in *The New Spice Box* show that there are innumerable ways in which literature is both Canadian and Jewish in orientation, countless ways in which Canadian Jewish experience is written into literature, and multiple ways in which writers identify as Canadian and Jewish. Much of the writing is recent, although some of it is historic. While it does not replicate content included in *The Spice Box*, it does feature stories by Helen Weinzwieg, Matt Cohen, and Seymour Mayne, writers represented in the 1981 collection. Omitted are others who treat Jewish subject matter but, for a variety of reasons, choose not to self-identify as Jewish writers.

Helen Weinzwieg's "My Mother's Luck" of 1989, the opening story in *The New Spice Box*, though centred in Kensington Market where the protagonist Lily lives and works as a hairstylist, also returns to Poland, where she was born and raised. Presented in Lily's inimitable voice as she prepares to send her daughter, Esther, on a return trip to Europe to visit a long-absent father, the extended monologue, assigned the ominous date of 6 July 1931, offers an encapsulated history of Polish Jewry.

Lily's personal narrative of unremitting difficulty—punctuated by advice she gives her daughter—reconstructs the past as it moves fitfully toward a present and future located, however uneasily, in Canada. Details of her past trials, first as a mistreated daughter and then as an undervalued wife, inform our reading of Lily's fortitude and resilience. We come to understand her defiant attitude, born of female subjugation in Poland and honed in Toronto, where she faces public scrutiny as a divorcée raising her daughter alone. She adapts old ways to new challenges and has few regrets—she reflects on the past as merely having shaped her—an indication of the confidence that comes of having had the opportunity in Toronto to make personal choices and to

live according to her beliefs. In the end, Lily is certain of her legacy to her daughter. “I brought you up right” she declares, and Esther is thus braced for the dangerous world her mother knows intimately (Weinzweig 16). Lily may have learned to live by her wits in Poland, but that knowledge also serves her admirably in Canada.

Essayists in *The New Spice Box* concede the effects of the past on present lives. In his 2009 essay Kenneth Sherman recollects his grandfather as a man who, soon after arriving in “the New World,” achieves success as a custom tailor and does “not spend much time looking back” at life in his native Poland (94). His grandfather thrives, however, by dint of three qualities that are rooted in the hardship of his Eastern European upbringing: a heightened intuition, a keen work ethic, and a pragmatic realism.

When asked to recall his hometown of Lipsk, Sherman senior recites telling details. He remembers its “extreme poverty” and its size: “it was so small that if a horse stood on the main street his nose would be out one end of the town and the tail would be out the other” (Sherman 95-96). All comedy aside, he condemns Europe as “a sewer”; still, he lacks a sense of history in Canada and asks the rueful question that provides the title for his grandson’s essay, “who knows you here?” (96). Though Sherman’s grandfather can reflect on a meaningful life, his formative experience has held sway over his many years in Toronto—so much so that belatedly, after having overcome much adversity, he still cannot resist weighing his European past against his Canadian present.

Eva Hoffman’s 1989 memoir describes her own existential crisis when she arrives in Canada in the 1950s. Vancouver is the physical and metaphorical site of Hoffman’s “primal scream” of “birth into the New World” (188). The city does not feel welcoming to the dejected adolescent, who must accompany her survivor parents from

Kraków, Poland to Canada’s west coast. Like so many immigrants, Hoffman’s parents seek freedom from oppression and new opportunities for themselves and their daughter. Hoffman, however, is uneasy in Vancouver, whose urban newness seems to mirror her own newcomer status. She abhors its suburban homes protected by pristine gardens and set against the backdrop of forbidding mountains, the dearth of old buildings, the bland food and lack of culture. More significantly, Vancouver neither sparks nor encourages her intellect. She leaves as soon as she can, escaping to Texas on a university scholarship. Hoffman’s hostility toward Vancouver renders the city as a liminal frontier that is still being settled. Here, though she feels unmoored in an unscripted cityscape, her aspirations for the future are kindled and nurtured. Thus, in preparing Hoffman for her inevitable departure, Vancouver proves to be an invaluable stop on her trajectory to becoming a future writer and intellectual.

A more nuanced valuing of the past and an understanding of its influence on the present is evident in Naim Kattan’s essay “Cities of Birth,” first published in 2005 in English but conceived in French, in which he imaginatively traverses the cities that have shaped his life. Kattan can be read as a perpetual exile who leaves his native Baghdad for Paris, travels to Rio de Janeiro, Istanbul, Berlin, and Tel Aviv, and works in Ottawa for nearly twenty-five years while commuting from nearby Montreal. The city where he has “chosen to live” and which “has become . . . like one love combining . . . with all others” holds Kattan (200). In Montreal, the “walls crumble, and we are here and elsewhere, elsewhere and here” (200). Open to global influence but bound to Montreal, Kattan’s identity is fluid. A contemporary example of the wandering Jew, he enjoys the privilege of moving freely about the world—both literally and creatively, by way of past experience—secure

in the knowledge that Montreal will always welcome his return.

A tie to Canada—even when it is deemed a cultural wasteland, as Hoffman characterizes Vancouver at mid-century—undergirds the interest in distant histories observable in contemporary Jewish writing. Today, the country invites embrace for its cosmopolitanism and cultural diversity; at the same time, it is open to censure for its historic failings and cultural contradictions.<sup>2</sup> The writers I chose to feature in *The New Spice Box* admit that complexity; they also feel sufficiently joined to Canada that to move beyond its borders—either physically or metaphorically—frequently leads them to reaffirm their ideological and geographical connections to a country that stirs their creativity.

My attempt to read *The New Spice Box* of 2017 in relation to *The Spice Box* of 1981 brings continuing tensions and aspirations into relief: my editorial impulse to reorient the canon of Canadian writing toward greater inclusivity, and my desire to frame Jewish writing as Canadian writing; the degree to which writers have always struggled with the complexities of Canadian Jewish identity, and the creative lengths they have gone to showcase Jewish sensibility and experience within a Canadian context. In 1981, pioneering co-editors Sinclair and Wolfe ventured to define a new literary field. More than three decades later, this editor looked beyond established parameters and outward to a future in which writers will probe new intricacies of Canadian Jewish life.<sup>3</sup>

#### NOTES

- 1 Both were trained as literary scholars. At the time, Sinclair taught at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver and Wolfe at the Ontario College of Art (now OCAD University) in Toronto.
- 2 Since an overview of those failings, which entails a shameful history of racism, lies outside the scope of this essay, I reference only the crime of cultural genocide enacted against Indigenous

peoples through Canada's government-sponsored Indian residential schools, an institutional system in place from 1831 to 1996.

- 3 Volume two of *The New Spice Box*—the anthology was conceived and contracted as a two-volume project—will be published by the University of Toronto Press under the New Jewish Press imprint.

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