

Lawrence Sabbath

NOT A great deal has been written about the life of early Jewish settlers in Montreal at the turn of the century and still less about those groups of Jews who lived in the suburbs.

Much of that lacuna will be filled in when Papineau opens tonight at the Sadye Bronfman Centre in a musical comedy production by the Yiddish Drama Group of the SBC.

Papineau is not, as the title might seem to imply, concerned with the hero of the 1837 Rebellion. The name here refers to Papineau Street and to the northeast section of Montreal that extends to Beaubien and beyond, including Armerst field and east as far as Pie IX Blvd.

The idea for the Yiddish musical has come from an extraordinary document, a large, hand-illustrated journal in dark-brown leather, with ruled lines much in the manner of an accountant's ledger. Ever since the Middle Ages the scribes of Jewish communities in Europe have kept such a journal, or Pinkas as it's commonly known in Yiddish, a record of communal events.

The Pinkas in question, however, is

no ordinary accounting of mundane events.

Yechiel Herman began the journal in 1904 and maintained it until his death in '56 when, according to family and friends, he was a "very old man."

Every one of the 400 heavyweight paper pages 24"x18", is rich with colored decorations around the borders and throughout the pages. The writing is in Yiddish, in large clear letters and in the classical script style of the Torah.

Each of the early pages represents one year of activities at the Tifereth Jerusalem synagogue where he served as the gabbai, or general factotum, the rabbi's Man Friday. The notations are basically the minutes of annual meetings, with one entry referring to the amount of \$9.40 in the treasury!

Very soon Herman took to monthly entries, then weekly and daily.

They are reports of community events and synagogue activities that were increasing rapidly, biographies and anecdotes of people, personal observations and comments on the social scene, all set down in a highly personal, primitivist original manner.

The accounts are interlaced with personal warmth, with chasidic stories, folktales, jokes, tales from the Talmud and Midrash and bits of Jewish history altered by Herman's fanciful concepts of

biological reality and his own impassioned flights of fancy.

At the same time that he was recording community life for posterity, he was filling up the back pages of the journal with an autobiography, with tales of his family and all kinds of fantastic stories.

Here is a profusely illustrated story of a baker's son and a holy Jew; a page on the creation of Adam, some of whose sprightly details may not seem quite in line with staid biblical versions, and another story that tells of Moses meeting the angels of heaven.

Nothing in the Bible seems to have been too holy or too complex to escape his native talent for embroidering and embellishing the familiar, in the style of a genuine raconteur.

An entry dated July 20, 1915 is called An Inspector in the Basement and is written in wavering black and red lettering to make it appear that the tale was frightening!

Herman also combined in collage form other elements besides colored inks and crayon. There are photographs of people he knew and of events of the day, including a newspaper clipping from the Canadian Jewish Eagle welcoming home the young men of the Papineau district from the war.

On the day the shul (synagogue) installed electricity, Herman duly noted it and then went on to tell the story of King Solomon and the Demons, followed by another about Reb Shalom Belzer, a 19th-century individual who lived in Europe, though probably not in the exact way so baroquely set forth by Herman.

There is a colorful Yiddish word that suggests Herman threw everything but the kitchen sink into his vividly described entries. The word is *arengesflochen*, or better still, *arengeshmolzen* and if they don't quite suffice to convey the message, *durchgedrungen*.

One of Herman's sons has said that his father seemed to spend all his time in the attic, laboriously setting down his impressions of the world around him and of the larger world of his lively imagination.

Herman came to Montreal from Visk, a village near Warsaw. A page of the Pinkas, entitled Memories of My Childhood, reproduces a letter he wrote to his mother on arriving here, telling how he wandered from home and became a woodcarver's apprentice, a training that undoubtedly explains his artistic bent. For a while he worked with the CPR, then as a shoichet or ritual butcher and in later years he was an amateur vintner.

The Tifereth Jerusalem synagogue was to last until '66 when a new one Tifereth Beth David Jerusalem, comprised of three synagogues, opened it



Illustrated page of Yechiel Herman's journal.

Cote St. Luc.

The original synagogue, built by Herman and the mainly Russian immigrants in the first years of the century, was orthodox, very small in size and constructed brick by brick, with pick and shovel by the Papineau area community. In contrast to another nearby, the white shul, Herman's was popularly referred to as the Red shul, because of the color of the bricks.

For the original seven, five cents a year took care of membership, later raised to 10 cents!

Land was cheap and in a short while, despite poor conditions, members opened stores in the district. They constructed a vibrant, substantial community with a whole range of social and cultural services — a free loan society, a sick benefit fund, Talmud Torah Hebrew school, cemetery and even a hostel for travellers.

Herman tells it all in his absorbing Pinkas. When his wife died he took a page for an illustrated epitaph. On the last page of the journal he designed his own epitaph, with a drawing of a tombstone, border pattern and with the date left open for his family to fill in.

The epitaph consists of a simple and moving six-line poem that translates freely as follows:

"There is rejoicing and singing, liveliness and dancing, there are well-dressed guests with happy faces, on the morrow after the dance the glow is gone."

Two years ago Rabbi Joshua Shmidman of Tifereth Beth David Jerusalem came across the journal among a large quantity of books that had come from the original synagogue.

"The moment I opened the pages of this fascinating diary," said the rabbi, "I felt that here was something extremely important. It related the ethnic roots of the Jewish community in Quebec and recounted vividly the history of an indigenous culture in an unusual, highly entertaining and informative way.

"Everything in the Pinkas reflects the author's bent for deflating pompous asses."

What relationship this Papineau community had with the then heartland of Montreal Jewry that occupied the district of St. Joseph and took in Mount Royal, St. Lawrence and the Rachel and St. Urbain areas, is not known.

"The Papineau residents," commented Rabbi Shmidman, "seemed to think of themselves as the Papineau shtetl, reflecting the European shtetls or small villages they had recently come from. They thought of going into the centre of Montreal as a real trip."

A year ago the rabbi arranged to have color slides made of the journal's

THE YIDDISH DRAMA GROUP

of the Saidye Bronfman Centre
presents a new musical play

PAPINEAU

(IN YIDDISH)

by ABRAHAM SCHULMAN
dir. by DORA WASSERMAN
music by ELI RUBINSTEIN

Dec. 3-18

Sat., 7 & 9:30, Sun., 1:30 & 7:30

Tues., Wed., Thurs., 8:30

739-7944



SAIDYE BRONFMAN CENTRE

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400 pages and used them for a dramatic reading of excerpts.

Dora Wasserman, founder and director of the highly successful Yiddish Drama Group, attended that evening.

She described how the moment it was over she "came running to the rabbi and asked to see the book at once. He was very kind and I became very excited going through it."

Remarked the rabbi with a glint in his eye: "When Dora says she is excited, you can trust it to be true. Her eyes sparkle, she exudes enthusiasm, she is the most incredibly enthusiastic woman I have ever met!"

Wasserman described her reactions to the journal:

"As a Canadian I was interested in the prospect of a Montreal play. I saw the material not only as a treasure but as containing more than enough vitality for a second play and later on I hope to do just that.

"At first I wanted to take just a certain period, from 1904 up to '14 or thereabouts, the reason being that here was a very interesting period when there was heavy immigration and Jews were organizing themselves into a community."

After discussing the idea with Rabbi Shmidman and obtaining permission to use material from the journal, Wasserman phoned her friend Abraham Shulman, a writer with New York's Jewish Daily Forward.

The two had combined some years ago for YDG's best musical in the company's long history, Bintel Brief, based on European immigrants who landed in New York at the turn of the century, much as those who were to form the Papineau shtetl.

Shulman came here in July and by September had completed the text, though a good deal of rewriting followed.

The musical is in two acts, with direction by Wasserman, original music by Eli Rubinstein, choreography by Gaby Orbach, set design by Guido Tondino and with Rabbi Shmidman as consultant.

The title, Papineau, occasioned some controversy within the group. The Yiddish title is Papenu, or, as the rabbi noted, Poppa'nyu, a word that is both a pun and a colloquial, affectionate term for father. When all the talk had cleared, Papineau won out.