

# Little Fists for Social Justice Anti-Semitism, Community, and Montréal's Aberdeen School Strike, 1913

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Résumé de l'article

En février 1913, à la suite d'insultes antisémites provenant de leur enseignante, cinq garçons de l'école Aberdeen de Montréal ont décidé de faire la grève. Peu de temps après, des centaines d'élèves juifs montréalais se sont réunis au parc en face de l'école. Là, ils ont désigné des leaders, ils ont établi un comité de négociation, et ils ont convenu de ne pas retourner à l'école sans obtenir au préalable des excuses de l'enseignante. Certains grévistes ont également manifesté devant les bureaux de l'institut Baron de Hirsch et devant ceux du journal yiddish *Keneder Adler* pour afin d'obtenir appui à leur cause. Enfin, dans la foulée de ces événements, les élèves de l'école Aberdeen ont démontré une compréhension profonde de « la grève » comme réponse stratégique à l'injustice, et aussi de la politique entre les communautés juive et protestante. Les années 1912–13 furent très difficiles pour les familles juives de la classe ouvrière à Montréal, mentionnons notamment, la grève des tailleurs suivie par la dépression économique. Les jeunes grévistes ont compris parfaitement ce que voulait dire être à la fois juif et de la classe ouvrière. Selon nous, la grève à l'école Aberdeen est une expression du syndicalisme des parents des grévistes et de l'injustice senti par toute la communauté immigrante juive. Les actions de ces élèves confrontés par l'antisémitisme représentent un exemple manifeste de la capacité d'agir des enfants.

## ARTICLE

# Little Fists for Social Justice: Anti-Semitism, Community, and Montréal's Aberdeen School Strike, 1913

**Roderick MacLeod and Mary Anne Poutanen**

### Introduction

DURING THE LAST WEEK OF FEBRUARY 1913, Miss McKinley called her Jewish pupils “dirty” and declared that they should be banned from the school. Her outburst triggered a political storm at Montréal's Protestant Aberdeen School, where Jews constituted the vast majority of the population. [Figure 1] News of Miss McKinley's anti-Semitic tirade spread quickly from her grade six classroom to other senior students who subsequently called a strike. Hundreds of Jewish pupils congregated in the park across the street from the school and organized pickets. Some of the strikers marched to the Baron de Hirsch Institute and to the newspaper office of the *Keneder Adler* to demand that action be taken against the teacher unless she apologized. Prominent Jewish community leaders negotiated with the principal and with the Protestant school board. Under pressure, Miss McKinley “expressed her regret for having made inappropriate comments which were misunderstood by the children.”<sup>1</sup> While this did not constitute an apology, the students agreed to return to class the following Monday, leaving it to their elders to resolve the crisis with the school commissioners.

It is tempting to see this event as an example of youthful exuberance, not to be taken seriously as a genuine strike. Certainly most contemporaries appear to have paid it little heed. The school board minutes are silent. Although it did

1. “Strike of Yiddish School children in Aberdeen School,” *Keneder Adler*, 2 March 1913 (Translation: David Rome).



**Figure 1.** N.M. Hinshelwood, "Aberdeen School," c.1900.

Source: McCord Museum, mp-1985.31.86

receive coverage by the press, both locally and in Toronto, the treatment of the strike is often dismissive. However, silence can speak volumes about adult fears engendered by student militancy. Deconstruction of public discourse and a closer analysis of the behaviour of the actors involved reveal a much greater level of complexity in the reactions of adults, which ranged from pride to outrage, embarrassment, and anxiety. The strike had long-lasting consequences for the Jewish community, for Protestant school board policy, and for the character of Québec's education system.

The Aberdeen students' actions were remarkable. They showed maturity in their understanding of "the strike" as a strategic response to perceived injustice, in their degree of self-confidence, and in their resolve, even when faced with mounted police, who had been called in to control the situation, and with possible reprisals from teachers and parents. We argue that the Aberdeen student walkout reveals a close connection between the strikers, the labour activism of their parents, and the working-class Jewish community along the St-Laurent Street corridor (otherwise known as "the Main"). The collective action of the Aberdeen pupils speaks to the historical agency of children and what the actions of youth can tell us about their community and its nurturing environment. While the strike touches on a range of themes such as migration, family, race, and social mobility, we intend this article to contribute to

labour history, demonstrating that children learned about the politics of work at home and in the community. The Aberdeen school strike, like consumer strikes and funeral processions, gave voice to grievances associated with the complex and layered realities of working-class life.<sup>2</sup> We also see it as part of the history of ethnicity, reflecting the development of a sense of identity in the face of anti-Semitism and in the indifference of school authorities. Finally, the paper builds on the history of children and youth, by examining children's agency as it was exercised in the school strike.

To an extent, the Aberdeen strike is part of the local lore: references to it appear in anthologies and popular histories of the Montréal Jewish community.<sup>3</sup> Our brief treatment of the strike in our monograph, *A Meeting of the People*, was based on a short piece in Israel Medres' *Montreal of Yesterday*. We mentioned the strike to illustrate a low point in the relations between the Jewish community and the Protestant school board, but we felt that more could be gleaned from it with respect to resistance and human agency. We realized that in the newspaper accounts and the anecdotal treatment details were often confusing and even contradictory when it came to the sequence of events and the names of people involved. Our first task, therefore, was to get the story straight. Second, to distil the strike's long-term significance, it was important to situate the students' action within the larger context of anti-Semitism in Québec, the evolving nature of the Protestant school board, and the political discourse surrounding education in the early part of the century. Third, to deepen our understanding of the motivations of the various players and their social and economic background, we needed to draw on primary sources generated by the school board and the Jewish community.

2. Since the 1960s, Herbert G. Gutman and E.P. Thompson have established that working-class protest, outside the physical settings of waged work, falls within the realm of labour history. See Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America" *American Historical Review*, 78 (June 1973), 531–588 and Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd," *Past & Present*, 50 (February 1971), 76–136. Family and women's historians have also located crucial links between the family, the household economy, and workplace struggles which demonstrate the vast array of strategies that the working class implemented in confronting and resisting capitalist society. Consider for example, Bettina Bradbury, *Working Families: Age, Gender, and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal* (Toronto 1993); Peter Gossage, *Families in Transition: Industry and Population in Nineteenth-Century Saint-Hyacinthe* (Montréal 1999); Denyse Baillargeon, *Making Do: Women, Family and Home in Montreal during the Great Depression* (Waterloo 1999); Cynthia R. Comacchio, *The Infinite Bonds of Family, 1850-1940* (Toronto 1999); Nancy Forestell, "All That Glitters Is Not Gold": The Gendered Dimensions of Work, Family and Community Life in the Northern Ontario Goldmining Town of Timmins, 1909–1950," PhD thesis, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1993; and Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (Montréal 1992).

3. David Rome, *The Drama of Our Early Education* (Montréal 1991), 133–4; Israel Medres, *Montreal of Yesterday: Jewish Life in Montreal, 1900–1920* (Montréal 2000), 135–6; Judy Gordon, *400 Brothers and Sisters: Their Stories Continue ...* (Toronto 2004), 15–18.

The literature pertaining to school strikes in general is scant and therefore it is difficult to make generalizations.<sup>4</sup> Even so, the level of organization and the rhetoric used by students at the Aberdeen School is not often seen in those children's strikes treated by historians in Canada and the United States. The Chinese students in Victoria studied by Timothy Stanley had evident grievances but their tactics were considerably different and lacked the political discourse of Eastern European socialism.<sup>5</sup> Two strikes dealing in whole or in part with Jewish students are not examined primarily in the light of the strikers' political agenda. Donald Raichle's study of the 1912 Newark school strike outlines a larger story of social panic and class tension in which Jewish students were merely one ethnic group among many.<sup>6</sup> Shmuel Shamai's treatment of the 1918 "Flag Fight" in Toronto describes a protest by Zionist Jewish students against a school system whose integration policy was inadequate and outdated, but was largely about symbols.<sup>7</sup> The strike at the Aberdeen School resulted from deep-seeded grievances and demonstrated a precocious understanding of the basic tenets of labour politics.

The complicated relationship within Montréal's Jewish community, with its class, language and geographic schisms, and between Jews and non-Jews, has been the subject of much research by Gerald Tulchinsky, Sylvie Taschereau, Pierre Anctil, Ira Robinson, David Rome, Arlette Corcos, and Gérard Bouchard. All of these authors have explored anti-Semitism in its particular manifestations in Québec, including a public school system that was divided along

4. US scholars have focussed on youth activism in the 1960s with respect to the civil rights movement and social reform. See for example, Rebecca de Schweinitz, *If we could change the world: Young People and America's Long Struggle for Racial Equality* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina 2009) and Gael Graham, *Young Activists: American High School Students in the Age of Protest* (DeKalb, Illinois 2006). Tamara Myers has been studying the participation of Canadian children and youth in Miles for Millions, a walkathon to relieve worldwide poverty and hunger. See her publication, "Blistered and Bleeding, Tired and Determined: Visual Representations of Children and Youth in the Miles for Millions Walkathon," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 22 (2011), 245–275. There is an unstudied but fascinating history of strike action by Montréal students, including those attending the Baron Byng High School in 1934, who protested the school board's increase in school fees. More recently Montréal high school students supported CEGEP and university students during their latest strike over tuition fees by day-long boycotts of classes.

5. Timothy Stanley, "White Supremacy, Chinese Schooling, and School Segregation in Victoria: The Case of the Chinese Students' Strike, 1922–1923," *Historical Studies in Education* 2 (Fall 1990), 287–305 and Stanley, "Bringing Anti-racism into Historical Explanation: The Victoria Chinese Students' Strike of 1922–3 Revisted," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 13 (2002), 141–165.

6. Donald R Raichle, "The Great Newark School Strike of 1912," *New Jersey History*, 106 (Spring–Summer 1988), 1–17.

7. Shmuel Shamai, "The Jews and the Public Education System: The Students' Strike over the 'Flag Fight' in Toronto after the First World War," *Canadian Jewish Historical Society Journal*, 10 (Fall 1988), 46–53.

Catholic and Protestant lines in which the nebulous place of Jews required constant negotiation. Even within the Jewish community, Yiddish-speaking immigrants faced prejudice from well-established English-speaking elites. These newcomers once again found themselves near the bottom of a hierarchy of whiteness in their new country. They were considered the "Others" deemed unfit for democracy, uncivilized, of a lower social class, and dangerous owing to their reputation as advocates of socialism.<sup>8</sup>

The concept of children's agency is central to our approach to the strike, to the motivations of the youthful players, and to their use of labour strategies learned at home and in the community. While such a theoretical position has not informed much writing by Québec historians, Tamara Myers' groundbreaking studies of juvenile justice have been influential in our understanding of how children respond to discrimination.<sup>9</sup> As Robert McIntosh reminds us, historical accounts of children usually have centred on actions undertaken by others, adults in particular, which have rendered children as victims of society.<sup>10</sup> Until recently, childhood has been understood as a process of

8. See for example, Michael de Nie, "A Medley Mob of Irish-American Plotters and Irish Dupes: The British Press and Transatlantic Fenianism," *Journal of British Studies*, 40 (April 2001), 214; and Steve Garner, "Atlantic Crossing: Whiteness as a Transatlantic Experience," *Atlantic Studies*, 4 (April 2007), 129. Other publications for consideration are David A. Gerber, "Caucasians are Made and Not Born: How European Immigrants Became White People," *Reviews in American History*, 27 (September 1999), 437–443; Donald M. MacRaild, "Crossing Migrant Frontiers: Comparative Reflections on Irish Migrants in Britain and the United States during the Nineteenth Century," *Immigrants and Minorities*, 18 (July 1999), 40–70; Alastair Bonnett, "Geography, 'Race' and Whiteness: Invisible Traditions and Current Challenges," *Area*, 29 (September 1997), 193–199; and Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York 1995). On laying claim to inclusion as white, see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass. 1998) and Daniel A. Rochmes and G.A. Elmer Griffin, "The Cactus that Must Not Be Mistaken for a Pillow: White Racial Formation Among Latinos," *Souls* 8, (Number 2 2006), 77–91. For a discussion on Italian immigrants and race in the United States, see Jennifer Guglielmo, "The Racialization of Southern Italian Women" in her book, *Living the Revolution: Italian Women's Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880–1945* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina 2010), 79–109.

9. Consider Tamara Myers' numerous article publications and her book, *Caught: Montreal's Modern Girls and the Law, 1869–1945* (Toronto 2006). Note as well Valerie Minnett and Mary Anne Poutanen, "Swatting Flies for Health: Children and Tuberculosis in Early Twentieth-Century Montreal," *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 36 (Fall 2007), 32–44. Outside of Québec, both Neil Sutherland and Mona Gleason seek out children's voices in interviews with adults about their childhood recollections and in textual sources such as diaries. See Neil Sutherland, "Listening to the Winds of Childhood," in his book, *Growing Up: Childhood in English Canada from the Great War to the Age of Television* (Toronto 1997), 3–23; Mona Gleason, "Embodied Negotiations: Children's Bodies and Historical Change in Canada, 1930–1960," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 34 (Spring 1999), 112–138. See also Elizabeth Gagen, "'Too Good to Be True': Representing Children's Agency in the Archives of Playground Reform," *Historical Geography*, 29 (2001), 53–64.

10. Robert G. McIntosh, *Boys in the Pits: Child Labour in Coal Mining* (Montréal 2000), 10.



socialization into the adult world. The new sociology of childhood, which informs our study, recognizes children as social actors and capable of reflexivity; thus, it gives children their voices rather than silencing them. Proponents of this approach argue that children must be “seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, and the lives of those around them,” and that “children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes.”<sup>11</sup> Today, scholars of children and youth emphasize a plurality of childhoods across societies as well as over time, and a methodology that recognizes the significance of social context in kids’ lives.<sup>12</sup> Children, they argue, must be considered from their own shared perspectives and their experiences with others in their social networks. Instead of perceiving adults, especially parents and teachers, exercising power over children in a variety of circumstances and places, sociologist Madeleine Leonard has suggested that we ought to see adults and children as negotiating the expectations they had of each other within families. Nonetheless, we must be aware that the notion of agency, which is essentially individualistic, should not imply an absolute lack of influence from family, community, or institutions. We argue that the response of the Aberdeen strikers to Miss McKinley’s anti-Semitic comments is evidence of autonomous action, albeit within the limitations imposed by parental and institutional authorities.

Since we know so little about the Aberdeen students themselves, we needed to reconstitute aspects of their lives through their relations with kin, peers, school authorities, and community leaders. We chose to consult a wide range of historical documents in order to provide as thorough a picture as possible of the circumstances surrounding the strike and the motivations of the various players. These sources include English, French, and Yiddish-language newspapers; school board documents, such as minutes of the Protestant Board of School Commissioners and the Aberdeen School admission and attendance registers; McGill Normal School registers; 1911 census returns; Lovell’s directories; and the databases of *Montréal Avenir du Passé* or *MAP*. These sources present challenges with respect to identifying the children who attended the school and their families, to evaluating contradictory interpretations of the

11. Alan Prout and Allison James, “A New Paradigm for the Sociology of Childhood? Provenance, Promise and Problems,” in Prout and James, eds., *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood* (London 1997), 8. A growing body of literature since their path-breaking study includes Nick Lee, “Towards an Immature Sociology,” *The Sociological Review*, 46 (August 1998), 458–482; Berry Mayall, “Toward a Sociology of Child Health” *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 20 (May 1998), 269–288; Gill Valentine, “Boundary Crossings: Transitions from Childhood to Adulthood,” *Children’s Geographies*, 1 (Number 1 2003), 37–52; Madeleine Leonard, “Children, Childhood and Social Capital: Exploring the Links,” *Sociology*, 39 (October 2005), 605–622; Michel Vandebroek and Maria Bouverne-De Bie, “Children’s Agency and Educational Norms: A Tensed Negotiation,” *Childhood*, 13 (February 2006), 127–143; and H. Matthews, “A Window on the ‘New’ Sociology of Childhood,” *Sociology Compass*, 1 (September 2007), 322–334.

12. Matthews, “A Window on the ‘New’ Sociology of Childhood,” 325–326.

events as reported in newspaper articles, and to figuring out what became of the strike leaders. In order to understand the social-class origins of these students, we sought to reconstitute as many families as possible and determine fathers' occupations. To create a manageable cohort for analysis, we examined a list of students who registered for the 1912–13 school year and matched these names against the databases of *MAP*, the 1911 census, Lovell's Directory, and parish records. Through a careful reading of these historical documents, we have come to understand aspects of the children's motivations and to distinguish diverse and sometimes contested discourses by English, French, and Yiddish-speaking élites about the meaning of the strike. There are, however, no written accounts by the actors themselves and we have found only one photograph of the youthful strikers, in the *Montreal Herald*.

The paper has been organized as follows. We begin with an overview of the Jewish community of Montréal, including the 1912 tailors' strike, the economic recession, and the climate of anti-Semitism in Québec. Next, we explore the complex relationship between the Protestant Board of School Commissioners (PBSC) and the Jewish community. Both these sections provide crucial background to the Aberdeen strike by exploring the class, language, and cultural tensions within the Jewish community and the experience of Jews within the Protestant school system. We then examine the strike itself in some detail in the light of children's agency and the reaction to it by adults. Finally, we consider the strike's impact on the Protestant school system, on the Jewish community, and on the students themselves.

## The Jewish Community in Early Twentieth-Century Montréal

WHEN THE ABERDEEN STUDENTS walked out of school in late February 1913, the Jewish community had grown substantially since the turn of the century owing to waves of immigration from Eastern-European *shtetlekh* (villages) in Russia, Poland, Romania, and Lithuania. In 1911, 30,000 Jews called Montréal home; ten years later, the population had grown to over 45,000.<sup>13</sup> Most were poor, Yiddish-speaking, and Ashkenazi, having left Europe to escape poverty, political repression, compulsory military service in the Russian army, discrimination, and pogroms.<sup>14</sup> These newcomers contrasted sharply with the small number of long-established, English-speaking, and largely well-to-do Jewish Montréalers who had set down roots in Québec following the Conquest. While the "uptowners" lived principally in middle-class enclaves such as Westmount

13. Gerald Tulchinsky, *Taking Root: The Origins of the Canadian Jewish Community* (Toronto 1992), 130, 158, 172.

14. Pierre Anctil, *Tur Malka: Flâneries sur les cimes de l'histoire juive montréalaise* (Sillery 1997), 59.



and Outremont, new arrivals or “downtowners” clustered along the corridor of St-Laurent Street where they recreated *shtetl* life.<sup>15</sup>

The uptowners were ambivalent about the newcomers. Given that the two groups differed sharply in terms of social class, political orientation, and culture, many in the original community were concerned that these Jewish immigrants would sully their hard-earned reputation with regard to the mainstream community, especially respectable Anglophones. Both Tamara Myers and Sylvie Taschereau have argued that well-off Jews worried that any negative attention resulting from the new arrivals could jeopardize their tentative hold on social citizenship in Québec.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the overwhelming needs of impoverished immigrants strained the existing resources of Jewish charitable institutions as well as relations between the established members and newcomers.

Anti-Semitism was a constant feature of Montréal Jewish life, even if it was sometimes obscured and in the background. Nonetheless, Jewish Montréalers faced chronic prejudice as a matter of course, be it at the level of snubs and taunts, which could at times erupt into street fights, or at a more official level, where political discourse maintained that Jews were inassimilable and as a result represented a threat to the Christian character of Canadian society. Ancient libels regarding Jews continued to raise their heads even in respectable circles, nowhere more so than in the declarations of Toronto’s Goldwin Smith, distinguished scholar and “Canada’s best-known Jew-hater,” whose ideas influenced several generations of politicians.<sup>17</sup> For the Christian population at large, long accustomed even as it was in many places to denominational antipathy, Jews were outsiders. While the more established members of the Jewish community had striven to integrate with mainstream society, the newcomers inevitably stood out by their language and poverty. Geographical isolation and the maintenance of traditions – defensive mechanisms typical of the immigrant experience in general – translated in gentile eyes as a refusal to integrate and therefore evidence of threat. That most newcomers were poor reinforced the popular association of outsiders with wretchedness, crime and disease – an association shared by much of the established Jewish élite. Class divisions within the urban Jewish community also took on a political character as working-class Jews came to protest their economic condition, increasingly rejecting cultural tradition in favour of secular militancy. To the

15. Anctil, *Tur Malka*, 55–74.

16. Sylvie Taschereau, “Echapper à Shylock: la Hebrew Free Loan Association of Montreal entre anti-sémitisme et intégration, 1911–1913,” *Revue d’histoire de l’Amérique française*, 59 (printemps 2006), 460; Tamara Myers, “On Probation: The Rise and Fall of Jewish Women’s Antidelinquency Work in Interwar Montreal,” in Bettina Bradbury and Tamara Myers, eds., *Negotiating Identities in 19th- and 20th- Century Montreal* (Vancouver 2005), 176–7.

17. Tulchinsky, *Taking Root*, 231; Alan Mendelson, *Exiles from Nowhere: The Jews and the Canadian Elite* (Altona, Manitoba 2008), 20–2.

wider society, such militancy simply added to fears that the Jewish community as a whole was a potential danger.

The years leading up to the Aberdeen strike saw a sharp increase in anti-Semitic incidents and the acidity of anti-Jewish discourse in Québec. Passage of the Lord's Day Act in 1906, a federal law prohibiting commercial activities on Sunday, had been promoted by Protestant evangelicals who often lashed out virulently against Jews for complaining of the rigours of Sunday observance. The Act did contain a clause exempting Jews, which had the effect of rallying anti-Semitic fervour from Protestants and Catholics alike; MP Henri Bourassa declared that Jews were unworthy of such an exemption, being unproductive "vampires" on Québec society.<sup>18</sup> In 1901, *La Presse* began to criticize Louis-Gaspard Robillard, president of the *Union franco-canadienne*, for improper business practices; Robillard defended himself by impugning the character of the newspaper's left-wing and Jewish editor, Jules Helbronner, with overtly anti-Semitic language.<sup>19</sup> Newspapers printed anti-Jewish letters and editorials with growing frequency, and desecration and vandalism seemed on the rise.<sup>20</sup>

This malicious tide crested in March 1910, when notary Jacques-Edouard Plamondon addressed a gathering of the *Association Catholique de la Jeunesse Canadienne-Française* in Québec City and denounced Jews and Judaism, evoking no less than the ancient blood libel as evidence of inherent murderousness on the part of Jews everywhere. This speech, and its subsequent publication as a pamphlet, provoked several instances of street fighting and vandalism between Jews and Catholics. These incidents in turn spurred the provincial Jewish leadership to sue Plamondon for libel, claiming that such language incited violence against Jews which potentially threatened lives and at the very least livelihoods.<sup>21</sup> The case ultimately would be lost on the grounds that the courts did not recognize group libel, but solely a specific attack on an identifiable individual. Plamondon's denigrations had not been of this nature. Even before the trial, however, which opened in May 1913, the case would have been an eagerly discussed topic throughout the Jewish community, by children as well as adults, both because of what was at stake and because the action of filing a suit on the grounds of defamation was itself unprecedented.

Despite such prejudices, immigrants set down roots and initiated strategies to manage on little income by taking in boarders or doubling up, whilst helping each other in the transition from the old world to the new. Families provided household space for newly-arrived relatives as well as *landsleit* (those from their home towns in Eastern Europe). The stores, political and cultural

18. Tulchinsky, *Taking Root*, 239, 242.

19. David Rome, *On Jules Helbronner* (Montréal 1978), 51.

20. Tulchinsky, *Taking Root*, 248–50.

21. Tulchinsky, *Taking Root*, 250–53. Joe King, *From the Ghetto to the Main: The Story of the Jews of Montreal* (Montréal 2000), 98–9.

institutions, synagogues, and neighbourhood parks and green spaces that they frequented served many functions, including places in which to exchange information and assist in the process of integration.<sup>22</sup> Immigrants purchased kosher food, clothing, and shoes, along with Yiddish-language newspapers and books, at Jewish businesses which lined the Main. Jewish women frequented the *mikva* or ritual baths. Female networks were critical in this process, as were the games and activities that neighbourhood children had organized into which young newcomers were invited. Immigrants utilized the services offered by existing community institutions and the numerous organizations that they themselves had created. These included Yiddish theatre, small Yiddish-language lending libraries (soon to be amalgamated as the Jewish Public Library), and the *Arbeiter Ring* or Workmen's Circle. In addition, mutual aid societies (or *landsmanschaft*) catered to widows, children, and the ill, among their services being free loans to those who wanted to establish small businesses. While this clustering in the St-Laurent Street corridor promoted mutual aid and niche economies, it also eventually resulted in economic independence and social mobility. As studies elsewhere have shown, the community's geographical proximity to Montréal's central business district encouraged outside links with respect to customers and jobs; the presence of other ethnic groups within the neighbourhood also brought similar opportunities.<sup>23</sup>

Life was not easy for young people but they found endless distractions in the neighbourhoods where they lived that softened the harshness of poverty, heavy responsibilities, and uncertainty. Esther Goldstein Kershman writes fondly about her childhood in her "Echoes from Colonial Avenue," describing favourite activities and sites of play. Her own backyard attracted siblings, cousins, and friends who played in the space encompassing her parents and her uncle's triplexes. Children frequented green spaces such as Fletcher's Field, where boys played baseball and girls organized picnics (as well as "bread and butter" parties), and Dufferin Park. At the Young Men's Hebrew Association, they attended nature study excursions, summer camp, swimming, and science lessons. Free swimming lessons were also offered at the Public Bath on the Main near Duluth Street. Goldstein Kershman watched silent films at The Midway, a theatre located at the corner of Ste-Catherine

22. Sara Ferdman Tobin, *Traces of the Past: Montreal's Early Synagogues* (Montréal 2011), 45.

23. Laura Vaughan and Alan Penn, "Jewish Immigrant Settlement Patterns in Manchester and Leeds 1881," *Urban Studies*, 43 (March 2006), 654. See also Laura Vaughan, "The Spatial Form of Poverty in Charles Booth's London," *Progress in Planning*, 67 (April 2007), 231–250; Laura Vaughan, "The Unplanned 'Ghetto': Immigrant Work Patterns in 19th Century Manchester," Paper given at *Cities of Tomorrow: The 10th Conference of the International Planning History Society*, University of Westminster, July 2002; Jason Gilliland, Sherry Olson, and Danielle Gauvreau, "Did Segregation Increase as the City Expanded? The Case of Montreal, 1881–1901," Paper given at the Canadian Historical Association Annual Meeting, University of Ottawa, 2009.

and St-Laurent streets, and saw vaudeville acts from the United States at the nearby Orpheum Theatre. Both parents and elites were uneasy about a youth culture that had developed around vaudeville, movies, and dance halls, worrying about the negative influences of a growing leisure industry in Montréal on children and adolescents. They were especially concerned that girls might be attracted to “prevailing Hollywood messages of romance, scandal, and new aesthetic standards, such as rouged lips and sex appeal.”<sup>24</sup> The Main itself was a constant source of entertainment, a cornucopia of sounds, sights, and smells, where children (some of whom attended Aberdeen School) prowled in search of opportunities for urban amusement and for adventure:

Nothing can ever taste as delicious as a sour apple you stole from one of the fruit stalls; so tart that it left you with a lingering velvety feeling in your mouth. Shops with shining fruits and vegetables, cheeses and delicacies from “back home” in Poland and Roumania or other sources – it was like the “shtetl” transplanted to Montreal. The crowds were busy, multilingual, buying, haggling, good-humoured people like in a trance. They filled the sidewalks, chatting, laughing, chewing on something, walking four-abreast, arm-in-arm, blocking the way for others.<sup>25</sup>

The children were also acutely aware that their parents were struggling in a new country to make ends meet. Securing waged employment was an obvious priority for all new arrivals. They sought work at the port, with the Canadian Pacific Railway, and in factories. Many turned to the garment industry or *schmata* trade which had expanded northward from its earlier location around Notre Dame and St-Paul Streets; sweatshops spread along the Main as far as Mile End, allowing for a short trek to work for much of the industry’s labour force.<sup>26</sup> By 1911, Jewish workers were fully ensconced in the needle trades, as noted in the *Canadian Century and Canadian Life and Resources*: “The great majority of the Russian Jews are in the clothing trade as cutters, tailors, finishers and so forth. A good many work at home or in sweat shops under wretched conditions. As long as the consumer insists on having an all-wool, ready-made, fit-you-as-a-glove suit of clothes for \$9.99, someone will have to turn it out.”<sup>27</sup> That it was Jewish owners of garment factories who provided employment to newcomers, and Jewish socialist organizers who strove diligently to unionize the mainly Jewish needle trade workers, created further conflicts, tensions, and divisions within the community. The conditions under which workers laboured were appalling. Factory inspector Joseph Lessard’s 1898 report of needle trade shops painted a disquieting picture of these work sites which, according to the *Jewish Times*, tarnished the public image of the entire Jewish

24. Myers, *Caught*, 159–162.

25. Canadian Jewish Congress Charities Committee, Esther Goldstein Kershman, “Echoes from Colonial Avenue,” Unpublished manuscript, 2, 14, 17, 19, 24–5, 54.

26. Robert Lewis, *Manufacturing Montreal: The Making of An Industrial Landscape, 1850 to 1930* (Baltimore 2000), 177–182.

27. Quoted in King, *From the Ghetto to the Main*, 120.

community.<sup>28</sup> Labour conditions were characterized by low wages, seasonal employment, child labour, the use of illegal workers, strike-breakers, and the threat of runaway shops. Jewish newcomers provided a cheap and abundant pool of workers for an expanding labour-intensive industry. As David Rome has so aptly concluded, "The conflict between the immigrants and the establishment, between employers and employees, had a class dimension when bitter strikes tore at the existing flimsy Jewish fraternal fabric."<sup>29</sup> All the same, as Laura Vaughan and Alan Penn remind us, employment in a company owned by co-religionists allowed Jewish workers to fulfill their religious obligations associated with *Shabbes* (Sabbath) and high holidays.<sup>30</sup>

Unions not only promoted solidarity amongst workers but sought better working conditions and wages, the closed shop, and the end to outsourcing and piece work. Both Gerald Tulchinsky and Bernard Dansereau have detailed a series of key strikes in a lengthy and bitter history of labour confrontations in Montréal's clothing industry from the turn of the century: one at the Star Mantle Manufacturing Company in 1904, four in 1907, one at Freedman Company in 1908, and one at Abraham Sommer's dress and cloak factories in 1910.<sup>31</sup> The growing hostility between employers and workers erupted again in June 1912, when 4000 tailors laid down the tools of their trade in firms of the Montreal Clothing Manufacturers' Association. The companies were owned by some of the community's most prominent Jewish leaders, including Lyon Cohen, Noah and David Friedman, Harris Vineberg, and Samuel Hart: "Members of the venerable Spanish and Portuguese synagogue, Sha'ar Hashomayim, or the Temple Emanu-el, they lived in fashionable West End suburbs, supported local Jewish charities, and took a keen interest in Jewish public affairs."<sup>32</sup> When the powerful Association refused to meet with the strikers and closed its shops, the union raised money through a tag day to assist the families of striking workers; members of the Poale Zion movement, or Labour Zionists, were taxed a day's pay to establish a strike fund.<sup>33</sup> The labour confrontation became very public when the Association hired thugs (private detectives and off-duty city policemen who had been employed by factory owners) to physically attack picketing workers. The union organized large rallies and parades in the heart of the *schmata* trade in protest. This

28. "Sweat Shops of Montreal," *Jewish Times*, 17 February 1899, 88–89.

29. David Rome, *The Immigration Story II: Jacobs' Opponents* (Montréal 1986), 69.

30. Vaughan and Penn, "Jewish Immigrant Settlement Patterns," 668.

31. Tulchinsky, *Taking Root*, 208; and Bernard Dansereau, "La place des travailleurs juifs dans le mouvement ouvrier québécois au début du xxe siècle," in Pierre Anctil, Ira Robinson et Gérard Bouchard, eds., *Juifs et Canadiens français dans la société québécoise* (Sillery, Québec 2000), 127–154.

32. Tulchinsky, *Taking Root*, 208.

33. Tulchinsky, *Taking Root*, 210.

strike was surely the substance of lively discussions around family kitchen tables, as well as on the streets, parks, and synagogues frequented by needle trade workers and their families. The acrimonious and bloody strike ended two months later in partial victory: manufacturers maintained their open shops; workers won a small reduction in hours of work and an increase in the rate of piece work. Even so, this labour dispute was critical to workers' growing class consciousness and solidarity, and it "marked the importance of Jews as major participants in the Montréal men's clothing industry, both as manufacturers and as workers."<sup>34</sup>

Poor families depended on the wages of their children who they sent to work by age thirteen or fourteen. In a difficult job market, parents knew that their sons could find work as newsboys for the city's major dailies earning enough money to make ends meet: "Many young boys could be seen running up and down St. Catherine Street, St. James, Notre Dame, and other thoroughfares selling newspapers. These were Jewish boys, sons of tailors, cloakmakers, and un-skilled workers."<sup>35</sup> The earning power of newsboys was especially critical during strikes when their pay often constituted the family's sole income. Young boys were also part of an important strategy used against shopkeepers who raised prices on staple products such as bread or meat. Housewives typically initiated these disputes, their husbands organized the protests, and their sons distributed pamphlets in front of the offending stores detailing the conflict and calling for collective action.<sup>36</sup>

The tough economic situation was not to improve. After more than a decade of unprecedented growth, Canada plunged into an economic recession in the fall of 1912. Jewish residents of the St-Laurent Street corridor now had to contend with the uncertainty of employment and higher prices owing to inflation. Yet, despite the difficulties of everyday life associated with such economic uncertainty, immigrant Jewish families continued to send their children to elementary school, unlike the usual practice whereby working-class families temporarily withdrew their children from school during hard times. Jewish families placed great importance on educating their children, both to facilitate integration into the larger community and to encourage social mobility. Ideally, education would extend beyond the elementary grades but this was impossible for many. If families could afford to send only one child to high school, they would have to select the young student considered the most promising, devoting resources and encouragement to this favoured offspring.

Montréal's Jewish families had been sending their children to Protestant schools since the 1870s, a trend continued by the eastern European immigrants, although at the beginning of the twentieth century many opted for the school attached to the Baron de Hirsch Institute, which also received subsidies

34. Tulchinsky, *Taking Root*, 212.

35. Medres, *Montreal of Yesterday*, 49.

36. Medres, *Montreal of Yesterday*, 70.



from the Protestant school board until 1907. Jewish students at these schools received Hebrew instruction alongside English, but the emphasis was not particularly religious. Members of the older established congregations could send their children to day schools attached to the synagogues, but most immigrants followed different religious traditions and sought alternatives. In 1896, a recently established congregation, B'nai Jacob, opened its own day school, the first of a number of schools known as Talmud Torah.<sup>37</sup> Within three years, the school had attracted a population of 150 students, and in 1903 it acquired a permanent home on St-Urbain Street. By that time, it was listed officially as the Montreal Hebrew Free School, even though it functioned primarily in Yiddish. Despite growing concern among some Eastern European families that their children were at risk of losing their cultural identity within a Protestant system, by the time of the Aberdeen strike most still enrolled their children in Protestant public schools.

### **Aberdeen: A Protestant School**

ABERDEEN SCHOOL WAS BUILT by the Protestant Board of School Commissioners (PBSC) to replace a temporary school that could not meet the needs of the rising inner-city Protestant population. Searching for nearby land to purchase, the commissioners had noted a largely open, undeveloped area straddling St-Denis Street, featuring only a few isolated houses, the Sisters of Providence asylum, and a large rectangular reservoir. The area seemed on the verge of being developed as a residential quarter; several landowners were looking to subdivide their estates, and the city was in the process of creating an urban park around the reservoir to serve as a nucleus for the new neighbourhood. In the autumn of 1894, the commissioners reached an agreement with two sisters, Philomène and Marie-Josephte Cherrier, the owners of a good-sized estate on the east side of St-Denis Street.<sup>38</sup> It seemed like a very good deal: the Cherrier lot was nearly 56,000 square feet in size and contained "two magnificent houses," semi-detached mansions which could be adapted for school purposes.<sup>39</sup> These houses overlooked one corner of what was then known as St-Denis Park but which soon acquired the name of St-Louis Square. This beautifully landscaped green space soon attracted speculative builders, and by the end of the century it was lined with elegant terraced houses and formed one of Montréal's most desirable residential neighbourhoods. From the beginning, the commissioners anticipated that the school would serve a socially diverse population, drawing on a broad geographical area containing mostly working-class families. The effort they expended to create a handsome

37. Arlette Corcos, *Montréal, les Juifs et l'école* (Sillery, Québec 1997), 156–7.

38. English Montreal School Board Archives [hereafter EMSB], Minutes of the Protestant Board of School Commissioners [hereafter PBSC], 13 December 1894.

39. Report of the PBSC for the City of Montréal, January 1894–30 June 1895, 6–7.



**Figure 2. William Notman & Son, “St Louis Square, Montreal,” c.1895.**

Source: McCord Museum: view-2700

school building in aesthetic surroundings was consistent with the Protestant board’s policy on school accommodation since the 1870s; as with other aspects of the curriculum, the school environment was intended to have a morally uplifting impact on working-class (and increasingly non-British) youngsters.<sup>40</sup> [Figure 2]

The commissioners hired the distinguished architect Alexander Cowper Hutchison to refurbish the two houses for use as a school capable of accommodating 800 pupils in several classrooms, and to build an extension to the rear that would contain an additional eight large teaching rooms and an assembly hall – all at a cost of \$40,000.<sup>41</sup> This was to be the first public school in the city to have a caretaker’s living quarters incorporated into the design. Seeking a name for the new school that would reflect favourably on its distinguished appearance and prestigious location, the commissioners wrote the current governor general, the Earl of Aberdeen, to see if he would agree to have it named after him. Like his predecessors Dufferin, Lorne and Lansdowne, the earl was willing, and also accepted their invitation to be present at the school’s

40. MacLeod and Poutanen, *Meeting of the People*, 129–31.

41. EMSB Archives, Minutes of the PBSC, 14 February 1895.

opening – which, after repeated delays, eventually took place in October 1895, one month after the doors opened to students.<sup>42</sup>

Aberdeen School personified the notion of a modern Protestant school that had evolved over the previous two decades. From the start, it contained a kindergarten class, an institution the commissioners had launched just four years earlier. They also selected Aberdeen School to be the home of an experimental new cooking component in the Protestant curriculum, with full kitchen facilities. This arrangement came out of an offer by the YMCA School of Cookery to subsidize what would later be called Domestic Science; girls aged ten and up from Mount Royal, Lansdowne, Berthelet Street and Dufferin schools would join those from Aberdeen for weekly cooking classes.<sup>43</sup> A few years later, in September 1901, a similar offer came from the Commissioner of Agriculture, this time to equip a school with facilities for manual training and to provide an instructor for two years as part of a program sponsored by tobacco magnate William Macdonald to improve Protestant education in the province. Again, the commissioners chose Aberdeen School to house what became known as “Sloyd,” which drew boys from five neighbouring Protestant schools for regular classes.<sup>44</sup>

The school quickly became the largest in the system, along with Lansdowne to the east and Mount Royal to the north. All three schools took in students from extensive stretches of the city, their district boundaries encompassing the area north and east of the commercial old town. The Aberdeen school district included part of St-Laurent Street, a longer segment of St-Denis Street, and territory reaching as far east as Papineau Street, its southern boundary being just north of Ste-Catherine Street and its northern extent was the old city limits.<sup>45</sup> What had been large swaths of open land in 1895 soon filled, as expected, with houses and families, adding to the pressure on its district school. By the turn of the century Aberdeen’s population had exceeded capacity, and the commissioners were obliged to install moveable partitions in the assembly hall to create additional teaching space.<sup>46</sup> A year later they hired architect Hutchison to build a second extension, providing twelve additional classrooms.<sup>47</sup> By 1908 ongoing congestion obliged them to resort once again to

42. EMSB Archives, Minutes of the PBSC, 14 March 1895, 1 October 1895. Report of the PBSC for the City of Montréal, January 1894 – 30 June 1895, 6–7.

43. EMSB Archives, Minutes of the PBSC, 7 May 1895. Report of the PBSC for the City of Montréal, January 1894 – 30 June, 1895, 10.

44. Report of the PBSC for the City of Montréal, September 1899 – September 1901, 6.

45. Regulations for City Schools under control of the PBSC for Montréal, September 1895.

46. EMSB Archives, Minutes of the PBSC, 21 September 1903.

47. EMSB Archives, Minutes of the PBSC, 10 November and 8 December 1904.

subdividing the assembly room, this time creating four classrooms, bringing the total to 33 classes aside from the kindergarten, cookery and Sloyd rooms.<sup>48</sup>

For some time, the commissioners had been pondering the nature as well as the extent of this rapid growth in school population. In 1901, they noted that the situation was at least as critical in nearby Mount Royal and Lansdowne school districts, although in the Berthelet Street, Ann Street and Dufferin districts – all older, commercial areas – the student numbers were actually dropping. They were growing in the suburbs, suggesting that the Protestant population was moving away from the centre. The area immediately around St-Louis Square and along St-Denis Street had become heavily Francophone and Catholic, a population that did not contribute to the overcrowding at Aberdeen, of course. What did add to the school's numbers was the increasingly dense neighbourhood along the Main and nearby streets east and west of it, composed overwhelmingly of recent immigrants from Eastern Europe. To a large extent, the commissioners noted, inner-city schools like Aberdeen were being sustained by a "very considerable increase in the number of resident Jews."<sup>49</sup>

This situation troubled the commissioners on various levels. Non-Christian children presented a social and cultural challenge: how would the students respond to the use of the New Testament within the curriculum? Was it possible to accommodate both Christian and Jewish religious holidays? How well would immigrants adapt to the ideals of British citizenship promoted in Protestant schools? On a more fundamental level, most immigrant families were not property owners and did not pay school taxes; overcrowded schools full of children whose parents did not contribute directly to the institution's upkeep were a recipe for financial woes.

On a deeper level, Protestant authorities were troubled by a working-class element that was potentially dangerous because of its so-called foreign habits and socialist tendencies. The introduction of Domestic Science and Sloyd into the curriculum highlights their anxieties. While these programs taught useful skills, they were also a vehicle to reinforce contemporary Anglo-Protestant and bourgeois values that were gendered and class-based. Such values were applied to the board's working-class constituency in order to inculcate the tenets of citizenship that emphasized a loyalty to empire and served as an antidote to socialist discourse. In March 1909, the school board was investigating ways "to develop among the pupils of the schools a stronger sense of civic duty," particularly "the duty of the individual to the state." Commissioners hoped to promote the formation of civic clubs and advocated the use of pledge cards "binding the signatories to the performance of such duties."<sup>50</sup> One can imagine the Aberdeen pupils feeling that such a plan had no relevance to their

48. Report of the PBSC for the City of Montréal, 1925–6, 47.

49. Report of the PBSC for the City of Montréal, 1899–1901, 4.

50. EMSB Archives, Minutes of the PBSC, 11 March 1909.

daily lives and objecting strongly to the implication of being graded according to their level of commitment.

Moreover, the growing number of Jewish children swelling the ranks of Protestant schools and the consequent demands for educational rights challenged, and potentially undermined, Protestant identity. Such claims touched a much cruder nerve within authorities than fears of social unrest: anti-Semitism was rarely expressed explicitly in the commissioners' discourse, but was never very far below the surface. Tension between the school board and the Jewish community was elevated at the beginning of the century following a drawn-out dispute over taxation. Since only the wealthy minority of Jews owned property and therefore paid school taxes, Protestants came to feel they were accommodating increasing numbers of Jewish pupils whose parents made no contribution to their education. According to David Rome, this situation led to bad feelings, manifested in growing hostility by Protestant teachers to "their Jewish charges."<sup>51</sup> School commissioners did little to smooth over such hostility, and returned with some frequency to the idea that Jews were implicitly taking advantage of Protestant generosity; they were, by definition, "outsiders" in both a legal and cultural sense.<sup>52</sup> This sense was compounded by the growing numbers of immigrants who lacked sufficient command of the English language to function in class without considerable extra work on the part of teachers.<sup>53</sup> One commissioner, the Reverend Shaw, even reflected openly on the problem of overcrowded classrooms in a letter to *The Montreal Star*. One option, he wrote, would be to expel them outright, even though "putting about 600 Jewish children on the streets" would be "excessively severe." Another option was segregation.<sup>54</sup> The latter would have appealed to those Protestant parents who "refused to send their children to Dufferin School because of the number of Jewish children."<sup>55</sup> Such refusal may have stemmed from a conviction that large numbers of Jews in the classroom diminished the curriculum's "Christian character" or it may have been simply that these parents did not want their children to associate with Jews.

That Jewish children were still considered "outsiders" in Protestant schools was underscored in 1902 when the winner of a scholarship to the High School of Montréal, Jacob Pinsler, was informed by the board that he was ineligible, given that his parents did not pay school taxes. The Pinsler case brought out in the open all the ill feelings of the past few decades. The Jewish community was outraged by the assumption that Jewish students were considered "outsiders," of a lesser status simply because their parents rented, and that on a

51. Rome, *The Drama of Our Early Education*, 61.

52. Tulchinsky, *Taking Root*, 139–140.

53. Rome, *The Drama of Our Early Education*, 94.

54. Quoted in Rome, *The Drama of Our Early Education*, 97.

55. King, *From the Ghetto to the Main*, 135–6.



fundamental level were simply not wanted in Protestant schools. A legal case was brought against the PBSC by Jacob Pinsler's father, Paul, who owned an upholstering and decorating business on Ste-Catherine Street. A Russian-born cap maker in 1891 whose upward mobility would result in the move of Pinsler & Company westward in 1919 and a Westmount home address the following year, Paul Pinsler declared in the *Jewish Times* that he had lived in Québec for many years and that all of his children had been born in Canada.<sup>56</sup> The case was argued by lawyer Samuel Jacobs, who would go on to prosecute Edouard Plamondon in 1913 and become an MP in 1917. The commissioners' response to Pinsler's legal action was petty, even vindictive. They would discontinue an annual subsidy they had been making to the Baron de Hirsch Institute since 1894 and would stop teaching Hebrew in the board's schools.<sup>57</sup> In the end, the case was settled in the commissioners' favour, much to the alarm of the Jewish community. To a large extent this discontent was also reflected in the wider community. The court found that, according to the law, Jews in effect had no educational rights. Although there were voices claiming that Jews had no place in Québec society, large numbers acknowledged that the situation identified by the courts left much to be desired. Consequently, legislation was passed in 1903 stating that "persons professing the Jewish religion shall, for school purposes, be treated in the same manner as Protestants...and shall enjoy the same rights and privileges."<sup>58</sup> This legislation was regarded by the Jewish elite as the "magna carta" of Jewish education, marking the full acceptance of Jews within Québec's public education system.<sup>59</sup>

The Protestant school commissioners accepted the implications of this legislation even as they continued to grumble about having to accommodate these technical Protestants who made no financial contribution to schooling. Furthermore, Protestant ire was clearly raised when it was suggested that equality for school purposes meant that Jews had a right to sit as commissioners.<sup>60</sup> The Protestant board defiantly resisted any changes to its administrative structure, refusing to interpret the 1903 legislation as granting Jews any further rights beyond accommodation in school rooms. They steadfastly pointed to the constitutional guarantees which specifically defined Montréal's Protestant school board as an institution to be run by and for Protestants. Commissioners even opposed moves to bring democracy to the city school boards, arguing that an unelected board was the best way to uphold these guarantees. Since Confederation, the PBSC consisted of three Protestant clergymen appointed by the provincial government and three Protestant city councillors selected

56. *Canadian Jewish Times*, 24 October 1902.

57. Report of the PBSC for the City of Montréal, 1901–02, 6.

58. Quoted in King, *From the Ghetto to the Main*, 136.

59. David Rome, *On the Jewish School Question in Montreal* (Montréal 1986), 1.

60. Rome, *The Drama of Our Early Education*, 118.



by the council. Reformist politicians made several attempts to introduce legislation ending this practice, but the Protestant commissioners (like their Catholic counterparts, who would have been similarly affected) protested, fearing that unsuitable candidates might be allowed to take office; many felt that among such unsuitable candidates there might well be Jews.<sup>61</sup> Addressing this ongoing debate in 1909, one commissioner, the Reverend James Barclay, implied that Jews were thieves for attempting to take something that did not belong to them.<sup>62</sup>

Another source of aggravation was the treatment of Jewish children in Protestant classrooms. A key element in the nineteenth-century discussions over taxation and Jewish accommodation within the PBSC was the availability of Hebrew instruction in Protestant schools, which took place first at the British and Canadian School and then at Dufferin, but which many thought should also be made available at Ann Street, Mount Royal, and Aberdeen schools where there were large Jewish populations by 1902.<sup>63</sup> Over the following decade, Hebrew instruction tended to take place, if at all, as an extracurricular activity – which was fine for a large percentage of the Jewish community (to say nothing of the Protestants) who did not particularly appreciate public money going to support it. According to *The Jewish Times*, 90 per cent of Jewish families did not support Hebrew instruction in public schools; such a statistic would suggest that the priorities of the elites held little significance for many if not most non-observant Jewish immigrants.<sup>64</sup>

At the same time, the school board promised as part of its negotiations with the Jewish community not to impose Christian teaching. This was part of the so-called “conscience clause,” which also guaranteed Jewish children the right to absent themselves from school on Jewish holidays without reprisal. Absenting themselves from the pervasive influence of Christianity was another matter, however. Education in Protestant schools generally did not involve a specific period within the school day devoted to religious instruction the way the Catholic curriculum did, but rather incorporated elements of Bible study into various subjects. Although the lack of defined religious instruction was traditionally seen as an attractive aspect of the Protestant school system to non-Christians, its more nebulous promotion of Christian values actually made it harder for Jews to find exemption from influence. Furthermore, it was easier for Protestants to claim that schools had a “Christian character” that was somehow vulnerable when exposed to Jews. At any rate, the 1900s

61. Rome, *On the Jewish School Question in Montreal*, 17.

62. Rome, *On the Jewish School Question in Montreal*, 15.

63. Rome, *The Drama of Our Early Education*, 100.

64. Rome, *The Drama of Our Early Education*, 97.

saw frequent complaints from Jewish families that the board often disregarded its promise not to impose Christian teaching on their children.<sup>65</sup>

To make matters worse, in the days leading up to the strike, Jewish students had borne the brunt of anger from their Protestant counterparts over the school board's decision to replace the Easter Monday holiday with another day in April which coincided with Passover.<sup>66</sup> Commissioners wanted to create a holiday later in the spring to spread the school breaks more evenly. Because the date they chose fell during Passover, many Protestants felt this was catering to the Jewish community. Several religious leaders, including the Anglican Archbishop, openly protested against the decision. "Sir," one disgruntled "parent" wrote to the *Daily Witness*, "Is the Montreal High School a Hebrew or a Christian school? Are our children to be taught to observe Christian or Jewish holidays?" The editor of the newspaper responded by reminding readers: "We may ask ourselves how we would like it if we were a minority [sic] bound in conscience to keep certain days and suffered unnecessary difficulties on that account. Our schools are distinctly Christian in point of form. To be Christian in spirit we should consider our neighbours as well as ourselves."<sup>67</sup> This was a nice sentiment but, given the school commissioners' long history of resisting accommodation of Jews, it can hardly be supposed that they were moving the holiday out of consideration to Jewish families. According to the chairman of the school board, Herbert Symonds, it had been made with "no thoughts of race or creed."<sup>68</sup> Whatever their reason for the decision to shift the date of the holiday, the school board cannot have been pleased by the controversy. The commissioners typically reacted to such disgruntlement by moving quickly to avert any public discussion that threatened to expose fault lines within the system.<sup>69</sup>

It did not help relations within the classroom that virtually all teachers in the system were Protestant – even at schools like Aberdeen where the population was in the majority Jewish. Only a handful of Jews attended the McGill Normal School; by the time teacher training moved to Macdonald College in Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue in 1907, less than a dozen had received teaching certificates.<sup>70</sup> There is no evidence that any of them were hired by the PBSC, other than those appointed to the Baron de Hirsch Institute School. This lack of Jewish teachers was noted and decried in editorials and in letters to the

65. Rome, *On the Jewish School Question in Montreal*, 39–40.

66. "School Strikers Go Back to Desk," *Montreal Herald*, 1 March 1913.

67. "Jews in the schools," *Montreal Daily Witness*, 1 March 1913.

68. *Montreal Herald*, 7 March 1913; *Montreal Daily Witness*, 1 March 1913.

69. See for example, Mary Anne Poutanen, "Containing and Preventing Contagious Disease: Montreal's Protestant School Board and Tuberculosis, 1900–1947," *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History*, 23 (Number 2 2006), 401–428.

70. McGill University Archives, McGill Normal School Registers, RG.30, c.55, 2044B.

editors of the *Keneder Adler* and the *Jewish Times*.<sup>71</sup> In 1909, lawyer Maxwell Goldstein wrote the commissioners on behalf of “a number of Jewish citizens” who advocated “the admission of Jewish teachers to the schools, and of Jewish representatives to the membership of the Board,” but the letter was merely acknowledged and filed away.<sup>72</sup> The commissioners understood the 1903 legislation to mean that “the Protestant school system should remain unchanged in respect to its distinctive religious character,” and that such change “would have the ultimate effect of destroying the Christian character of the administration [and] would be opposed to the conscience and judgement of the Protestant community of Montreal.”<sup>73</sup> Clearly, the hiring of Jewish teachers would constitute a change in the system’s “distinctive religious character.” Furthermore, had any teachers been employed, they would have been unable to take Jewish holidays, a deterrent in and of itself.<sup>74</sup>

For Jewish children, having only Protestant teachers would not have been surprising given that every aspect of the school system – teaching personnel, administrators, and the curriculum – was Protestant. Although there was no formal class in religious instruction, the Protestant curriculum was suffused with Christian elements, from reading exercises drawn from the New Testament to singing daily hymns such as “Jesus Loves Me.” Protestantism was so integral to the culture of going to school that the students might well have absorbed these elements uncritically. School children routinely took at face value what teachers conveyed and Aberdeen students were presumably no different. And yet, it is not so difficult to imagine, given the timing and substance of Miss McKinley’s anti-Semitic remarks that her students might have looked around their classroom and noted that they were all Jews, and thus the target of her malice. Equally, it might have suddenly struck them that this Protestant teacher was the anomaly in the classroom and that her outburst was offensive. Quite possibly, from their perspective, the ground had shifted.

For their part, teachers in schools with large Jewish populations may have consistently felt a greater affinity with their Protestant employers, however fearful they might have been of the power they exercised over their lives, than with their young Jewish charges. For many teachers, facing a classroom of children from different ethnic, racial, or religious backgrounds would have been a daunting prospect. Furthermore, the teaching profession was as vulnerable as any other to prejudice and racism. Alton Goldbloom, future professor of medicine at McGill University, insisted that most of his Protestant teachers had no issue with their Jewish pupils, but recalled one who was “particularly venomous,” constantly insulting him in public and wondering aloud what it was that

71. Rome, *The Drama of Our Early Education*, 130–131.

72. EMSB Archives, Minutes of the PBSC, 28 April 1909.

73. EMSB Archives, Minutes of the PBSC, 13 June 1913.

74. Rome, *On the Jewish School Question in Montreal*, 33.

made Jews “smell so bad.”<sup>75</sup> Even well-meaning teachers would not have been immune from such prejudice. Most were young and distinctly ill-equipped to deal with urban diversity; certainly cultural sensitivity training was not a feature of the Normal School curriculum. Lack of experience, combined with a public discourse that was often overtly anti-Semitic, made the kind of incident that sparked outrage at Aberdeen School in 1913 all but inevitable.

## The Strike

WHEN HARRY SINGER, FRANK SHERMAN, Joe Orenstein, Moses Skibelsky, and Moses Margolis heard Miss McKinley's remarks on that winter day in February 1913, they went to the principal to demand that the teacher apologize. Miss McKinley had allegedly said “that when she first came to the school it had been very clean, but since the Jewish children arrived the school had become dirty ... and that Jewish children should be shut out of Aberdeen school.”<sup>76</sup> As British historian Ellen Ross has suggested, the word “dirty” frequently served as code for lice which drew attention to fears of contagion.<sup>77</sup> Miss McKinley's tirade had touched a nerve. Aberdeen's Jewish students were often singled out and humiliated for being dirty. One child commented: “Should a Christian boy come to school in an unclean condition he was quietly sent home, but if a Hebrew lad turned up dirty he was sure to be told of it before the whole class and held up to ridicule.” The mother of a small child reported that he had come home crying for being told he was dirty, even though all pupils had soiled hands after playing.<sup>78</sup> Rabbi Simon Glazer, the feisty champion of social justice, asked the school board for the names of Jewish pupils who had been reported for being dirty, believing that they were being targeted unfairly.<sup>79</sup> Accustomed as they were to such regular discrimination, the pupils were nevertheless struck by the blanket application of this accusation. Individually, students may have overlooked such countless petty putdowns, but by denigrating all Aberdeen's Jews, Miss McKinley had simply gone too far.

Principal Henry Cockfield was experienced with working-class youth. He himself had grown up in Pointe-St-Charles, son of machinist Moses Cockfield and Elizabeth Digby McKay, and married Helen Smith Reid whose father was also a machinist. Despite his humble origins, Cockfield graduated from McGill

75. Quoted in Rome, *The Drama of Our Early Education*, 98.

76. Brainin, “Strike of Yiddish School Children in Aberdeen School,” *Keneder Adler*, 2 March 1913 (Translation: David Rome).

77. Ellen Ross, *Love & Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870–1918* (New York 1993), 214.

78. “School Strikers Go Back to Desk,” *Montreal Herald*, 1 March 1913.

79. EMSB Archives, Minutes of the PBSC, 28 April 1909. For more on Simon Glazer, see Ira Robinson, “Rabbi Simon Glazer: A Rival for the Chief Rabbinate,” in his book, *Rabbis and Their Community: Studies in the Eastern European Orthodox Rabbinate in Montreal, 1896–1930* (Calgary 2007), 35–56.

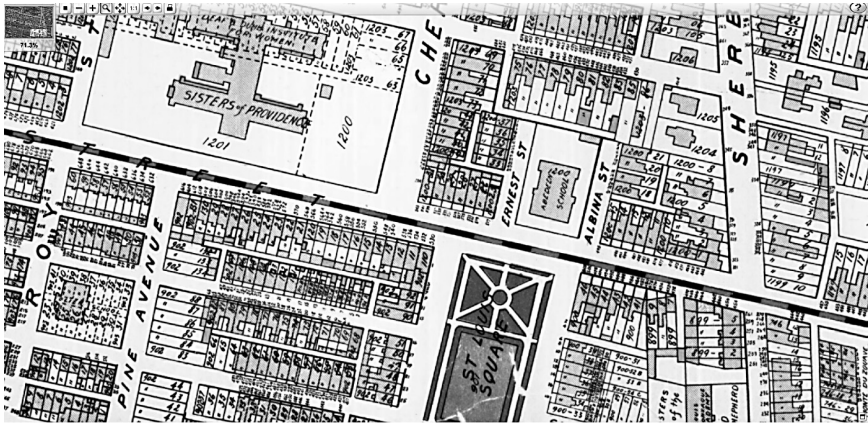


Figure 3. Detail of AR Pinsoneault's *Atlas of the island and city of Montreal and Ile Bizard*, 1907.

Source: Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec: G/1144/M65G475/P5/1907 CAR

with a BA and an Academy teaching diploma in 1882. By the time he became principal of Aberdeen School in 1899, he had fathered five sons, two of whom went to Aberdeen: one, Henry (Harry), attended for seven years “without having been once late or absent and stood first in his class each year but one,” and was awarded a special prize of \$10; the other, William, who had “received perfect marks for conduct and punctuality during each year of his school career,” won a Commissioners’ Scholarship, the Bronze Medal, and a \$10 gold piece.<sup>80</sup> These were evidently the ideals to which Principal Cockfield held boyhood. His only daughter, Helen, who was in the senior class at Aberdeen at the time of the strike, did not disappoint him either: in June 1913 she would win one of the Commissioners’ Scholarships.<sup>81</sup>

As the veteran head of several schools in working-class areas, including Aberdeen for fourteen years, Cockfield expected trouble from adolescent boys. Some years earlier, he reported the “wilful breakage of glass in the rear windows” of the school which was a frequent occurrence and necessitated calling in the police.<sup>82</sup> A number of unusual thefts of money and clothing at Aberdeen School might also have raised his suspicions about the moral integrity of immigrant pupils. And only a few weeks before the strike, one local resident, the Honorable Mr. Justice Martineau, had complained to the board of Aberdeen pupils’ “disorderly behaviour.”<sup>83</sup> Confronted by these five teenage

80. EMSB Archives, Minutes of the PBSC, 12 November 1903 and 9 June 1904.

81. Report of the PBSC for the City of Montréal, 1913, 18.

82. EMSB Archives, Minutes of the PBSC, 11 October 1906.

83. EMSB Archives, Minutes of the PBSC, 19 December 1912.





Figure 4. Households sending one or more students to Aberdeen School, 1912-13.  
Adapted from Charles E Goad, *Atlas of the City of Montreal and vicinity*, 1912.

Source: Bibliothèque et archives nationales du Québec: G/1144/M65G475/C3/1912 DCA

boys bringing an accusation against a teacher, Cockfield was inclined to take a jaundiced view of their sincerity and dismissed them as troublemakers.

Frustrated, Harry Singer, Frank Sherman, Joe Orenstein, Moses Skibelsky, and Moses Margolis met after school on Thursday, 27 February, and agreed to take action by calling a strike. In keeping with the logistics of labour protest that they had learned at home and in the community, the boys set out to mobilize the student body. By Friday morning the word had spread and growing numbers of students stood “about the school gates eagerly discussing the chance of success of their cause” and encouraging others to join their protest. Not knowing how long the strike would last, the five protest organizers suggested that classmates pick up their textbooks and scribblers; when they got to their class, however, they discovered that Miss McKinley had locked the door on them.<sup>84</sup> In response, the leaders sent a group of younger children throughout the school alerting anyone who might join their cause to what was taking place outside. The students then congregated in St-Louis Square across from the school. [Figure 3] The strikers appointed the five boys who initiated the action as strike leaders, and resolved to uphold solidarity by not returning to class until authorized by the leaders to do so.<sup>85</sup> Some students were appointed to picket “as is the custom in all strikes.”<sup>86</sup> They vowed as well to consider any

84. Reuben Brainin, “Strike of Yiddish School Children in Aberdeen School,” *Keneder Adler*, 2 March 1913 (Translation: David Rome).

85. Israel Medres, “The Children’s Strike against Anti-Semitism,” *Montreal of Yesterday*, 135.

86. Reuben Brainin, “Strike of Yiddish School Children in Aberdeen School,” *Keneder Adler*, 2



strike-breaker a scab: "In those days, when the majority of the children were from working-class families, even the small children in the first grade felt contempt for scabs."<sup>87</sup>

At least 200 Aberdeen pupils joined the strike; some journalists have reported higher numbers, and Reuben Brainin of the *Keneder Adler* referred to "600 small soldiers."<sup>88</sup> That so many acted speaks to the close-knit community whence they came. The students knew each other very well. In 1913, the school had more than 1500 students, with an average class size of 37. While such conditions may not have made for an ideal learning environment, they did permit students to network and conspire, and in this way build a sense of solidarity not unlike that of the factory floor. Moreover, these students all came from the same set of streets, often living next door to each other or even on separate floors of the same houses. The sense of solidarity was further expressed along the streets, green spaces, laneways, and even over backyard fences. The density is captured in Figure 4, representing a sample of three streets close to the school – St-Dominique, Coloniale, and Cadieux – in which families sending one or more students to Aberdeen School (each represented by a dot) in 1912–1913 are clearly numerous. Such networks assured effective mobilization once the call to strike was sounded.

Who were these children? Of the 825 students who registered at Aberdeen for the 1912–1913 school year, we were able to link 121 students to the 1911 census and to city directories, thus allowing us to determine parents' occupations and therefore their social and economic status. These occupations indicate a preponderance of working-class families although some represent white collar jobs, management, and professionals. Notwithstanding the wide range of occupations, as shown in Figure 5, almost a third of the families had breadwinners who laboured as tailors. Likely all or most of these families would still be feeling the effects of the vicious tailor strike that had taken place only months before. No doubt this experience and others like it account for the readiness with which the Aberdeen students resorted to a call for militant action. It explains the ease with which they turned to the language of the strike: "uphold solidarity," "close ranks," "pickets," and "scabs." At the same time, the children were not simply mimicking their elders but rather were using these terms appropriately and effectively, revealing an understanding of the process of labour politics.

The strike leaders were all in grade six and aged twelve to thirteen. Their families originated in Eastern Europe, and two of the boys (Margolis and Singer) were born there prior to emigrating. Of the three born after the move, only Orenstein was born in Canada; Skibelsky's family was living in England at the time of his birth, while Sherman's was in the United States. Three of the strike

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March 1913 (Translation: David Rome).

87. Medres, "The Children's Strike against Anti-Semitism," 135.

88. Reuben Brainin, *Keneder Adler*, 4 March 1913. (Translation: David Rome).

Occupation - Trades	#	% of sample
Painter	3	2.5
Carpenter	5	4.1
Butcher	2	1.6
Electrician	2	1.6
Tailor (includes 3 pressers and 1 operator)	38	31.4
Furrier	1	0.8
Total	51	42.1%

Figure 5. Occupations of the Aberdeen School families, 1912-13.

leaders immigrated with their mothers as young children, the fathers having arrived earlier as was customary for those from Eastern European *shtetlekh*. Margolis and Skiblesky had fathers who were teachers, Orenstein's was a shopkeeper, and Singer's and Sherman's fathers were tailors. In the 1911 census, only one of the strike leaders' mothers was identified as a wage earner: Rebecca Margolis was an operator in a fur factory. Given that two of the fathers were teachers and two were tailors it is not surprising that these students would have been familiar with the politics of labour discourse. Joseph Orenstein's father self-identified as a shopkeeper in the 1911 census, but Lovell's Directory shows that in the years leading up to the strike he laboured in a variety of occupations that included grocer, pedlar, and presser. His work history would have given him a unique insight as small-business owner and wage labourer in the *schmata* trade. Joseph's oldest brother Henry had a similar labour experience; he worked for companies manufacturing clothing and shoes before managing the tony Cotter Boot Shop located on St. James Street in the city's business district.

For journalist Reuben Brainin, Montréal's young strikers were inspired by "the literary evenings in Jewish institutions, of Jewish presentations which young people hear and absorb."<sup>89</sup> The Baron de Hirsch Institute on Bleury Street was at the heart of the community's cultural life and straddled geographically the divide between uptowners and downtowners. It was the principal social and educational centre and a venue for the kinds of events to which Brainin refers. The Institute offered day and night classes to young immigrants, housed a library of Yiddish as well as English books, and provided space for a variety of Jewish community organizations; it was part of the vibrant intellectual life, expressed in Yiddish, associated with labour unions, theatre, and bookstores along the Main. The *Keneder Adler*, Montréal's only Yiddish-language newspaper at the time, reflected this culture, at least to a certain extent. Although

89. Reuben Brainin, "Strike of Yiddish School Children in Aberdeen School," *Keneder Adler*, 2 March 1913. (Translation: David Rome).

politically it was more liberal than socialist in outlook, and typically refrained from taking the lead in condemning factory owners during key strikes, it was widely read by working families along the Main.<sup>90</sup> Identifying with these institutions reinforced a sense of the strike leaders' identity as Yiddish-speaking members of the working class. The local synagogues would also have provided social space to debate such political and social issues even while the strike leaders prepared for their bar mitzvahs. That these boys had either recently turned thirteen, or were about to, would have been a factor in taking a leadership role in the school as "men." This status, especially in 1913, would have earned them respect among the younger children in Aberdeen School, surely an important factor in rallying the rank-and-file.

As effective strike leaders, these young men inspired a sense of labour discipline on the picket line. By the afternoon of the strike, the crowds of children attracted reporters from most of the city's dailies as well as police: "Striking children lined the sidewalks and cheered lustily. A solitary foot policeman and one mounted officer paraded up and down the road trying to disperse the crowd, but as soon as the youthful strikers were moved from one part of the square, they gathered at another." Such tactics, typical of children trying to avoid trouble and escape adult authority, proved very useful in the context of the strike. Journalists reported that "the scholars behaved with almost perfect conduct; there was no booing or hissing, and not even one snowball was thrown."<sup>91</sup> Their apparent lack of fear was noteworthy, given that these children had witnessed the police brutality used against members of their families and neighbours during the recent tailors' strike and would have seen a police presence as intimidating.

Seeking solidarity with the larger Jewish community, some of the Aberdeen strikers marched to the offices of the *Keneder Adler*, where they found a sympathetic audience in its editor, Reuben Brainin. A Russian-born Hebrew essayist and scholar with a long career in Poland, Germany and the United States, Brainin had arrived from New York a year before to take up the position of editor-in-chief at the behest of the *Adler's* owner and publisher, Hirsch Wolofsky. Brainin's editorials reflected not only the newspaper's support for the Jewish working class but also his own commitment to Jewish ethnic identity.<sup>92</sup> The Aberdeen strikers knew of him, expected a good reception, and were not disappointed. Although Brainin's sympathy for Jewish workers during the tailors' strike had been muted, given his opposition to creating divisions among the

90. Tulchinsky, *Taking Root*, 211, 224–5. In 1913, Yiddish-speaking Montréalers would also have read *Der Canader Yid* (*Canadian Israelite*), published in Winnipeg, and which has been described by Lewis Levendel as ranging from liberal to socialist. Lewis Levendel, *A Century of the Canadian Jewish Press: 1880s–1980s* (Nepean, Ontario 1989), 23.

91. "School Strikers Go Back to Desks," *Montreal Herald*, 1 March 1913.

92. Tulchinsky, *Taking Root*, 211; Rebecca Margolis, "The Yiddish Press in Montreal, 1900 to 1945," *Canadian Jewish Studies/ Études juives canadiennes*, 16–17 (2008–2009), 12.

Jewish community, the Aberdeen school strike was clearly different.<sup>93</sup> It struck a chord with Brainin, who was already impressed by the cultural resilience of Jewish diaspora communities in North America, but had never seen this level of resistance to discrimination on the part of such youngsters. The students left convinced that their strike would receive positive coverage by Brainin in the community's newspaper. Any chance that the *Adler* might have presented the other side of the story was dashed when a reporter contacted the school later that day and Principal Cockfield refused to issue a statement.

Another group of Aberdeen students marched to the Baron de Hirsch Institute, located over a kilometre from the school. By one account, they were corralled and escorted there by uptowner Hyman Lightstone, who feared "mischief from the children." A veteran of both the Spanish-American and Boer wars, Lightstone was also a McGill-trained physician at the Baron de Hirsch Institute. Wanting to assert the authority of community leaders, Lightstone instructed the strikers "not to do anything unlawful." Despite this apparent pressure to be coopted by an élite member of the community, the strikers continued to assert their autonomy. At the Institute, they presented their case to representatives who agreed to call a meeting of the Baron de Hirsch's legislative committee to decide on a course of action. Knowing that the school authorities would never negotiate directly with children, the strikers were prepared to place their trust in this committee and to return to the strike. For all of their militancy, the strikers were also pragmatic, once again displaying wisdom beyond their years.

The legislative committee met at the Craig Street office of Samuel W. Jacobs, the prominent lawyer who would shortly prosecute the Plamondon case, and debated the children's actions. Jewish community leaders had mixed feelings about the strikers. On the one hand, because the strike was in reaction to anti-Semitism, they could hardly oppose its intentions; on the other hand, picketing children reminded them of the threat of labour militancy recently displayed in the bitter tailors' strike. In the end, the committee realized that they could not ignore the situation and so decided to appoint negotiators to intervene on the part of the students provided that they would return to school on Monday morning.<sup>94</sup>

Wishing to influence the outcome of this delicate situation, Herman Abramovitz, rabbi of the prestigious Sha'ar Hashomayim Synagogue located in Montreal's Square Mile, agreed to be one of the negotiators along with Jacobs.<sup>95</sup>

93. Medres, "On the Eve of the Storm," *Montreal of Yesterday*, 144–5.

94. "School Strikers Go Back to Desks," *Montreal Herald*, 1 March 1913. According to Ruben Brainin, there was only one delegation that visited the *Keneder Adler* offices and the Baron de Hirsch Institute in turn. Such an interpretation does not allow for the role of Hyman Lightstone. It is possible that two groups of strikers converged on the Baron de Hirsch Institute, one from the *Adler* and another directly from the school.

95. According to Israel Medres it was Hirsch Wolofsky and not Samuel Jacobs who formed the

Abramovitz had a cautious response to the strike: "Whether there is any truth in what the boys say remains to be seen. [It would be] vastly unfair to make any move in this matter until I feel assured that the allegations made by the boys have some foundation of truth." Furthermore, Miss McKinley was a "young lady who has had close connection with the Hebrew community in the city for many years and was for some time a teacher in the Baron de Hirsch School. She has always been held in high esteem by those of the Hebrew race with whom she has come in contact."<sup>96</sup> Rabbi Abramovitz doubted that the teacher meant "the construction that the boys put upon the remark." Moreover, he placed the blame on the shoulders of the leaders, claiming that the strike could have been avoided if the students had taken their complaint to the proper authorities.<sup>97</sup> On the last point, the rabbi was wrong; the leaders had in fact gone to the principal, and it was only after he had rebuked them that they resorted to calling a strike. The rabbi's glowing description of the teacher is also inconsistent with Miss McKinley's behaviour in the Aberdeen classroom. Such a glaring contradiction suggests either that he was confusing her with someone else or that he was exaggerating her qualities out of a wish to downplay the validity of the boys' actions. These comments are reminiscent of the rhetoric associated with employers who typically characterize strikers' demands as unreasonable.

When these two prominent uptown residents arrived at the school by sleigh, the picketers cheered. To them, the presence of such high-powered figures indicated that the strike was being taken seriously. They likely expected that their cause would unite the community and did not see that their actions might have appeared as threatening to the Jewish establishment. While children generally do not welcome the prospect of adults meeting with a school principal, the Aberdeen strikers appear to have felt confident that Abramovitz and Jacobs would represent their position fairly on this matter. Before going into the school, the two men met with the strike committee in St-Louis Square. It may have been only a symbolic gesture, but to the young strikers it helped validate the legitimacy of their cause. Whatever Abramovitz and Jacobs' motivations, it is clear that they understood the need to recognize the chain of command in this dispute.

In the principal's office, Abramovitz and Jacobs were confronted by Cockfield's outrage over what he saw as the students' insolence. Called in to defend herself, Miss McKinley admitted that her comments had been inappropriate but maintained that they were misinterpreted by the students. The intransigence of principal and teacher appears to have convinced Abramovitz and Jacobs that the matter was more serious than they originally thought.

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negotiating committee with Rabbi Abramovitz and visited the Aberdeen principal. The majority of the newspapers, however, have identified Jacobs and not Wolofsky. ("The Children's Strike against Anti-Semitism," 135.)

96. "School Children Call Strike but only Six Respond," *Montreal Herald*, 28 February 1913.

97. "Scholars Strike at End," *Montreal Gazette*, 1 March 1913.

Despite their ongoing concern for the social implications of children being on strike, they came to accept that on some level the students' action was justified given that the teacher's remarks at the very least bordered on anti-Semitism. Jacobs and Abramovitz presented Cockfield with two demands for the resolution of the strike: that Miss McKinley be transferred to another school and that the children be accepted back with no recriminations and without exception.<sup>98</sup> The irascible principal refused to make these concessions, claiming that it was a matter for the school commissioners. Learning that the school board would meet the following week, Abramovitz and Jacobs agreed to place the matter in the hands of the commissioners and left the school. The student strikers were apparently satisfied with this arrangement enough to agree to go back to school on Monday; once again, they cheered the community leaders as their sleigh disappeared down the street.<sup>99</sup>

Monday morning, however, when the children lined up in the school yard, Principal Cockfield called the strike leaders "out" and threatened to have them expelled. When journalists asked Cockfield what would happen to the leaders, he replied, "It is no business of the press what we do here in Aberdeen School."<sup>100</sup> Here again, Cockfield seems to have acted impulsively, displaying willfulness, and a lack of tact by snubbing Rabbi Abramovitz, Samuel Jacobs, and the press for no apparent reason other than to assert his rapidly diminishing authority over the situation. Likely, from the school board's perspective, both Cockfield and Miss McKinley had become liabilities. The school commissioners found themselves faced with an embarrassing situation that threatened to present the Protestant school system in the worst possible light. However hostile some Protestant leaders were to the presence of large numbers of Jews within their schools, such overt anti-Semitism on a teacher's part or such incompetence and histrionics by a principal were unpardonable. That the school commissioners were prepared to concede to some of the strikers' demands in return for peace in the school yard, leads us to conclude that Cockfield was effectively silenced.

Jewish leaders at the Baron de Hirsch Institute felt "confident that the Commissioners will probe the alleged insult and give a sound judgement according to the facts of the case."<sup>101</sup> Curiously, however, the Aberdeen strike was not minuted at the March 6th board meeting. Whether the deliberations were held in camera or simply stricken from the record, the commissioners must have dealt with this delicate issue. Their silence suggests that they did not want the matter to be discussed further in the public domain. There was no

98. Reuben Brainin, "Strike of Yiddish School Children in Aberdeen School," *Keneder Adler*, 2 March 1913. (Translation: David Rome).

99. "School Strikers Go Back to Desks," *Montreal Herald*, 1 March 1913.

100. "Young Strikers Were Called Out from School Ranks," *Montreal Herald*, 3 March 1913.

101. "Young Strikers Were Called Out from School Ranks," *Montreal Herald*, 3 March 1913.



more newspaper coverage of the Aberdeen School strike. The local dailies do touch on the matter of Easter Monday, which was recorded in the minutes: the commissioners decided, under pressure, that this day would revert to being a school holiday along with the new date in April.<sup>102</sup> The two-holiday solution constituted the board's official response to what was potentially an explosive crisis. Faced with irate parents and church leaders, on the one hand, and the embarrassment of a tactless teacher's offensive remarks on the other, the commissioners sought a compromise that would appease both sides.

Rabbi Abramovitz and Maître Jacobs likely understood that the additional holiday was part of a larger concession to resolve the Aberdeen strike, along with the tacit agreement that the strikers would not be disciplined. After Cockfield's initial attempt to call the leaders out on the Monday morning, the matter appears to have been dropped. While we have no way of knowing this for certain, it is reasonable to assume that any punishment visited upon the students would have been publicized. Although the English-language newspapers might have agreed not to report on any recriminations against the students, one cannot imagine that Reuben Brainin of the *Keneder Adler* would fail to decry any mistreatment of the strikers.

This, however, was as far as the board would go for the time being. There is no indication that changes were made to the complement of teachers at the Aberdeen School. Miss McKinley does not figure in any of the transfers or retirements listed in the school board minutes in the weeks following the strike. In fact, there is no mention of any higher level teachers from Aberdeen School, which is significant given that there is a larger problem regarding Miss McKinley. While Reuben Brainin identified the teacher who made the anti-Semitic remark as "Miss McKinley," the name does not appear in any other English-language newspaper coverage; furthermore, we could not find the name anywhere in the school board minutes or in the list of McGill Normal School graduates. It is possible that English-language newspapers withheld her name in order to protect her reputation; if so, it must have been common practice when reporting on middle-class individuals. At any rate, whoever Miss McKinley was, she seems to have remained for the time being at Aberdeen School.<sup>103</sup> Although the students had set the teacher's removal as a condition for ending the strike, Rabbi Abramovitz and other Jewish leaders must have felt that the issue was not worth pursuing given the board's other concessions. Order was restored.

The strike provoked a variety of responses within the media, clearly demonstrating that the student conflict had alerted the adult world to the danger (or, in some cases, the advantages) of children who were willing to challenge

102. EMSB Archives, Minutes of the PBSC, 6 March 1913.

103. According to his son Stanley, Harry Diamond, one of the strikers, ran into the teacher at a movie theatre in the 1930s. Harry described the meeting as tense and her reaction frosty. (Interview conducted with Stanley Diamond, 31 May 2012.)

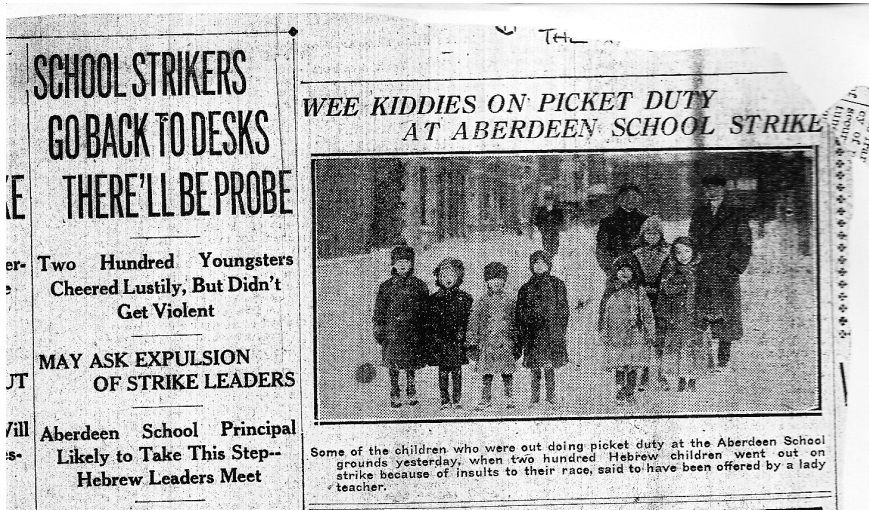


Figure 6. Front page, *Montreal Herald*, 1 March 1913.

authority. The *Montreal Gazette* was adamantly opposed to the students' strike call: "A big foot should be put down on any strike movement among scholars in public schools. Children are sent to school to be taught by teachers and not to dictate to them, as some of the learned youngsters think in these days of the idle strap and ruler. Let the juveniles wait till they grow up to be big men of 18 and 20 before they begin agitating and worrying old people of 30 and 40."<sup>104</sup> The language used in this article is deliberately demeaning, asserting the authority of responsible adults, and sanctioning the punishment of these children with strap, ruler, and the evocative "big foot." The *Montreal Herald* provided the most extensive coverage of any newspaper, featuring the strike on Saturday's front page, no less. It too used belittling language. One headline ran: "Wee Kiddies on Picket Duty at Aberdeen School Strike," accompanied by a photograph showing seven very young children standing in the snow.<sup>105</sup> [Figure 6] Neither the image nor the headline conveys the seriousness of the strike with regard to the age of the leaders, the numbers involved, or the manner in which the strike was organized. This dismissive tone may well have masked anxieties about the potential radicalism of a new generation of workers brought up with strikes and militant labour rhetoric. The story was taken up in Toronto where *The Globe* provided background material on the confessional structure of education in Québec, commenting that the Protestant board was not to be envied its task of having to accommodate pupils of widely varying origins.<sup>106</sup>

104. "Scholars Strike at End," *Montreal Gazette*, 1 March 1913.

105. "School Strikers Go Back to Desks," *Montreal Herald*, 1 March 1913.

106. "Jewish Scholars Have Been On Strike," *The Globe*, 3 March 1913.

The French-language newspapers were neutral in their coverage of the strike, providing very short descriptions of the incident without commentary. This position was typical when it came to issues between Protestants and Jews with respect to schooling. Editors did not want to insert a Catholic opinion into this conflict which had no relevance for the Francophone readership.

Although members of the Jewish élite were wary, many in the community supported the Aberdeen students. The *Canadian Jewish Times* depicted the strike as “novel in the annals of public instruction” and a “healthy symptom of Jewish nationalism.” At the same time the editors drew a distinction between a teacher’s off-hand remark and the views of the school board: “The teacher’s oration we believe to be merely a slip of the unguided tongue ... [and] are not prompted or sanctioned by her board.”<sup>107</sup> The Yiddish press, less worried about upsetting the Protestant community or the English-speaking Jewish elite, was supportive of the strike. Nonetheless, Reuben Brainin played down the element of labour militancy and emphasized that the self-confident strikers were marching for Jewish dignity. Brainin was keen to see signs that the community was taking pride in a growing sense of identity. The Aberdeen students did not disappoint; the strike was “a major contribution to Jewish renaissance.”<sup>108</sup> To Brainin, an understanding of this renaissance lay “hidden in the children’s strike and more. The tender soul of the Jewish child would not dare revolt for so minor a matter if the threads of national rebirth were not weaving in their hearts.”<sup>109</sup> There would have been no strike had these children not developed a sense of injustice and decided to stop making concessions to a system in which their identity was systemically suppressed: “Since schools were opened to Jews...every skulking teacher or professor had the right to stifle and insult the soul of a Jewish child... [while] his exilic parents always suppressed all that is Jewish in the child to the point of denial of his self.” Brainin referred to this transformation as an assertion of honour: “The act of these children is an honour unto us. Many Christians will learn the new Jewish sense of honour.”<sup>110</sup> Evidently, Brainin was projecting his own aspirations for the North American diaspora. Indeed, Aberdeen parents seem to have approved of their children’s action, no doubt seeing in it a reflection of their own values; according to the *Globe*, they “encouraged the children to remain on the street.”<sup>111</sup> The strike signalled to these working-class parents that their children had absorbed lessons in labour learned at home. To the élites, the strike signalled that the upcoming generation was prepared to challenge the authority of their elders in their quest for justice. To counter this

107. “The Juvenile Strike,” *Canadian Jewish Times*, 7 March 1913.

108. *Keneder Adler*, 9 March 1913 (Translation: David Rome).

109. *Keneder Adler*, 4 March 1913 (Translation: David Rome).

110. *Keneder Adler*, 4 March 1913 (Translation: David Rome).

111. “Jewish Scholars Have Been on Strike,” *The Globe*, 3 March 1913.

challenge, Jewish élites were obliged to close ranks, assert their own authority, and downplay the significance of the children's actions.

## Conclusion

ABERDEEN'S STRIKERS MADE THEIR OWN HISTORY. At a critical moment in the development of Montréal's Jewish community, when labour militancy, solidarity, and organization had reached unprecedented levels, when growing numbers of Jewish children began to present serious accommodation problems to the Protestant school system, and when the first concerted effort to mount a legal challenge to anti-Semitism had united Jews of all social classes, Aberdeen students marched. What might appear as a localized, momentary act of rebelliousness was in fact a course of action with landmark consequences for the world around it. Although adults appeared to demean or ignore its importance, they were conscious of the strike's serious potential challenge to authority, and worked to resolve the strike quickly. Both the Protestant school system and the Jewish community experienced significant changes in the months following the strike that were directly or indirectly related to the actions of the Aberdeen students. In looking back at the strike, they may well have been pleased with the social and legal changes that ensued.

The Aberdeen School strike marked a turning point in the history of the Montréal Protestant school system. Although the issue appears to have been whitewashed by the school authorities, they soon took clear steps to improve relations in the classroom. A crucial modification was the hiring of Jewish teachers. It was no coincidence that within weeks of the strike, the commissioners asked legal counsel to inquire whether it would contravene the provisions in the Education Act pertaining to the need for teachers to be vetted by Protestant clergymen. In June 1913, lawyers determined that the board had "the power to appoint Jewish teachers to its staff," and thus the commissioners agreed to "consider applications for employment from Jewish women teachers who are otherwise duly qualified."<sup>112</sup> Members of the school board had managed to close their eyes to the issue despite frequent calls since 1903 by the public for change. They were also willing to tolerate anti-Semitic attitudes by teachers. But when the Aberdeen students responded publicly and militantly to Miss McKinley's outburst, the inappropriateness of having Protestant teachers instructing large classes of Jewish pupils could not be ignored. The following winter, Misses F. Novick, L. Chaskelson and Rebecca Smilovitz, all clearly identified as "Jewesses," were appointed to Montréal schools.<sup>113</sup> Within a decade of the strike, the board was employing over seventy Jewish teachers, hardly enough to go around all the schools on the Main, but a definite improvement over the situation at the beginning of the century.

112. EMSB Archives, Minutes of the PBSC, 13 June 1913.

113. EMSB Archives, Minutes of the PBSC, 23 April 1914.

Despite continued pressure by the Jewish community, it would be a long time before the school board made further concessions such as recognizing the right of Jewish teachers to attend their high holidays without recrimination and moving high school dances from Friday to Saturday evenings.

The student strike also had an impact on the outlook of the Jewish community towards schooling. Since 1903, the élite had taken the position that attending Protestant schools was crucial to Jewish children's integration in North American society – or, more precisely, into the Anglo-Saxon world of the British Empire, which they respected for its values of “fair play.”<sup>114</sup> Recent immigrants were more likely to value the preservation of Eastern European culture, including the Yiddish language, and to mistrust non-Jewish authority over their lives.<sup>115</sup> The more religious among such families had opted to send their children to the Talmud Torah School opened in 1896, and would help establish similar schools in the years following the Aberdeen strike; by 1917 there were five such schools, which joined to form the United Talmud Torahs of Montréal. More significant, in terms of its relation to the Aberdeen strike, was the growth in the support shown by non-observant Jews for independent schools. Members of the Poale Zion (Jewish socialist) movement, embracing ideas brought from Eastern Europe, had been critical for some time of the Jewish establishment's apparent willingness to continue negotiating with an unaccommodating Protestant school board. The opening in 1913 of the National Radical (later Peretz) Shul dedicated to the preservation of Jewish cultural heritage, and the creation the following year of the Jewish People's School, were clearly influenced by a rising sense of militancy that the Aberdeen School strike reflected.<sup>116</sup> For many years, these schools functioned only on Sundays and in the later afternoons on weekdays, as a supplement to regular classes in the Protestant system, but as of 1928 the Jewish People's School operated as a day school and the Peretz School would do so as of 1941. By the late 1920s, the supporters of these private schools would champion the formation of a separate Jewish school board, in fierce opposition to Maxwell Goldstein and others who continued to favour integration.<sup>117</sup> Even so, as the Protestant school board fought to reverse the 1903 legislation (successfully by 1928) and actively promoted separate schools, even a separate school system, the faith of the more liberal Jewish element in a comprehensive public school system was shaken.

114. Rome, *On the Jewish School Question in Montreal*, 1.

115. Rome, *On the Jewish School Question in Montreal*, 20.

116. Hershl Novak, *La première école Yiddish de Montréal, 1911–1914* (Québec 2009), 69. Novak refers to Simon Belkin, who dated the city's first Yiddish school from 1911, but admits there is much uncertainty as to when the school actually opened. Accounts of the Jewish People's Schools give 1913 or 1914 as the dates when these schools began.

117. Rome, *On the Jewish School Question in Montreal*, 61.



The issue of Jewish representation on the Protestant school board also returned in the wake of the Aberdeen strike. Thanks to the efforts of the newly-created Independent Citizens' League, clothing manufacturer Abraham Blumenthal had been elected to the Montréal city council in 1912, representing the St Louis Ward.<sup>118</sup> Two years later, at the end of a school commissioner's term of office, Blumenthal presented himself as a candidate for one of the three school board seats that the council appointed. He was not chosen, his candidature opposed by other members of the council. In 1916, when a second Jew, the popular world-champion skater Louis Rubinstein, was elected an alderman, Blumenthal attempted to have him appointed to the school board, again without success.<sup>119</sup>

The strikers themselves emerged as winners despite the odds; they were never publicly disciplined and they received an apology of sorts, even if they regarded it as insufficient. They did not succeed in having the objectionable teacher removed from the classroom, but they did set in motion a process that would result in much better Jewish representation among the public school teaching profession. They initiated the strike action without first securing permission from their parents, who nonetheless proved supportive. Likely, the strikers were aware of what they had achieved: by refusing to tolerate anti-Semitism, they drew the attention of their community to a systemic problem in the school system that had links to prejudice within the wider society. In so doing, they learned the value of taking action against injustice. The Aberdeen strike was also no doubt a transformative moment in their lives, the kind of incident that one often looks back on and recognizes as profoundly significant.

We have no way of knowing the long-term impact of being a student strike leader, but we have managed to glean something of their adult lives. In 1916, Moses Skibelsky emigrated with his family to the United States when his father accepted a position as principal of a Hebrew school in Chicago. Moses became a dentist and practised in Chicago for decades. Although he anglicized his name to Martin Bell, he married within his faith to Russian-born Esther and raised a daughter, Cyral.<sup>120</sup> Moses Margolis worked as a cloak operator and auto mechanic before enlisting (as Mack Margolese) in the Royal Canadian Dragoons in 1917 when he turned 18.<sup>121</sup> That for several years after the war

118. Medres, *Montreal of Yesterday*, 118–120.

119. Rome, *On the Jewish School Question in Montreal*, 22.

120. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., "Manifests of Passengers Arriving at St. Albans, Vermont, District through Canadian Pacific and Atlantic Ports, 1895–1954," M1464, in Library and Archives Canada, Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Record Group 85; *1920 United States Federal Census*, Cook County, Illinois, Chicago Ward 12, T625-320, 1A, Enumeration District 675, Image 575; and *1930 United States Federal Census*, Cook County, Illinois, Chicago, 461, 18B, Enumeration District 1004, Image 38.0.

121. Library and Archives Canada, RG 150, Accession 1992-93/166, Box 5921 – 16, Soldiers of



Margolis was listed in Lovell's Directory only as "returned soldier" suggests that he had been injured or was unable to work. In 1921, Joseph Orenstein (he shortened his name to Oren) married Evelyn Yaphe, who was also a grade six student at Aberdeen School during the strike. The couple moved to Miami where Joseph operated a shoe store. According to his granddaughter, Joseph was the "least bigoted person" she had ever known. He employed an African-American worker as a "stock boy" with whom he sat and ate in the "Blacks-only" section of a segregated restaurant across the street from his store.<sup>122</sup>

These young men eventually anglicized their Jewish names – which may have been a nod to modernity, a means of pre-empting prejudice, or a practical business strategy rather than a rejection of their roots – but their actions in 1913 reflected a growing sense of Jewish identity. In this they were instrumental in rousing the community. Reuben Brainin put it eloquently in the *Adler*:

Christian society let it pass as a minor event; the Jewish public took it as child's play. Some Jews considered it unfortunate. Why arouse the geese? But the inquiring eye will see that there is much to learn in the case.

This without entering into the justice of the case or whether children should resort to strikes. The first to protest should be the parents, and it is the parents who should demand rights and justice for them. But what interests me is that the children did not seek justice for themselves; it was their national sensibility that was offended and that provoked their little fists against their highest government (for to children their teachers and schools are the highest government).

We need to think much about this first sprouting of a generation which is new in our exile history, a free generation which is discarding the chains of diaspora, which no longer bends its head, no longer begs for justice but takes what is not accorded it freely.<sup>123</sup>

To an extent, Brainin read his own cultural interpretations into the children's actions whilst underplaying their political radicalism. In practice, the Aberdeen strike, like the tailors' strike the previous year, highlighted the deep class divisions within Montréal's Jewish community as well as, to a lesser extent, the differences between observant and non-observant Jews. It also highlighted the philosophical differences that would lead to long and bitter battles within the community over the values that constituted Jewish education, and over how and by whom such values should be imparted. Yet, in the end the Aberdeen strike proved an issue around which the entire community could rally, albeit cautiously in some cases. It may not have led directly to the creation of Jewish independent schools or the assertion of Jewish political rights, but it provoked critical deliberation. The student action served to

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the First World War – Canadian Expeditionary Force, Mack Margolese.

122. Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec à Montréal, Québec, Vital and Church Records (Drouin collection), 1621–1967, Sha'ar Hashomayim, Folio 18, No. 32, Marriage of Joseph Orenstein and Evelyn Yaphe, 22 June 1921. We also draw on an email from Stanley Diamond describing a telephone conversation he had with Linda Slote Quick, 4 June 2012.

123. Reuben Brainin, *Keneder Adler*, 4 March 1913 (Translation: David Rome).

remind Jews that they did not have to put up with the kind of discrimination, both veiled and explicit, that they swallowed every day, proving to be one of the occasional cases where ethnic and religious solidarity prevailed. The conditions for mobilizing Yiddish-speaking members of the community were ripe, but it took the action of children to reinvigorate a growing movement to champion Jewish citizenship. The children were not only applying the values with which they were brought up but also affirming their importance as a means to effect change.

Going on strike confirmed the children's status in their own minds as members of the working class and connected them to their labour-activist parents. At the same time, resisting anti-Semitism bolstered their cultural identity, both in their neighbourhood and with the Jewish community at large. To an extent, they had grown up with this sense of identity, absorbing it at home, in the streets, and in the social life of the St-Laurent corridor, but it stood at odds with the broader notions of citizenship promoted in Protestant schools. The Aberdeen strike gave them the confidence to explore and express their own notions of citizenship predicated on Jewish identity, working-class solidarity, and a sense of social justice.

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