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"The Fertile Soil of Growth, Life and Ideas" : Russian-Jewish Anarchist Solidarity in the Canadian West, 1900–1950

"Winnipeg is the place of promise. It is the fertile soil of growth, life and ideas,"[1] was how Emma Goldman, a renowned militant anarchist, described her early impressions of radical political activism in the Canadian West. Goldman, a Russian-born Jewish anarchist, came to be known as one of the most prominent figures of the American progressive thought in the early twentieth century. She visited the Prairies of Canada for the first time in April 1907, during her lecture tour across North America. This visit, welcomed with great agitation by the local anarchist and even socialist movement,[2] established the first substantial connection between the radicals of Western Canada and the general anarchist ensemble of the American continent. The connection, however, had its limits. While actively engaged in local-scale initiatives, the anarchists of Winnipeg maintained a certain distance with regard to the majority of the Jewish libertarians who came to settle in the New World in this era, and to the mutual aid work in which the latter were involved. This distinction, and the factors to which it was due, are the two focal points that our research study sets out to explore.

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[1] Goldman, Emma. "On the Road." *Mother Earth*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (May 1907), 133. Cited in Burrows, Paul. "'Apostle of Anarchy:' Emma Goldman's First Visit to Winnipeg in 1907." *Manitoba History*, No. 57 (February 2008).

[2] See Trachtenberg, Henry. *"The old CLO' move" anti-Semitism, politics and the Jews of Winnipeg, 1882–1921*. Toronto: York University, Ph. D. thesis, 1984, 456.

Historiographic framework

This study is proposed as an integral part of our Ph. D. research project in Contemporary History, conducted since September 2020 in affiliation with the doctoral school "Pratiques et théories du sens" of Paris 8 University, and the Institut d'Histoire du Temps Présent, a research unit of the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS).

The Russian-Jewish anarchism in America has been in the center of our research at postgraduate level since the year of 2017. In these works, we have explored the different aspects and initiatives of Jewish anarchist mutual aid in North America throughout the first half of the twentieth century, focusing on the United States. This research, to be further enriched and expanded in the course of our doctoral dissertation, has built on the existing scholarship dealing with the history of North American radical thought. The historiographic framework in question has been predominantly formed by scholars of the United States, Canada, France, Russia and Israel, who first began to examine the subject of ethnic American anarchism in the late 1960s–early 1970s. This scholarship includes works by Paul Avrich, Donald Avery, Andrew Cornell, Kenyon Zimmer, who have presented the general image of the multi-ethnic anarchist and radical communities of the U. S., Canada, and to a lesser extent, Mexico. Other studies have focused specifically on the Jewish and Russian-Jewish radicalism, including the works of Pierre Anctil on the radical Jews of Quebec, and of Moshe Goncharok and Kirill Limanov on the transnational yiddish anarchism. Being highly informative of the general context, these works, however, have lacked the detailing of the lesser-known, local progressive currents of the North American Jewish diaspora—literary and political circles, cooperative colonies, and their educational and fundraising activities,—as well as of the humanitarian aspect of anarchist activism.

The present-day shift of our scientific focus to include the Canadian case, including that of Western Canada, has driven us to explore the works published by the local academic community,

centered in Winnipeg. Its representatives, including Roz Usiskin, Henry Trachtenberg, Arthur Chiel, Stefan Epp-Koop, Arthur Ross, have given significant attention to the study of the Western Canadian radical left, greatly contributing to the social and political history of Winnipeg and its surroundings, as well as the history of its Jewish diaspora. However, the existing studies have only briefly, rather fragmentarily, discussed the particular subject of the Prairies' anarchist movement, its membership, and especially its links with the general North American anarchist milieu. This historiography has also largely left outside of the spotlight the question of local humanitarian aid, failing to sufficiently consider and present its extent, objectives, and methods.

These observations reveal an important historiographic gap in the political and social history of the Canadian West, as well as of the North American continent in general; one that is intended to be filled as a result of this doctoral project by adopting a smaller-scale, case-study approach. By applying the prosopographical ("collective biography") research method to this study, we purport to join the novel transdisciplinary trend in social history, that of studying social movements through motivations and emotions of their actors[3] in order to highlight the nuances often overlooked on the macro level: the role of individual itineraries, even personal traumas, and of the sentiment of ethnic and political kinship in the organizational choices made by the activists. In addition to the new original sources of personal as well as organizational character, our research will build upon solid knowledge of the underlying historical context, as well as on the corpus of sources accumulated in the course of our previous work. This sets the foundation for a broader comparative study, allowing us to combine different scales of analysis and to place the singular case of the Western Canadian Jewish anarchism within the framework of a larger socio-political ensemble of Canada and, more generally, North America.

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[3] See Johsua, Florence. "'Nous vengerons nos pères…'. De l'usage de la colère dans les organisations politiques d'extrême gauche dans les années 1968." *Politix*, 2013/4 No. 104, 203–233; Redfield, Peter. *Life in Crisis: The Ethical Journey of Doctors Without Borders.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013; Malkki, Liisa H. *The Need to Help: The Domestic Arts of International Humanitarianism.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

Subject presentation

1. Importing ideas: the origins of Russian-Jewish anarchism in Western Canada

The turn of the twentieth century in North America was marked by a new, third, wave of immigration, whose peak brought over 2.9 million newcomers to the Canadian shores between the years of 1900 and 1914.[4] While this number is significantly lower than the 15 million of immigrants estimated to have entered the country's southern neighbor, the United States of America, within the same time frame,[5] it still surpasses by nearly four times the total of those admitted to Canada during the previous fourteen-year period. A significant number of these immigrants were Eastern European (Ashkenazi) Jews, in particular those of the Russian Empire.

This mass emigration of Russian Jews was a consequence of the oppression that the Jewish population of Russia had suffered. The Russian Orthodox Church and the Slavophile antisemitic propaganda,[6] as well as the long imperial policy of the *cherta osedlosti*, known as the Jewish Pale of Settlement, had provoked frequent and violent pogroms that had only intensified towards the late nineteenth century,[7] causing the departure from the Russian territory of nearly two million Jews.[8] Canada, along with the United Kingdom and Australia, another dominion of the British Crown,

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[4] Boyd, Monica, and Vickers, Michael. "100 Years of Immigration in Canada." *Canadian Social Trends*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 11-008 (Autumn 2000), 2–12.

[5] "Progressive Era to New Era. Immigrants in the Progressive Era," *Library of Congress*, n. d. [undated], http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/progress/immigrnt/ (accessed March 23, 2020).

[6] "The prejudice against Jews is inherent to every Christian," wrote Ivan Aksakov, a notorious antisemite and one of the leaders of Slavophilia—the nationalist ideological movement developed in the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century. See Aksakov, I. A. "On How to Render the Jews Innocuous for the Christian Population" (О том, как бы обезвредить евреев для христианского народонаселения), Moscow, September 15 (1883), in Id. *The Jewish Question (Еврейский вопрос)*. Moscow: Sotsizdat, 2001 (published posthumously).

[7] Gitelman, Zvi. *A Century of Ambivalence: the Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union.* New York: Schocken Books, 1998, chap. 1, "Creativity versus repression: the Jews in Russia, 1881–1917," 1–58.

[8] Between 1881–1914, 1,980,000 Jews have left the Russian Empire. Of this number, 76% (1,557,000) have settled in the USA. See Miller, A. I. *The Romanov Empire and Nationalism. Essays in the Methodology of Historical Research (Империя Романовых и национализм: Эссе по методологии исторического исследования)*. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2006, chap. 4, "The Romanov Empire and the Jews" (Империя Романовых и евреи), 96–146.

became the second most popular destination for these refugees after the United States.[9] This was largely due to the country's economic and urban growth, which promised ample opportunities for employment. By the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Canada's total Jewish population had reached the size of 100,000.[10]

Western Canada, and in particular the city of Winnipeg, quickly established itself, alongside Toronto and Montreal, in the vanguard of destinations attracting the new workforce. Emerging as the West's rapidly developing urban center between 1870 and 1908, Winnipeg welcomed approximately 45 thousand newcomers.[11] Jews constituted roughly 20% of this number, reaching the total of 9,023 in 1911, which accounted for 6.3% of the city's population at the time;[12] according to other accounts, already in 1907 the ensemble of Russians and "other Slavs and Bohemians," including those of Jewish origin, reached 15,000.[13] But Winnipeg's economic progress and prospects of plentiful work were not the only reason for its popularity among those seeking asylum. The immigrant Jews, many of them secular and already influenced by radical revolutionary ideas, were attracted by the promise of a secular life, the freedom of religion, and the opportunity to practice the politics they believed in. Such was the image transmitted by the Canadian West, largely seen as a wild, virgin land, where a new life free of oppression could be built.[14]

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[9] See *Ibid.*; Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence*, 250.

[10] "Jews," *Library and Archives Canada, Government of Canada*, n. d. https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/immigration/history-ethnic-cultural/Pages/jewish.aspx (accessed March 23, 2020).

[11] Woodsworth, J. S. *Strangers Within Our Gates.* Canada: Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, 1909, 259.

[12] Rosenberg, Louis. *The Jewish Community of Winnipeg.* Montreal: Research Bureau of The Canadian Jewish Congress, 1946, 10–13. Cited in Usiskin, Roz. "The Winnipeg Jewish Community: Its Radical Elements, 1905–1918." *MHS Transactions*, Series 3, No. 33 (1976–77).

[13] James Henry Ashdown (Mayor of Winnipeg, 1907–1908) to Frank Oliver (Minister of the Interior, 1905–1911), Winnipeg, 1907. Cited in Trachtenberg, *"The old CLO' move" anti-Semitism, politics and the Jews of Winnipeg, 1882–1921*, 457.

[14] The image is especially notable in comparison with other Canadian urban centers, e. g. Montreal, where the big cross atop Mount Royal represented for the newly arrived "what [they were] running away from." See Langbord Levine, Merle Zita. *My Memoirs.* Toronto, 2019, 7.

It is in the Prairies of Canada that the ideas imported by the newcomers would continue their development, and the Jews would find themselves among the principal advocates of the Canadian radical thought. As a minority ethnic group, Jews, especially those of Europe, were historically considered to be "the barometer of society's civilization"[15] from the political as well as socioeconomic point of view.[16] Finding itself on the margin of the few civil liberties that offered the empires of the Old World at the turn of the century, the Jewish people was especially receptive to the radical ideas that were developing in Europe. Many Jewish émigrés, having adhered to the Marxist concept of class consciousness, were pushed to exile due not only to their ethnic and religious background, but also to their political convictions and revolutionary activity—especially as the repression of revolutionaries exacerbated in fin-de-siècle Russia, building up to the First Russian revolution of 1905. Emigrating for both ethnic and political reasons, these exiles came thus to adopt a double refugee status.[17] Some of the refugees, including the Winnipeg activist Frank (Feivel) Simkin, who would later convert to anarchism, were clandestine members of the Bund—the General Jewish Labor Federation of Lithuania, Poland and Russia (*Algemeyner Yidisher Arbeter Bund in Litah, Poyln un Rusland*), a secular Jewish social democratic party organized in 1897. Others had adopted a more radical stance, joining the anarchist movement, which was gaining popularity among the European workers under the influence of the ideas of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin. Although often presented as rivals, in reality the two factions, anarchism and social democracy, had a common basis: both were founded on the ideals

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[15] Kantor, Moshe. "Educate, Legislate, Enforce." Fifth World Holocaust Forum. Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial museum, Jerusalem. January 23, 2020. Kantor quotes Napoleon Bonaparte, who on May 30, 1806, granted equal rights to the Jews of France.

[16] See Mitchell B. Hart, Tony Michels (eds.). *The Cambridge History of Judaism: Volume 8, The Modern World, 1815–2000.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

[17] On the redefinition of the concept of a refugee in the twentieth century, transiting from political to ethnic, see Groppo, Bruno, and Collomp, Catherine. "Introduction : L'Europe productrice de réfugiés ; Les Etats-Unis, un accueil sélectif." *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps*, n°60 (2000), Les États-Unis et les réfugiés politiques européens : des années 1930 aux années 1950, 2.

and values of collectivism, mutual aid, and social equality. The only significant difference consisted in the role of the state, social democrats seeing it as the ultimate source of the economic and social welfare of the people, while anarchists denounced completely the grounds for its existence, condemning any form of social hierarchy, and thus of constraint and privilege.[18]

Constituting two separate currents of progressive thought, social democrats and anarchists did not always get along, in Europe as well as in emigration across the Atlantic. From the early 1900s, as the exiles began to set up funds to help revolutionaries in Russian prisons and labor camps,[19] there quickly arose the issue of discrimination against anarchist prisoners. As testified by the imprisoned libertarians,[20] the allocations, originally destined for all victims regardless of their political convictions, were sent exclusively to the bundists and mensheviks, both representatives of the social democratic current. This discriminatory tendency entailed the establishment of a separate anarchist relief campaign, launched as early as 1905 by the radical Jewish immigrants of England.[21] Following the example of their counterparts, the anarchists of the U. S. East Coast developed this initiative into a true international solidarity network under the title of the Anarchist Red Cross, establishing between 1907–1913 a number of its fundraising branches in the cities of New York,

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[18] The author deems it particularly important to accentuate the non-violent character of the Jewish anarchist movement in America, whose members, although referred to as radicals, favored gradual change by education and social enlightenment. For example, the American anarchist Irving S. Abrams noted: "Every person must have a star, an ideal to which he clings. *The ideal may not be realized today or tomorrow*, but you must have an ideal, which will carry you forward in life, will inspire you to do deeds and acts. […] there are people like… foolish, like myself and many others who call ourselves anarchists, who feel that this injustice can be done away with. That *people can be educated*. We must in our souls believe that justice must prevail. We must have that concept that we are going to carry on, *little by little*." (Italics added by me.—M. T. C.) *Free Voice of Labour (Freie Arbeiter Stimme)* [documentary film]. New York: Pacific Street Film Collective, 1980.

[19] The general network of aid funds for Russian political prisoners was known as the Political Red Cross, established in 1906. See Strelnikova, E. V. "The Political Red Cross in the Russian Empire and Abroad (1906–1914)" (Политический Красный Крест в Российской империи и за рубежом (1906–1914)). *Vestnik PSTGU*, Vol. II, No. 1 (38; 2011), 77–88.

[20] Harry Weinstein to Boris Yelensky, n. d., letter published in Yelensky, Boris. *In the Struggle for Equality: the History of the Anarchist Red Cross.* Chicago: A. Berkman's Aid Fund, 1958, 12–13.

[21] According to Rudolf Rocker, the treasurer of the European Anarchist Red Cross, the organization was first created in London circa 1905. See Rudolf Rocker to Boris Yelensky, June 2, 1956, letter published in Yelensky, *In the Struggle for Equality*, 11–12.

Chicago, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Brownsville and Detroit.[22] This separate, specifically anarchist enterprise resulted in a significant deterioration of relations between social democrats and anarchists in the region.[23]

The situation in Canada, and specifically Western Canada, was different. The relationship between the two progressive factions of the Jewish diaspora in the city of Winnipeg was largely symbiotic: in the year of 1907, both anarchists and social democrats stood at the origins of the newly formed joint local branch No. 169 of the Workmen's Circle (WC, Yiddish title *Arbeter-ring*)—a social and cultural Jewish organization first established in New York in 1892 under the title of "Workingmen's Circle."[24] From then on, the two currents of the Winnipeg Jewish left carried out their activities within this common framework, engaging in common community organizing projects of educational and social vocation. Thus, while the majority of militant libertarians of America at the dawn of the century chose to


ГОЛОСЪ
ССЫЛЬНЫХЪ И ЗАКЛЮЧЕННЫХЪ РУССКИХЪ АНАРХИСТОВЪ.
Изданіе Анархическаго Краснаго Креста въ Нью-Іоркѣ.
№ 2. ОКТЯБРЬ, 1914 ГОДА. № 2.

Cover of *The Voice of Anarchists Exiled and Imprisoned in Russia*, published by the New York Anarchist Red Cross. No. 2 (October 1914). Source: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

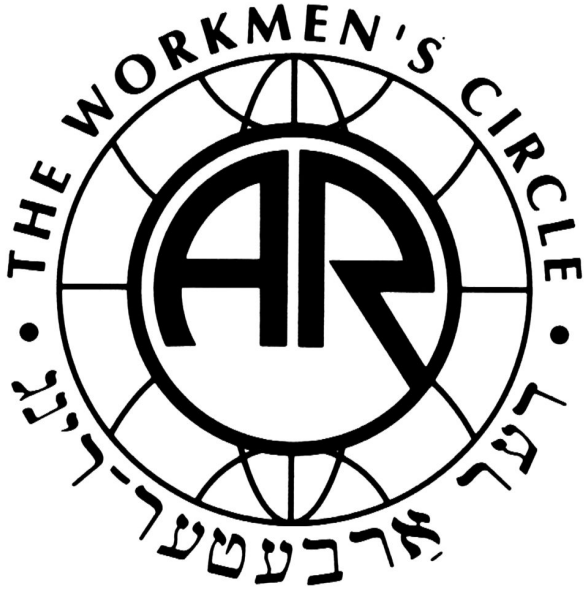
[22] See *The Voice of Anarchists Exiled and Imprisoned in Russia (Голосъ ссыльныхъ и заключенныхъ русскихъ анархистовъ)*, No. 2 (October 1914).

[23] According to Boris Yelensky, the Anarchist Red Cross secretary in Philadelphia (1911–1913) and Chicago (1913–1917), the anarchist groups were repeatedly denied venues to rent and prizes in competitions held at collective fundraising events in favor of social democratic groups, and the two movements continually engaged in passionate political debates. See Yelensky, *In the Struggle for Equality.*

[24] "Our History," *The Workmen's Circle*, n. d. (https://circle.org/who-we-are/our-history/ accessed March 23, 2020); "History," *Boston Workers Circle*, n. d. (http://circleboston.org/history accessed March 25, 2020).

distance themselves from the *Arbeter-ring* network due to political discord, the Western Canadian radicals favored cooperation and willingly organized joint local-scale initiatives, such as the *Arbeter-ring* school, the I. L. Peretz school, and the Liberty Temple (*Freiheit Temple*) association which functioned as an open forum for Jewish political discussion.[25]

These mutual events and undertakings, all centered around secular Jewishness with a strong dimension of community spirit, were characterized in their early stages by a friendly, communal ambiance despite the political differences of their participants. The first falling out did not occur until 1915, when the anarchist Frank Simkin was allegedly expelled from the original Workmen's Circle branch by its social democratic members, advocates of a strong socialist government. And although this episode caused Simkin to start a separate anarchist branch (No. 564),[26] the latter still managed to keep a comradely relationship with the rest of the Jewish left. Thus, two year after the separation, in 1917, Simkin was invited to speak at the bundist branch jubilee banquet along with another member of the new anarchist branch, Israel Prasow.[27]



Emblem of the Workmen's Circle (*Arbeter-ring*) organization.

2. The faces of Winnipeg anarchism

The anarchist branch No. 564, formed under the already traditional name of Free

[25] For a detailed account of the Jewish radical educational institutions and associations, see Herstein, Harvey H. "The Growth of the Winnipeg Jewish Community and the Evolution of its Educational Institutions." *MHS Transactions*, Series 3, Number 22 (1965–66).

[26] Burrows, "'Apostle of Anarchy'."

[27] See *The Israelite Press*, Sept. 5, 1918; Noznitsky B. "Memories," in *Sholem Aleichem Twenty-Five Years Jubilee Book*, *1921–1946,* Winnipeg, *The Israelite Press*, 1946, 17. Cited in Usiskin, "The Winnipeg Jewish Community."

Society (*Freie Gezelshaft*),[28] had its own unique features that distinguished it from the general Canadian anarchist milieu. According to Julius Seltzer, a Toronto anarchist leader, the group was made up of "a more intellectually inclined bunch than in other cities."[29] The anarchist community was centered around the North End, a predominantly working-class residential area of Winnipeg, where most European Jewish immigrants settled at this time.[30] While sources cite the anarchist branch to have consisted of thirty-five members at the moment of its creation in 1915,[31] most of them garment workers,[32] the immediate leadership of the group likely did not surpass five to seven individuals, and it is this handful of activists who allegedly played the principal part in determining the ways of development of the local anarchist movement. This ensemble included:

- **Frank** (Feivel) **Simkin** (1885–1983):[33] a Jewish immigrant born in Mogilev, present-day Belarus, Russian Empire, into a family of religious Jews. Deviating from his parents' plan for him to become a rabbi, unlike his brother Samuel, and joining instead the radical revolutionary current of the Bund, Simkin came to Winnipeg in 1906 following the First Russian revolution of 1905—fleeing repression.[34] Later, he brought across the Atlantic his wife Gittel, as well as their both respective families. Already an anarchist in Russia, he became more confirmed in his views upon his arrival in Canada. A pacifist and an advocate for education, he became very involved in the local anarchist movement, starting a radical discussion club at a local library, then becoming the leader of the *Arbeter-ring* and the I. L. Peretz schools, and eventually

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[28] The anarchist groups of Chicago (1897–1904) and Toronto (organized in 1908) functioned under the same title.

[29] "Julius Seltzer" in Avrich, *Anarchist Voices*, 328–330.

[30] See Trachtenberg, *"The old CLO' move" anti-Semitism, politics and the Jews of Winnipeg, 1882–1921*, 461–462; Herstein, "The Growth of the Winnipeg Jewish Community…"; Gourluck, Russ. *The Mosaic Village: An Illustrated History of Winnipeg's North End.* Winnipeg: Great Plains Publications, 2010.

[31] *The Israelite Press*, Sept. 15, 1915. Cited in Usiskin, "The Winnipeg Jewish Community."

[32] "Julius Seltzer" in Avrich, *Anarchist Voices*, 328–330.

[33] Library and Archives Canada (LAC). *Sixth Census of Canada, 1921.* Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: LAC, 2013. Statistics Canada Fonds. Series RG 31, Folder 30, Page 8.

[34] Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada (JHCWC), Oral history, Media No. 107. Interview with Feivel Simkin, Feb. 23, 1977.

establishing the separate anarchist branch No. 564 of the Workmen's Circle. Simkin is known as the publisher of *Der Yiddishe Vort* ("The Israelite Press"), the Yiddish language newspaper in Western Canada established in 1914 and deriving from another project of Simkin's, *Der Kanader Yid* ("The Canadian Israelite") journal.[35] An experienced publisher and "printer in quite a large way," he is known for his involvement in the general Canadian anarchist movement and, in particular, his contribution to the Federated Libertarian Groups of Canada project. In the late 1930s, Simkin offered his Toronto counterparts, authors of this collective anarchist initiative, an advantageous price for the printing of leaflets to advertise this prospective organization, and aided with their distribution across Western Canada.[36] Despite all this effort, the Canadian anarchist groups were unable to unite, and the project never saw the light of day. In 1949, Simkin became president of the newly founded Universal Printers enterprise and did not retire from his position until the company's sale in 1960.[37] Simkin was never affiliated with institutional political activity in Winnipeg.[38]

- **Israel** (1884–1928)[39] **and Sam** (Zalman; 1887–1971)[40] **Prasow**: two brothers born in present-day Belarus, Russian Empire, into a secular, Russian-speaking Jewish family. Fleeing anti-Semitism, they emigrated to Canada in 1904 after an anti-Jewish pogrom that took place in 1903 in the city of Gomel. In 1905, they were followed by their mother and two younger

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[35] Gutkin, Harry. *Journey Into Our Heritage: The Story of the Jewish People in the Canadian West*. Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys Publishers, 1980, 179; Chiel, Arthur. *The Jews in Manitoba: A Social History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961, 125–128. Cited in Burrows, "'Apostle of Anarchy'."

[36] International Institute of Social History (IISH), Amsterdam, Emma Goldman papers, General correspondence, Folder 64 [Giesecke-Rogers, Dorothy 'Giessecke', and Laddon, Esther. - Toronto Libertarian Group. (Scarborough Bluffs, Ontario, Canada). 1935-1939.]. Giesecke to Goldman, Scarboro Bluffs, Ontario, n. d.

[37] Bumstead, John M. *Dictionary of Manitoba Biography.* Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1999, 228.

[38] JHCWC, interview with Feivel Simkin, Feb. 23, 1977.

[39] LAC. *Passenger Lists, 1865–1935.* Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: LAC, n. d. Department of Employment and Immigration fonds. Series RG 76-C, Roll T-14718.

[40] *Ibid.* Series RG 76-C, Roll T-506; JHCWC, Oral history, Media No. 054. Interview with Bertha Plotkin (Prasow), April 21, 1972.

sisters, one of them Berthe Plotkin (née Prasow). Both brothers took up construction jobs and, joining the working-class milieu of Winnipeg, became "very politically aware."[41] While Israel at first gravitated towards Zionism, Sam was a devoted anarchist, and he was the first to join the Jewish radical circle animated by Frank Simkin at a local public library. He was likely among those who in 1911 asked the City of Winnipeg Library Committee to establish in one of its libraries a section of Jewish and Ruthenian literature—a request that was satisfied after a lengthy debate, although making the books of this section subject to strict review by the censorship board who feared radical anarchist and socialist influence.[42] Both Prasow brothers are cited to have been leaders of the local anarchist group[43] and good friends of Emma Goldman. Namely, when in 1907 Winnipeg saw the establishment of a distribution outlet for Goldman's anarchist magazine *Mother Earth* (1906–1917), Sam Prasow became its local agent and contact.[44] The Prasows owned a department store in Winnipeg;[45] they were also writers whose work was featured in the pages of *Der Kanader Yid*.[46]

- **Max** (1880–1956)[47] **and Rose** (1882–1964, née Cherniak) **Alcin** (Elkin): both Jewish immigrants from present-day Belarus, Russian Empire, who came to Canada respectively in 1903 and 1904. Max was a watchmaker by profession[48] and owned a store located at 810 Main Street, in the North End of Winnipeg.[49] Rose was a member of WC since as early as 1906.

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[41] JHCWC, Oral history, Media No. 054. Interview with Bertha Plotkin (Prasow), April 21, 1972.

[42] Trachtenberg, *"The old CLO' move" anti-Semitism, politics and the Jews of Winnipeg, 1882–1921*, 460.

[43] "Julius Seltzer" in Avrich, *Anarchist Voices*, 328–330.

[44] Advertisement for "Agents of Mother Earth" in *Mother Earth*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (May 1907). Cited in Burrows, "'Apostle of Anarchy'."

[45] "Julius Seltzer" in Avrich, Paul. *Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism In America.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, 328–330.

[46] Chiel, *The Jews In Manitoba: A Social History*, 125–128. Cited in Burrows, "'Apostle of Anarchy'."

[47] *The Jewish Post*, July 5, 1956, 12.

[48] Trachtenberg, "The Winnipeg Jewish Community and Politics: the Inter-War Years, 1919–1939." *MHS Transactions*, Series 3, Number 35 (1978–79).

[49] *Winnipeg Free Press*, Jan. 5, 1937, 7.

Both spouses are said to have been "committed to Jewish cultural and political causes." Rose Alcin taught at the radical *Arbeter-ring* and I. L. Peretz schools, focusing on the Yiddish culture rather than Hebrew.[50] In 1919, Alcin became the Labour Party's school trustee. She was the first Jewish woman to hold public office in Canada.[51]

Rose Alcin (née Cherniak)
Source: *Manitoba Social Science Teachers' Association Journal*, vol. 40, no. 3, April 2015.

- **David Matlin** (1891–1966):[52] the least well-known member of the branch, only briefly mentioned in Rudolf Rocker's memoirs as a hospitable and efficient organizer who was of great help to him during his 1913 lecture visit to Winnipeg.[53] Born in England into a family of Russian-Jewish immigrants (according to another source, in Russia),[54] he moved to Canada with his parents in 1907, where the family settled in the city of Winnipeg. Matlin was the eldest of six children in the family and followed in his father's footsteps to earn his living as a

[50] "Rose Cherniak Alcin (Elkin)." *Manitoba Social Science Teachers' Association Journal*, vol. 40, no. 3, April 2015, 15.

[51] *The Jewish Post*, June 28, 1962, 9.

[52] LAC. *Census of Canada, 1911*. Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: LAC, 2007. Statistics Canada Fonds. Series RG 31-C-1, Page 30, Family No. 273; Usiskin, "The Winnipeg Jewish Radical Community: Its Early Formation 1905–1918," in Stone, Daniel (ed.). *Jewish Radicalism in Winnipeg, 1905–1960.* Winnipeg: Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, *Jewish Life and Times*, v. 8 (2003), 165.

[53] Rocker, Rudolf. *The London Years*. Robert Anscombe & Co., 1956, 235. Cited in Usiskin, "The Winnipeg Jewish Community: Its Radical Elements, 1905–1918." *MHS Transactions*, Series 3, No. 33 (1976–77).

[54] *Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, RG 85*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration.

tailor.[55] In 1921, he married his compatriot Sarah Rodin.[56] The couple eventually relocated to Vancouver, where Matlin became a coat designer.[57] Nothing is known of the Matlins' possible pursuit of anarchist activities.

- **Boris Sachatoff** (1873–ca. 1952):[58] an activist of Jewish origin born in Tula, Russian Empire. Having described himself as "a Tolstoyan Christian anarchist," that is an advocate of passive resistance to evil through nonviolent means,[59] Sachatoff stands apart in the Western Canadian anarchist movement as he likely never belonged to the Winnipeg group—although he may have been in contact with its members. In 1910, he came to Winnipeg to live among the Dukhobors, a Russian pacifist religious group with a strong communitarian identity. Sachatoff traveled to Canada from Chicago, where he and his ex-wife Lydia Sachatoff Gordon (née Landau) had earlier emigrated from Russia. The Sachatoffs had two children, Sophie (married name Bannister) and Eva (married name Brandes), who had at first left for Winnipeg with their father. Six months later, the young women returned to Chicago to be with their mother, a devoted anarchist and a friend of Emma Goldman, and eventually followed in her footsteps to adhere to the American anarchist movement. Boris Sachatoff worked as an itinerant jeweler and watchmaker, as well as an agent for the Victor Talking Machine Company, before establishing his own store. Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, Sachatoff distanced

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[55] LAC. *Census of Canada, 1911.* Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: LAC, 2007. Statistics Canada Fonds. Series RG 31-C-1, Page 30, Family No. 273.

[56] *Vital Statistics*. Manitoba Consumer and Corporate Affairs (http://vitalstats.gov.mb.ca/Query.php accessed April 2, 2012).

[57] LAC. *Voters Lists, Federal Elections, 1935–1980.* Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: LAC, n. d. R1003-6-3-E (RG113-B).

[58] LAC. *Census returns for 1916 Census of Prairie Provinces.* Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: LAC, 2007. Statistics Canada Fonds. Series RG 31-C-1, Page 9, Family No. 87.

[59] See the interview with Sachatoff's daughter Eva Brandes in Avrich, *Anarchist Voices*, 274–281. On the Tolstoyan anarchist movement, see Boris Prokudin. "Leo Tolstoy's Anarchism" (Анархизм Льва Толстого). *PostNauka.ru*, March 6, 2017 (https://postnauka.ru/video/73038 accessed September 20, 2020).

himself from the anarchist movement and became a communist, thus severing all ties with the Jewish radical milieu as well as with his family.[60]

These personalities were united by several common points: all of them of Jewish descent, coming mostly from present-day Belarus, i. e. the region within the former Jewish Pale of Settlement particularly impacted by the violent grassroots anti-Jewish pogroms which took place in fin-de-siècle Russia. Most came from secular families, spoke Yiddish as a primary language, and, although poorly educated, were highly ambitious, having eventually succeeded as entrepreneurs, and some as political and syndicalist leaders. Most abode by a traditional family model, having established a nuclear family with several children—the charge of care for whom may have been a possible reason for underrepresentation of women within the local anarchist leadership.

But most importantly, all of these anarchists had come to Canada prior to the First Russian revolution of 1905. They represent therefore the earlier of the two third-wave Jewish immigration currents as defined by the historian of the American Jewish diaspora Irving Howe: that of ethnic, anti-Semitism refugees of 1881–1905. As opposed to revolutionary exiles of 1905–1917,[61] ethnic exiles appear to have been less concerned with reforming the political situation of their native land, rather aspiring to escape it in order to start a new life, involving and organizing the local community to build a "free society." Thus, as their Jewishness played a big part in defining their identity as exiles,[62] these migrants had a natural tendency to rely on their ethnicity as "a shield from the emotional rift of displacement," in the words of Nancy Green.[63] They were therefore susceptible to forming alliances with other progressive Jews already present on the American continent,

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[60] The information on Boris Sachatoff was provided by his great-grandson, Roger Treistman, residing in Poughkeepsie, New York, USA.

[61] Howe, Irving. *World of our Fathers.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976.

[62] While it can be generally perceived as having a direct link to Judaism, in the case of the American diaspora, and especially in the secular Jewish anarchist, Jewishness, or *Yiddishkeit*, refers to the shared experience of "Jewish history during the past two centuries […] marked by the prevalence of Yiddish as the language of the east European Jews and by the growth among them of a culture resting mainly on that language." *Ibid.,* 16.

[63] Green, Nancy L. *The Limits of Transnationalism.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019, 48.

notwithstanding the differences in political opinions, which explains the cooperative tendency within the Winnipeg Jewish left which we described earlier. This local network, created on the basis of common ethnic origins, culture and native tongue while conjugating the diverse social and political tendencies that had defined the newcomers' past activities, allowed the anarchists of Winnipeg to establish a relatively autonomous community—one that was able to exist without having to rely on the outside support from the anarchist milieu.

The position held by the branch of Winnipeg with regard to the general North American anarchist movement was therefore a particular one. On the one hand, the local anarchist community distinguished itself by its unity and dynamism, which were appraised in the early stages of its existence by the renowned anarchists Emma Goldman and Rudolf Rocker—the latter following the former's visit to Winnipeg with his own lecture series in April-May of 1913.[64] The Western Canadian anarchists not only were responsible for the organization of lecture tours, but also offered housing to the visiting speakers, with whom they appeared to have established friendly relations. For instance, during her visits, Goldman "stayed at the homes of Jewish anarchists—the Prasows at 452 Manitoba Avenue and one Cramer at 670 Burrows Avenue,"[65] both located in the North End. The group was also in touch with another grand American anarchism figure, Voltairine de Cleyre of Philadelphia, who was invited to lecture in Winnipeg in 1910—although, as it appears, had to cancel the planned trip due to her precipitated engagement to teach at the Chicago *Arbeter-ring* Sunday school.[66] This hospitality allows to suggest a certain level of involvement of the Winnipeg radicals in the general North American anarchist agenda, and connections which they maintained with fellow sections of the movement across Canada, as well as the United States.

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[64] Burrows, "'Apostle of Anarchy'."

[65] Trachtenberg, *"The old CLO' move" anti-Semitism, politics and the Jews of Winnipeg, 1882–1921*, 455.

[66] University of Michigan Library (UM), Special Collections Research Center (SCRC), Labadie Collection, Voltairine de Cleyre Papers, Box 1 [Correspondence], [Jacob and Anna Livshis, 1908–1910]. De Cleyre to Livshis, Philadelphia, September 22, 1910.

On the other hand, no sources, Canadian or American, that are known to us at this point, mention Winnipeg's participation in the Anarchist Red Cross humanitarian campaign, which was heavily present at this time on the American East Coast. Moreover, we do not find reference to any Canadian anarchist group being systematically involved in humanitarian work prior to the 1930s, an era that brought about more Soviet repression as well as the Spanish Civil War,—although some fundraising undertakings to support the Russian and Jewish anarchist political prisoners were organized in the cities of Canada during the lecture tours at the visitors' initiative. Generally, the Canadian Jews, and particularly those of Winnipeg, appear to have had a tendency to prioritize local communal organizing, to the point of quasi-isolating themselves from the political context of the Old World. For instance, to our knowledge, few of them have returned to Russia after the Revolution of 1917, contrary to the American trend. The geographical factor has also likely played its role, the Western Canadian group being significantly distant from Eastern and Midwestern American ones, therefore less prone to have been influenced by the humanitarian tendencies the latter developed.[67]

These observations lead us to suggest that the anarchist community of Western Canada, although constituting an integral part of the Jewish anarchist movement in North America, held a particular position within the latter's framework. It prioritized local-scale involvement over the participation in anarchist international humanitarian initiatives—a decision largely determined by the centrality of Jewishness and the local communitarian spirit in the Winnipeg anarchists' identity, due in its turn to their status of early ethnic refugees.

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[67] The U. S. West experienced a similar division, with exclusively social and educational local groups and colonies appearing in the early twentieth century in the states of Washington and California. See Luce, Caroline. "Socialism, Radicalism and the Social Labor Movement in Los Angeles: History and Historiography." *Perush*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Feb. 2010). The first eastern American anarchist humanitarian organization was founded in Los Angeles in the mid-1930s, at the initiative of the New York Yiddish Anarchist Federation.

3. The limits of local anarchism: a short-lived commitment?

Furthermore, to understand the place of the Winnipeg anarchist movement in the general context of Jewish anarchism, we must establish not only the nature, but also the limits of its activity, most clearly defined by its time frame. The historiography dealing with the Winnipeg Jewish radical initiatives fails to determine the end date of their presence in the Western Canadian community. It suggests nonetheless that the local anarchist movement, already under strict police surveillance as instructed by the municipal government, who had repeatedly condemned the admission into the country of the "Red Emma" Goldman and other "undesirables,"[68] was further compromised by the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 and its consequences—this time on a federal scale.[69] As a result of the strike, not only has the Parliament of Canada changed the Immigration Act so that even British-born immigrants could be deported, it has also broadened the Canadian Criminal Code's definition of sedition, amending it with Section 98.[70] The new section went so far as to ban "unlawful associations,"[71] which in practice signified that for mere possession of revolutionary leaflets and literature one could be sentenced to as much as twenty years in prison.[72]

From the outside perspective, although the Jewish social initiatives within the Workmen's Circle, in particular the educational ones, remained in place, this change appears to have nearly crushed the local anarchist movement. Some familiar names found themselves disappearing from

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[68] Trachtenberg, *"The old CLO' move" anti-Semitism, politics and the Jews of Winnipeg, 1882–1921*, 451–452.

[69] See McCormack, A. Ross. *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899–1999.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977.

[70] Molinaro, Dennis. "Section 98 Criminal Code." *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/section-98-criminal-code accessed March 26, 2020).

[71] Specifically, the law stated: "Any association […] whose professed purpose […] is to bring about any governmental, industrial or economic change within Canada by use of force, violence or physical injury to person or property, or by threats of such injury, or which teaches, advocates, advises or defends the use of force, violence, terrorism, or physical injury to person or property […] in order to accomplish such change, or for any other such purpose […], or which shall by any means prosecute or pursue such purpose […] or shall so teach, advocate, advise or defend, shall be an unlawful association." See Berger, Thomas R. *Fragile Freedoms: Human Rights and Dissent in Canada.* Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company, 1981, 132–133.

[72] "Attilio Bortolotti" in Avrich, *Anarchist Voices*, 175–188.

both the local press and the accounts of contemporaries; others were now revoked in a different context of public office structures (Alcin) and private enterprise (Simkin), with no reference to the anarchist background of their bearers. Rudolf Rocker, who came back to lecture in Winnipeg in 1925, was especially sensitive to this change, stating that the movement had turned into "a group of contractors, bosses, and 'alrightnikes' [sic]"[73]—an opinion supported by Emma Goldman on her own return to Winnipeg in early 1927.[74]

These accounts, while attesting that the Winnipeg anarchist movement continued its existence in spite of the persecution, are far from presenting it as "very able and active until the 1950s," as would later claim the Toronto anarchist Julius Seltzer.[75] From the early 1920s, the group appears to have entered a crisis which resulted in part from the gradual loss of enthusiasm by its aging members. The latter were often ill due to the Prairies' "very cold and penetrating climate,"[76] especially Sam Prasow who still remained the alleged leader of the movement and Goldman's principal contact in Winnipeg.[77] Between health issues and lack of connectivity to the general anarchist movement, determined by the departure, either forced or voluntary, of several key figures of Jewish anarchism from the American continent to Europe,[78] the Winnipeg radicals found themselves less and less involved in the collective cause, and less capable of contributing to it.

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[73] *Der Kamf*, Montreal, Jan. 1, 1926. Cited in Usiskin, "The Winnipeg Jewish Community."

[74] IISH, Alexander Berkman papers, General correspondence, Folder 25 [Goldman, Emma. January-May 1927], Goldman to Berkman, Winnipeg, March 15, 1927.

[75] "Julius Seltzer" in Avrich, *Anarchist Voices*, 328–330.

[76] IISH, Alexander Berkman papers, General correspondence, Folder 25 [Goldman, Emma. January-May 1927.]. Goldman to Berkman, Winnipeg, February 16, 1927.

[77] IISH, Emma Goldman papers, General correspondence, Folder 64 [Giesecke-Rogers, Dorothy 'Giessecke', and Laddon, Esther. - Toronto Libertarian Group. (Scarborough Bluffs, Ontario, Canada). 1935-1939.]. Goldman to Dorothy Giesecke, Nice, May 10, 1936.

[78] This, along with the distance separating the potential donors from the beneficiaries, anarchist political prisoners of the Soviet Union, was a general concern of Goldman's with regard to all of the Canadian anarchist movement. She even proposed to Alexander Berkman to move to Canada together in order to inspire the local activists. This plan was impossible to realize due to Berkman's poor health condition. See IISH, Alexander Berkman papers, General correspondence, Folder 25 [Goldman, Emma. January-May 1927.]. Goldman to Berkman, Winnipeg, February 22, 1927.

Another reason identified by Goldman stems from the close links of the movement's members with their Jewish identity. Being of Jewish origin herself, Goldman insisted however on the importance of conducting North American anarchist propaganda in English in order to make the ideas accessible to the local population.[79] This objective was heavily compromised by the inability of many of the immigrants to speak, read and write in English correctly, and by their general preference to use the Yiddish language in their activist work. As a result, even the younger generation of anarchists, Canadian-born and for the most part exclusively English-speaking, had trouble understanding the ideas.[80] Naturally, this language barrier presented a great difficulty to perpetuating the movement's ideology as well as its mutual aid engagement.

Finally, the tradition of cooperation with the local Jewish left has also played a role in limiting the anarchist group's range of actions. Indeed, since the success of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, the radical syndicalism in North America had been characterized by a growth of influence of the social-democratic and especially communist element. This was also the case in Winnipeg, where the communists gained popularity within the Workmen's Circle, but also in the One Big Union, a radical labor union formed in Western Canada following the General Strike of 1919 and characterized by a significant Jewish participation.[81] The communist factor imposed new limitations on the anarchists, who, in order to continue to benefit from collective forums and conference halls, as well as to keep its access to the general public interested in leftist ideas, had to restrain their invitees from publicly criticizing the Soviet regime.[82] Goldman went as far as to say

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[79] *Ibid.,* Folder 172 [Yelensky, Boris. - Free Society Group, Committee to help the Spanish workers and their cause. (Chicago, Illinois, USA). 1934, 1937.]. Goldman to Boris Yelensky, Toronto, October 31, 1934.

[80] Reflecting on her 1927 visit to Winnipeg in her letter to Alexander Berkman, Goldman lamented that the Jewish anarchists "do not even read their own literature, unless it is in Yiddish. Imagine there is not one book, or pamphlet in the house of any of the Anarchists of this city in the English language. That means that even if the children of any of our comrades should want to know something they have no source of information. Well, it is sad. [sic]" IISH, Alexander Berkman papers, General correspondence, Folder 25 [Goldman, Emma . January-May 1927.]. Goldman to Berkman, Winnipeg, March 15, 1927.

[81] *Ibid.* Goldman to Berkman, Winnipeg, February 7, 1927.

[82] *Ibid.* Folder 24 [Goldman, Emma. August 1925-1926.]. Goldman to Berkman, Toronto, December 27, 1926.

that this collaboration has effectively eroded the ideological stance of the local anarchist group, its members having allegedly become greatly influenced by the antagonistic communist ideas. For example, despite Rudolf Rocker's reputation as an authority figure in anarchism, and specifically within the Winnipeg radical movement, his 1925 lecture visit did not suffice to convince the comrades of the gravity of Soviet repression and therefore of the necessity to raise funds for its victims. They could only be persuaded by Goldman herself, a first-hand witness of the Bolshevik revolutionary dictatorship in 1920–1921.[83]

Thus, according to Goldman's accounts, following the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the General Strike of 1919, the Winnipeg anarchist movement practically ceased to develop initiatives of its own, be it on a local or an international scale. However, its direct membership as well as sympathizers of the anarchist ideas continued to be involved in fundraising projects in response to specific calls for aid, often at the initiative of the visiting activists. For example, during her 1927 visit, Emma Goldman organized a group of female university students, young members of the Workmen's Circle who she found to be "alert and active,"[84] into an *ad hoc* radical relief group for the imprisoned Soviet dissidents. In less than a month, this Woman's Aid Society for Relief of Russian Political Prisoners deployed a campaign to counteract the common misconceptions about the Soviet political prisoners by organizing dances and concerts, and was able to raise and send to the USSR a sum of 85 U. S. dollars.[85] Goldman's last lecture visit to Winnipeg in 1939 appears equally to have been a success in terms of proceeds and of the local community spirit.[86] Thus,

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[83] *Ibid.* Folder 25 [Goldman, Emma. January-May 1927]. Goldman to Berkman, Winnipeg, February 7, 1927.

[84] Goldman, Emma. *Living My Life.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1931, 842. Cited in Zeilig, Martin. "Emma Goldman in Winnipeg." *Manitoba History*, No. 25 (Spring 1993).

[85] IISH, Alexander Berkman papers, General correspondence, Folder 25 [Goldman, Emma. January-May 1927]. Goldman to Berkman, Winnipeg, February 22 and March 2, 1927. Emma Goldman papers, General correspondence, Folder 64 [Cohen, Joseph J.; Freedman, Samuel; Mratchny, Mark and Johanna Boetz. - Freie Arbeiter Stimme, Jewish Weekly. (New York, USA). 1927-1929, 1931, 1935-1939 and n. d.]. Goldman to Cohen, Edmonton, March 7, 1927.

[86] Romalis, Coleman. *Emma Goldman: The Anarchist Guest* [documentary film]. Toronto: Romalis Productions, 2000.

although the anarchists of Winnipeg do not appear to have established their own systematic humanitarian mission for the needy comrades overseas—contrary to the groups of Toronto and Montreal, both of which have participated, among other causes, in the Russian-Jewish U. S.-initiated campaign to aid the anarchist Holocaust victims during the Second World War,[87]—they have indeed continued to respond to outside appeals, as well as to engage in some collective local-scale initiatives well into the mid-century.

Conclusion

Comparing the anarchist group of Western Canada to those of neighboring regions allows to identify a number of its unique features. On the one hand, it is relative autonomy of the movement's activity agenda vis-à-vis the general North American anarchist current. On the other, its symbiotic relationship with the local Workmen's Circle, and thus, more generally, with the Jewish left of the region. These two trends, which reveal the movement's choice of allies as well as its agenda priorities, highlight the centrality of the Jewish identity in the Western Canadian Jewish anarchism. Stemming from the members' previous experiences—including their families' ethnic and religious identities; Jewish religious education; using Yiddish as a primary language; but also anti-Semitism of Tsarist Russia as the key push factor of their migration,—this idea of ethnic Jewish kinship appears to have largely determined the political choices of the local movement, largely surpassing its political and ideological affinities.

Consequently, this choice of priorities also determined the limits of the local anarchist activity, as the group progressively distanced itself from its anarchist counterparts across the continent and the world. In parallel, its rapprochement with the local Jewish left, due in part to practical factors such as common infrastructure and audience, was bringing change to the ideological stance of the anarchists. The increasing alignment of the group's objectives with those

[87] See Yelensky, *In the Struggle for Equality*; IISH, Boris Yelensky papers, Correspondence, Folder 47 [Rezanovich, H., Montreal. 1946–1947.].

of the general syndicalist current played its role in the attenuation of the anarchist dimension, effectively leading to the disbandment of the local movement towards the end of the first half-century.

The Winnipeg case of Jewish anarchism, and especially the limits of the movement's mutual aid, presents a curious, largely unexplored aspect in the social and political history of Western Canada. Its interest, however, extends well beyond the regional and even national scale. This untold history falls within a more general context of the Jewish anarchist movement in North America, its development, its undertakings, its inner political and identity dynamics as well as its relations with other ideological currents. Thus, while the general evolutionary trends of the general movement have helped us interpret the specific, local features of the Winnipeg Jewish anarchist engagement, the latter may in its turn offer an important vantage point to explore and explain the developments on a larger scale. By way of comparison to other cases of local activism, this prosopographical account will allow to identify various individual-scale factors having determined the extent of the anarchist political and humanitarian activities across North America, thus presenting an indispensable part of our ongoing research project.