

Prof. Gershon Hundert (1946-2023)

It is with disbelief and deep sadness that we share the news of the passing of Gershon Hundert on October 27th, after a short illness. Professor of History and Leonor Segal Professor of Jewish Studies, Gershon was a gifted historian; a beloved colleague, teacher, and mentor to many during his 48-year career at McGill.

A Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada since 2011, Gershon Hundert was an internationally recognized leader in the study of the Jewish past and particularly the Jewish experience in East Central Europe. Indeed, he almost single-handedly brought the study of early modern East European Jewish history out of its insular state, fully realizing the dictum that there can be no study of Polish history without Jewish history and no study of Jewish history without Polish history. To do so, Gershon had to learn Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish, Russian and Latin, acquire a deep knowledge of both Jewish and European history, and grapple with complex rabbinic and Jewish mystical texts. Along the way, he questioned the focus of historians on regions like Germany where few Jews lived compared to the much larger Jewish communities of Eastern Europe and the Ottoman Empire.

Gershon Hundert's first monograph, *Jews in a Polish Private Town: The Case of Opatow in the Eighteenth Century* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992) is a powerful microhistory. The book was ground-breaking in its methodology, source materials, and findings. Professor Hundert showed, for example, that contrary to common belief, the Jews of Opatow lived not in a ghetto, but rather interspersed among Christians, sometimes inhabiting some of the finest houses along the market square.

Jews in Poland-Lithuania: A Genealogy of Modernity (University of California Press, 2004) was in many ways the culmination of Professor Hundert's distinguished career: a broad yet detailed analysis of the totality of early modern Polish Jewish society. Again taking the Polish context seriously, Gershon traced the development of Jewish social and economic niches in Polish towns and cities. He also detailed inner Jewish life, covering every conceivable dimension of Polish-Jewish civilization during the 18th century. A milestone in Jewish historiography, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania* was translated into Polish, Lithuanian and Hebrew, and received the Oscar Halecki Polish and East Central European History Award, Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in America.

Gershon Hundert's most prominent contribution is probably his role as editor-in-chief of the monumental YIVO Encyclopedia of Jewish in Eastern Europe (Yale University Press, 2008). The two-volume, 2,400-page encyclopedia includes more than 1,800 entries. It is a testament to his leadership within a field he helped originate, that Gershon was able to assemble a team of 450 contributors from 16 countries. The encyclopedia presents an ecumenical portrait of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. Brimming with life and now available in its entirety on-line, it will be read for decades.

Gershon's latest publication—a two-volume collection (Mossad Bialik, 2023) of annotated writings of an eighteenth-century Polish Jew, Dov Ber Birkenthal, a wine merchant—is a sterling example of detailed and painstaking textual work that illuminates an entire era. The collection showcases manuscripts personally recovered by Gershon from the physical obscurity of archives in Jerusalem and Manchester. Accompanied by his insightful introduction, which draws from meticulous textual analyses in Hebrew, Polish, German, Yiddish, and Latin, the publication features over two thousand footnotes, a glossary, and an index. Dov Ber Birkenthal's writings, as edited and annotated by Hundert, serve as a dramatic and compelling illustration of the alternative genealogy of modernity provided by the history of Polish-Lithuanian Jewry so masterfully limned by Gershon throughout his work.

Gershon Hundert was a model for academics who wish to pursue scholarship of the highest order while holding significant administrative positions on campus and beyond. He served four terms as Chair of the Department of Jewish Studies and raised over 3 million dollars to support its work. Gershon was also Chair and a long-time member of the Graduate Committee of the Department of History and chaired several search committees within the Faculty of Arts. In addition to his impressive service to the McGill community, Gershon was President of the American Academy for Jewish Research (2014-2018); the Editor of *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* (1992-1999); played a pivotal role as a key historical expert in curating the eighteenth-century gallery at the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw; the President of the Polish Jewish Heritage Foundation of Canada (1987-1999); and served as an external reviewer for dozens of journal articles, book manuscripts, scholarly prizes, tenure and promotion committees, and programs of Jewish studies undergoing cyclical review.

A modest person, gracious and generous, erudite and wise, master of the perfect quip, and always genial, Gershon Hundert will be sorely missed by all who had the pleasure to know him. Our deepest sympathies go to his wife, Ruth; his brothers Ken and Mark; and to his three children, Daniel Leibush, Rachel and Rena who he lovingly called his most significant publications.