ForeWord Reviews

HISTORY

The First Jews in North America: The Extraordinary Story of the Hart Family
Denis Vaugeois
Kathe Roth, translator
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Aaron Hart, patriarch of the prominent Hart family, settled in Quebec in 1760, likely the first Jew to live there. He arrived with the British army as a merchant; nearly two centuries later, in 1938, his great great grandson, Cecil Hart, coached the Montreal Canadians hockey team to the Stanley Cup.

Those are but a sample of the interesting and intriguing facts and stories found in Denis Vaugeois's *The Extraordinary Story of the Hart Family: The First Jews in North America*. The book was first published in French in Quebec and is well translated by Kathe Roth. The Honourable Herbert Marx, former Member of the Quebec National Assembly and Justice of the Quebec Superior Court wrote the short, effective preface. Denis Vaugeois is Quebec's former minister of cultural affairs, an historian, and author of several books on North American and European history.

Under the French, only Catholics were allowed to emigrate to Quebec. After the British drove the French out in 1760, Protestants were allowed to live there and Jews were tolerated and often inter-married with non-Jews. Referring to the late 1700's, however, Vaugeios notes: "Jews were not included in the civil registers kept by Catholics and Protestants during this period." Later he says: "The tolerance that I have mentioned several times was not simply that of the church or the Jewish community, but of society as a whole. Since the beginnings of the colony, Canadiens had accepted people of mixed blood."

The Extraordinary Story of the Hart Family is also a charming dissertation on the historian's craft. Addressing the importance of the fur trade in early Canada, Vaugeois says: "Great theories and grand concepts are very fashionable, but they are rarely necessary in history. It is my belief that people make history—people with their desires, tastes, and ways of being." This approach takes Vaugeois to examine minute details of a person's life, including, for instance, the inventory of the library of a Hart descendant made after his death. What books a man read and kept often tells a lot about his interests, education, and world outlook.

Vaugeois devotes nearly two chapters to the political exploits of the Hart family in the early 1800s, especially those of Aaron Hart's son, Ezekiel. Aaron Hart had settled in Trois-Rivieres, a small town on the St. Lawrence River just north of Montreal. Aaron had warned his sons not to enter politics because they would be opposed as Jews. Ezekiel waited until after his father died in 1800 and ran for election as a Member of the Assembly representing Trois-Rivieres. Although elected, he was ejected from the Assembly for failure to make properly the oath required of all members: among other issues, Ezekiel could not swear on the Protestant Bible. In 1832 a law was passed granting Jews "all the rights and privileges of other subjects of His Majesty in this Provence." Canada thereby emancipated its Jews several decades before Parliament in London!

Throughout, the book is filled with pictures of persons and reproductions of documents important to the story. Vaugeois has also included an extensive bibliography and thorough index. This delightful volume will be of interest to the casual reader as well as the serious student of north American history.

John Senger