

In & Around Montreal

Book's protagonist is Jewish and gay in 19th-century Poland

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You know attitudes have evolved when an Orthodox rabbi writes a foreword to a novel about what it might have been like to be Jewish and gay in a 19th-century Polish shtetl, a book that has clear autobiographical elements.

Montrealer David Brody's self-published book *Mourning and Celebration* is introduced by Rabbi Daniel Sperber, president of the Institute for Advanced Torah Studies at Bar-Ilan University in Israel.

Brody is gay and observant.

"Times have changed, and even among Orthodox Jews, there is a growing understanding of the tragic situation in which a religious homosexual finds himself," Rabbi Sperber writes. "There is a greater willingness to view the phenomenon with sympathy, rather than cause the 'gay' to be an outcast, a pariah in his own community."

Rabbi Sperber says that homosexuals must be granted "full admission into the community," despite the seeming challenges Jewish law poses.

Part of the reason for this evolution is due to people like Brody going public with the anguish they felt in their own community, he continues.

Brody, a translator by profession who has lived in Montreal since 1968, dedicates the book "to the thousands of voiceless souls whose anguish could rise only to heaven." Through the main character Yankl, he is attempting to speak for the many gay Jews of the past who dared not reveal themselves.

He explains that his objective in writing this work of fiction was to gain recognition that, though times have advanced, the place of homosexuals within Orthodox Jewry has not been resolved.

Brody and Rabbi Sperber, now in their late 60s, went to school together in London, England. The latter said he had no idea that Brody was gay at the time because he apparently concealed it so well.

Mourning and Celebration also contains testimonials from other rabbis, including Rabbi Adam Scheier of Congregation Shaar Hashomayim, where Brody has been a member for many years and feels is fully accepted, even though the synagogue is traditional.

Rabbi Scheier comments that *Mourning and Celebration* is a story of "a conflicted world that most neglect to imagine even existed," adding that it is, "tragically, timeless." He says he considers Brody "my teacher in the implications of what transpires when deep emotional longing meets

moral blindness."

"The Shaar is extremely open-minded," said Brody, a founder of one of the pioneering Jewish gay groups in Montreal, Yakh-dav.

The Shaar granted his request to dedicate a breakfast in memory of his late partner, who was not Jewish. That was 15 years ago.

The Shaar was also one of the first traditional congregations anywhere to screen the groundbreaking 2001 documentary *Trembling Before G-d*, a frank examination of what it means to be Orthodox and homosexual. Brody participated in the discussion that took place afterward.

In *Mourning and Celebration*, Brody imagines what a hell it would have been if he had been born 100 years earlier, in the time of his grandfather, in a Jewish village in eastern Europe. His grandparents were indeed from Rypin, Poland.

Much of the book takes the form of conversations between the present-day narrator and Yankl, the shtetl dweller who must contend with living in a community where homosexuality is forbidden and regarded as wicked.

Yankl is not only gay; he is an only son, in whom much is invested by his parents. He is a brilliant scholar and a talented violinist.

From an isolated adolescence, the story follows his search for validation and human rights in a time and place when such concepts were not commonplace.

The story, however, is not a condemnation of Orthodox Judaism; on the contrary, the rabbis are humane and grapple with Yankl's "problem" in a way that causes the least hurt to everyone.

"The second objective of the book was

to demystify Judaism," said Brody. "I've tried to explain Shabbat and the festivals and the different rituals." The book contains a glossary of Hebrew and Yiddish terms.

Despite having lived a century apart, there are similarities between Yankl's struggle and that of the narrator, whose early life is likewise marked by concealment and shame. In real life, Brody was the eldest son in an Orthodox family; his father had been a shochet and cantor. His parents also had high expectations of him, not the least of which was to marry and live a "normal" life.

Homosexuality was, after all, decriminalized in Britain only in 1967.

Indeed, Brody many years wanted to "change" to spare his family and went to a series of psychiatrists, before accepting himself as he was. His father did, too, in time, although his mother, he believes, never really did.

Brody, a gay rights activist in Quebec, successfully sued the province for the right of homosexuals in committed relationships to the survivor's pension. It was an eight-year court battle that ended in 2002. Brody, whose partner of 23 years died, believed gays had just as much right to the benefit as any common-law couple.

Brody considers himself "lucky to have lived to see the complete evolution of gay emancipation and I feel very lucky to be living in Canada. I never dreamed I would see legalized [same-sex] marriage.

"But I think the final victory for gay rights will come when we don't talk about it anymore like we don't talk about the women's vote," Brody said.

For more information about the book, visit www.mourningandcelebration.com.



David Brody