

XII Sephardi Jews in Montreal

Montreal, a metropolis of some three million inhabitants, is home to a large and diverse Jewish community. More than a quarter of that community is Sephardic. Who would have thought that the descendents of Jews forced to leave Spain by the Inquisition would make their homes in Montreal, giving birth to a multiethnic Sephardic community whose existence in the twenty-first century is a sign of its durability and adaptability. Where did these Sephardim come from? How did they arrive in Montreal? How can they be identified today? These are the principal questions that must be asked concerning these migrants as we retrace the highlights of their journey from the four corners of the earth.

A TWO-THOUSAND-YEAR HISTORY

Sephardic communities look back on a tumultuous history marked by numerous migrations as well as long periods of settlement. The name “*Sepharad*,” from the Hebrew, has been used by Jews since the fifth century CE to designate Spain. By extension, it came to refer to Spain’s Jewish inhabitants. With the expulsions of the Jews of Spain and Portugal by their Christian monarchs in 1492 and 1497, the Jews of the Iberian Peninsula emigrated in large part to North Africa, where they created a community distinct in its origins and customs. The Sephardic exiles were called *Megorashim* (“the Exiles”) to distinguish them from the native North African Jews, who were called *Toshavim* (“the Natives”). Those Jews, however, who decided to remain in the now-Christian Iberian Peninsula were forced to deny their Jewish faith and convert to Christianity. These conversos, some of whom continued the secret practice of Judaism, were considered by many to be crypto-Jews, and were sometimes called Marranos. The expulsion from Spain, on the one hand, and the phenomenon of Marranism, on the other, became basic building blocks of Sephardic identity. In early modern times, one could find Sephardic Jews settled in places like North Africa, Holland, England, Turkey, and the Balkans.

THE FIRST "SEPHARDIC" MIGRATION TO MONTREAL

It is from this early modern Sephardic diaspora that a handful of British Jews of Spanish and Portuguese origins came to Montreal and, in 1768, founded Shearith Israel, the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation, one of the oldest synagogues in North America and the first in Canada. This Orthodox Sephardic synagogue has maintained its existence until the present day.

The arrival in Montreal of massive numbers of Ashkenazi Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century permanently changed the composition and structure of Montreal's Jewish community. In that era, the community acquired a number of essential welfare institutions, like the Jewish Immigrant Aid Society (JIAS), which helped in the absorption of immigrants, and a network of synagogues and schools for the maintenance of religious practice.

Because of this Eastern European Jewish influx, the Sephardi community in Montreal diminished in relative importance, if not in prestige. Additionally, beyond the original Sephardi families, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue attracted a number of Ashkenazi members. Thus the Sephardi tradition in Montreal experienced a certain diminution, without, however, disappearing completely.

SEPHARDI MIGRATION AFTER WORLD WAR II

With the end of the Second World War, the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, and the decolonization of North Africa, the history of the Jews of the *Maghreb* came to a turning point. The situation in North African countries became more and more problematic for Jews, while the question of aid for the Jewish community in the Arab countries (*Maghreb*),¹ already an issue in the nineteenth century, became an urgent reality.

There is a large body of recent scholarship on the nature of and the principal factors for the massive exodus of Jews from the Arab countries in the mid-twentieth century. What was the nature of discrimination against and the persecution of Jews in this time and place? What was the role of the State of Israel? What was the role played by international

1 *Maghreb* referring to northwest Africa, west of Egypt, and *Mashrek*, referring to Arabian countries to the east of Egypt and north of the Arabian peninsula, i.e. Iraq, Palestine, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Syria.

Jewish organizations in this migration? Certain leaders of world Jewry helped to organize the Jews' departure, while others put into motion policies seeking to ameliorate the Jews' situations in their homelands by financing Jewish institutions in North Africa, for instance. Other complex questions arise concerning the immediate reception of the Jewish emigrants in Israel, France, and Canada.

Some of these Sephardi migrants understood their journey as repatriation. This was true for Jews from Algeria, as well as for those Tunisian and Moroccan Jews who possessed French citizenship. At times, Jewish emigration was seen as the political exclusion of Jews on the part of newly independent Arab states, and at other times it was viewed as an outright expulsion, particularly in the cases of Egypt and Iraq. Sometimes the departure could be seen as a voluntary choice; at other times it was understood as an exile. These conflicting interpretations, to which various political and administrative problems are linked, are as complex as they are intertwined. It remains difficult to comprehend the hierarchy of individual and collective decisions that drove individuals and families to depart their native countries with no great hope of return.

In the case of Israel, and also Canada, the Jews of North Africa and of the *Mashrek* were considered by some governments and international Jewish organizations as contributing to the population of their countries. For those among the emigrants who possessed French citizenship, destinations were largely determined by the legal obligations of France to its citizens in Algeria after its independence. Others wished to make the best of the situation, and sought greater security, or followed economic and, indeed, religious imperatives.

It is from Morocco, which became independent in 1956, that approximately 15,000 Jews came to Montreal. About 80% of Moroccan Jewish emigrants went to Israel in several waves that ended in the 1970s. Several thousand Moroccan Jews left their country for France and Canada during the last major wave, which lasted from the end of the 1960s through the 1970s. However, this schema does not exclude the indirect routes by which some Moroccan natives, having tried life in Israel or France, later came to Canada.

The arrival of Sephardi Jews in Montreal enables us to study their means of adaptation and incorporation as well as the transformation of the community in their new host country. This study of the integration of this group in Montreal may be considered a model of this genre,

not only for diaspora studies, but also for studies devoted to migration. These Jews both integrated into an older, established Jewish community and transformed it.

A MULTI-ETHNIC JEWISH COMMUNITY:
INSTITUTIONS AND POLICIES OF ABSORPTION

The arrival in Montreal of Holocaust refugees marked a turning point in the life of the Montreal Jewish community and helped it emerge in the postwar period as a major international Jewish center. The arrival of Jews forced out of Iraq after Israel's independence in 1948, as well as that of the Moroccan Jews, also made its mark on the dynamic of the Montreal Jewish community. Beyond the issues intrinsic to the departure of the Jews from their homeland, we need to add factors stemming from the nature of the Montreal Jewish community as well as from Canadian immigration policy.

The Jewish community in Canada had acquired a considerable role as an intervener with the Canadian federal government on questions of Jewish immigration since the 1920s. The Jewish Immigrant Aid Society, mentioned above, had developed a number of services for newly arrived Jews. In the postwar period, the Jewish community was concerned about its future: its leaders had commissioned internal reports that forecasted the rapid aging of the Jewish population. Thus, they naturally sought to increase the pool of Jewish immigrants coming to Canada. When Canada liberalized its immigration policy, the Jewish community was ready with an efficient network of institutions to welcome new arrivals. For its part, the Quebec government understood the importance of controlling the selection of immigrants and of providing itself with the authority to accomplish this goal. The Quebec Ministry of Immigration was thus created in 1968. Knowledge of French at this time became a much more important factor in the point system for immigrants seeking visas to immigrate to Quebec.²

This combination of factors was favorable for the immigration of French-speaking Jews from the *Maghreb*. Many of them arrived with

2 It was in 1967 that Canada adopted a point system for selection of immigrants based on objective criteria such as education and family reunification, as opposed to the previous criteria, which included ethnic origin, color, and religion, and were overtly discriminatory.

the aid of JIAS and were given further help by the Jewish Vocational Services (JVS). It was thus a Montreal Jewish community that was exceedingly well organized into which these Jews arriving from Muslim Arab countries sought to integrate. The Jewish community of Montreal up to that point had been mostly English-speaking, and it sought to find the means to integrate these French-speaking newcomers, even if it was not necessarily prepared to make room for their religious rituals and cultural traditions. For their part, the new immigrants did not really think of themselves as a homogenous group. They continued to see themselves in the identities they had constructed over the course of centuries in their respective homelands, and they thus set to work to create schools and synagogues, as well as cultural and recreational centers that would attract other people who were also from their countries.

The special role that was played by the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation in the absorption of these immigrants needs to be emphasized. It was in the context of that synagogue that the first encounters took place between Montreal's "old" and "new" Sephardim. The congregation's longstanding identification with the Sephardi tradition attracted newcomers who celebrated their marriages there in the early years and encountered other Jews, including Sephardim of different origins as well as Ashkenazim. In the 1960s, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, which had been preponderantly English-speaking and Ashkenazi, became an important meeting place for Moroccan Jews. It was also in the framework of this synagogue that the new immigrants worked out a means of identifying with Sephardi Judaism in Montreal that gave them the advantage of integrating into an existing, recognized, and respected community, while at the same time asserting a common identity that did not specifically bind them to their country of origin. Thus the Iraqi and Egyptian Jewish immigrants who found themselves members of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue coexisted in a noisy multi-ethnic crucible. Each group wished to impose its special liturgy, traditions, and melodies on the congregation. After the arrival of a large number of Moroccan Jewish immigrants, a reinvented Sephardi identity began combining a number of new and old religious and cultural practices, causing Sephardi identity to undergo unexpected development in Montreal. The Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in those years played a crucial role, despite the fact that after 1970 the Moroccan Jews were numerous enough to celebrate their marriages at another community

institution, the Shomrim Laboker Congregation, as well. The recruitment of Salomon Amzallag, also called Samy El Maghribi, who had been a well-known musician and singer in Morocco, to be hazzan at the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue from 1968 to 1984 also attracted Moroccan Jews to this synagogue. Later on, in the 1980s, with the establishment of other Sephardi congregations, the importance of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue diminished.

The development of a hybrid Sephardi identity occurred in both Israel and the diaspora. However, Montreal witnessed this hybridization of different versions of Sephardism within a specifically Canadian context—that of Canadian multiculturalism. Jews of the *Maghreb* and *Mashrek* who participated in the great postcolonial migrations of the latter half of the twentieth century thus contributed to the diversity of Montreal Jewish identity by creating their own version of an identity and a culture that had already been present in Montreal. To Montreal Jewish identity and culture they added the dimension of an oriental Judaism that flourished on the banks of the St. Lawrence in the midst of a greater Jewish community.

In analyzing the institutional structure of this group of Jews from Arab countries, we can discern how Sephardi identity is constructed in the context of a larger Jewish community.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE SEPHARDI COMMUNITY: FROM THE GROUPE- MENT JUIF NORD-AFRICAÏN TO THE COMMUNAUTÉ SÉPHARADE UNIFIÉE DU QUÉBEC (CSUQ)

Of the new Jewish immigrants who settled in Quebec after 1960, Jews from Morocco constituted the largest “national” group. They numbered 7,995 persons who arrived from 1960-1991 (according to the 1991 census). That is nearly double the number of Jewish immigrants to Canada from Poland (4,250), and much more than the number of Jews originating in all other countries (including France and Israel). It is thus not astonishing that it was this community that had the largest impact on the construction of a Sephadic identity in Montreal. The arrival of a great number of Moroccan Jews, the bulk of whom arrived in a span of less than twenty years, changed the balance of the different ethnic or national communities that make up the Jewish community of Montreal, whose population now is nearly 90,000.

While JIAS, the agency that aided the immigration of North African Jews to Montreal, had the responsibility of getting them established at the beginning, it quickly clashed with the new immigrants' desire to establish separate institutions. Thus in 1959 the Association juive nord-africaine, which soon changed its name to Groupement juif nord-africain, declared its intention to respond to the cultural and religious needs of its own constituency. After the demise of that institution, the Fédération Sépharade des juifs de langue française was founded in 1965 and became, in 1966, the Association Sépharade Francophone.

It is significant to note that the term "North African" was dropped, and its place was taken by the ancient and mythic Sephardi identity that allowed these immigrants to assert their identity in the face of the English-speaking Jewish community. We can clearly see the two principles upon which the differentiation was constructed: the Sephardi heritage (old) and loyalty to the French language (new). After the arrival of large numbers of Moroccan Jews in the 1970s, the need to create their own Sephardi synagogues and community centers was felt in all the different neighborhoods in which they lived.³ North African Jews also negotiated with the Young Mens' Hebrew Association (YMHA) to create a French-speaking group for young people and a French-speaking adult group, later adding one for young adults. In 1971, this became the Centre communautaire Juif (CCJ). More than simply a leisure center, the CCJ offers sociocultural and recreation activities specifically directed toward Sephardim, with departments for children, adolescents, young adults, and golden age adults, focusing on leisure, culture, and religion. It also houses a synagogue and a nursery school, which are frequented by many Sephardim.

The Communauté Sépharade du Québec (CSQ), created in 1976, immediately demonstrated its divergence from the institutions of the Ashkenazi Jewish community, while independent institutions, mainly synagogues, continued to function outside its auspices. The main objectives of the CSQ are to preserve and promote Sephardi culture and to

3 Congregation Or Hahayim of Cote St. Luc was founded in 1972, and its synagogue dedicated in 1981. A Sephardic community was founded in Laval in 1972, and its synagogue, Or Sepharade, was dedicated in 1980. In Ville St-Laurent, Petah Tikva was created in 1973 and its building dedicated in 1983. Another Sephardic congregation, Hekhal Shalom, was founded in Ville St-Laurent in 1981. The Sephardic Association of the West Island was created in 1975 and has recently acquired a community center which also serves as a synagogue.

contribute to a better integration of the immigrants in their host country. Just like similar institutions in Morocco, it has divisions that deal with religious matters (such as registers of marital status, associations for visiting the sick, and the Hevra Kadisha [burial society]), social assistance (such as providing information on social services and linking clients to agencies that can respond to their issues), and the dissemination of information through a journal (*La voix Sépharade*). It also offers direct services to its members in the critical areas of education and welfare. The CSQ merged with the CCJ in 2001 to create the Communauté Séfarade unifiée du Québec (CSUQ).

In the area of education, the creation of École Maïmonide in 1969 was an important event in the growth of the community. This school offers primary and secondary education supervised by the Quebec Ministry of Education, as well as a program of Judaic studies geared toward preserving and reinforcing the Jewish Moroccan heritage. It has enjoyed unprecedented success. Its three campuses serve the three principal neighborhoods in which Sephardim live. One of the buildings in its campus in St-Laurent has been named in honor of Mohammed V, king of Morocco. Another Sephardi school, created in 1976 and affiliated with the Alliance Isralite Universelle (AIU), testifies to the relationship with the French Jewish educational institution, in which many of the Montreal school's teachers were trained.

Lastly, the Centre Hillel was created in 1972. It is a French-speaking branch of Montreal's B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation and serves French-speaking students at the postsecondary level (college and university). Students at the University of Montreal who are affiliated with Centre Hillel publish a journal, *Bleu-Blanc*, that has had a long run. There are over a dozen groups of lesser size that also cater to Sephardim. The multiplicity of these cultural and religious groups reflects the profound nature of the roots this community has put down, as well as the eagerness of their members, who think that communal organization is indispensable to maintaining their identity.

In the areas of art and culture, most Moroccan Jewish groups sponsor lectures with local or out-of-town speakers, especially during the Festival Sépharade or Jewish Book Month. During these events, Quebec society has a chance to become more aware of the contributions of the Jewish Moroccan community.

A small group of committed young people participated in the creation

of these institutions. As is the case in other communities in Quebec, the leaders of community organizations are mostly men between the ages of 45 and 60 whose occupation is either business or education. These leaders also took the initiative in 1990 to create the Congrès Sépharade du Canada, in order to develop links with Sephardi communities in the rest of Canada and to have representation of the CSQ locally and internationally, particularly with respect to Israel. The CSQ is also affiliated with the Rassemblement du Judaïsme Marocain.

This strong institutionalization, achieved by a group of motivated leaders, needs to be understood in the context of a Quebec and Canadian immigration policy that supports the recognition and maintenance of the original cultures of immigrants. These institutions have also permitted Moroccan Jews, despite the secular identity of many, to continue the practice of a traditional Judaism and to support a rich liturgical heritage. The Sephardi community structure, which supports its members from cradle to grave and offers an extremely varied range of services with its synagogues, schools, welfare organizations, and cemeteries, structures its identity and mediates the community's relations with other Canadians and Québécois.

In the 1970s and 1980s, it was possible to speak of Sephardi-Ashkenazi tension within the Montreal Jewish community and to explain the high rate of intermarriages between Sephardim and Catholic Quebec women as a result of Ashkenazi hostility to Sephardim, who were considered by them to be lower class and possessing neither culture nor education. Now, however, Montreal Jews feel that their community has been created anew with multiple components.

Indeed, the Sephardi community is an integral part of this new image of Montreal Jewry in the context of the Montreal "Jewish campus" where all the major institutions of the Jewish community have been concentrated since the 1990s, including the CCJ, Gelber Centre, Segal Centre, etc. The Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, which was completely renovated in recent years, has also reestablished its pride of place as the oldest synagogue in Montreal and one of the oldest in North America.

This process of settlement, which has occupied three generations of immigrants in Montreal since the end of the 1960s, has had many phases. It must be understood as an exemplary case of the capacity of immigrants to reduce barriers, whether real or perceived, between

themselves and their host societies in a postcolonial context. From images of the Jewish pariah, rebel or newly established, described so well by Hannah Arendt, we pass imperceptibly to images of Jews as figures of nostalgia (blending in an ahistorical setting). Sephardi Judaism, disoriented by the exile of most of its indigenous communities, ill-treated and disrespected in Israel, discovered in its Canadian diaspora an institutional completeness that it had lost with its migrations. These Montreal Sephardi struggles have resulted in a very strong effort to maintain community traditions, especially those having to do with religion and food. Unless these traditions are ultimately reduced to folklore (a fate which threatens all minority cultures) they can become means for the genuine affirmation of an identity that is both hybrid and open.

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SEPHARDI COMMUNITY

Today, the Montreal Sephardi community is more than 20,000 strong. It is a religious and ethnic group that is well integrated into the cosmopolitan city of Montreal both economically and socially.⁴

First of all, just over 40% of this population has at this point been born in Canada, while 34% was born in Morocco and the rest in France (5.6%), Israel (5.5%), Egypt (3%), Iraq (2.2%), Western Europe (2%), Eastern Europe (1.6%), and elsewhere (such as Lebanon, Turkey, United States, South America). This proportion of immigrants (59.6%) is high in comparison with the more established Ashkenazi population. The recent immigration of this population (of which one third originated in Morocco, and most of which has been in Canada for less than thirty years) explains this high proportion of immigrants. It is rather the 40% born in Canada who consider themselves to be Sephardi that might seem to be high. The number of Catholic women who converted to Judaism prior to their marriages partly explains the relatively high proportion of Sephardi Jews born in Canada.

The geographic location of the Sephardim in Montreal is similar to the residential patterns of the Jewish community in Montreal as a whole. Thus a strong majority of them moved into traditionally Jewish

4 Sephardim are not merely to be found in Montreal. The 2001 census found 8070 Sephardim in Toronto (making up 24.7% of the Canadian Sephardic population), and 870 in Vancouver (2.7%).

neighborhoods in the West of Montreal: Cote St. Luc (4,285), St-Laurent (3,770), Snowdon (2,295), Cote des Neiges (1,715) and the West Island (2,185). Only 1,785 of them live elsewhere (Verdun, Lasalle, Lachine, etc.). Ville St-Laurent has the highest proportion of Sephardim to the total Jewish population (45.8%).

In their matrimonial life, the majority of Sephardim live as couples (77.4%), even though only 45.5% of them are married (the rate of marriage for Montreal as a whole is 33.2%). Thus, the great majority of children (89%) live in a two-parent family. It is a young population that is 80% French-speaking, though 26.5% also speak English at home. Other traditional languages, like Judeo-Arabic, Hebrew, and Spanish, have seen a considerable decline. The educational level of the Sephardim is comparable to that of the Ashkenazi group. Forty-three percent of Sephardim have finished secondary school; 21.4% have a college diploma or professional certificate; 22.6% have a Bachelor's degree; 11.2% have a Master's degree; and 2.8% have a doctorate or medical degree. Thus, more than one third of them (35.7%) possess a university degree. This is comparable to the Jewish community as a whole, but higher than the population of Montreal as a whole (21.5%). This indicates that the Sephardim have made an important investment in education as a mode of integration into the Quebec and North American environment. The great majority of its members are mostly young people and adults of working age (26% are 25-44 and 27% from 45-64), rather than the aged (15.5%). These results from the 2001 census confirm the results of the first studies devoted to these new immigrants since the 1970s, which spoke of their successful economic integration.

The majority of Sephardim are professionals (16.2%), upper and intermediate level managers (14.1%), sales and service personnel (12.6%), secretarial and office employees (9%), and technical and para-professionals (7.8%). Their contributions to the economic life of the metropolis are made primarily in the textile, clothing, shoe, and hairdressing industries. There is also a significant number of them in the liberal professions and on the staff of para-public institutions in health, social services, and education on the primary, secondary, college, and university levels. Their salary structure reflects their median status (defined as between \$10,000 and \$24,000), with a median income of \$23,268, which is somewhat larger than the Montreal average and a bit lower than that of Ashkenazi Jews. More precisely, one quarter of Sephardim

earn less than \$10,000 a year, approximately 30% earn between \$10,000 and \$25,000, and the rest are about equally divided at 17% for both the \$40,000-\$70,000, and the \$70,000-\$100,000 groups. Only 5.2% earn more than \$100,000. While 82% of this population lives above the poverty line, with an overrepresentation of business and professional workers (30.3%), 17.8%, mostly seniors, lives below the poverty line.

The Sephardi population is slowly increasing and is generally well integrated economically. It has demonstrated a remarkable adaptability to the social and cultural context of Quebec. It has succeeded in establishing a certain societal visibility and has made its presence and unique identity known in various ways, thus changing the image of the Montreal Jewish community.

CONCLUSION: SEPHARDI JEWS IN QUEBEC

Culturally, Moroccan Jews in Montreal are in a special position with respect to their integration into Montreal's society. Because of their Jewishness, they share many things with the Ashkenazim. However, the Ashkenazi community, due to the number of its members, its predominant use of English, its economic power, and its well-developed network of communal institutions, desired to integrate these new immigrants as speedily as possible, without consideration of their identity and their knowledge of French. Furthermore, the processes by which this renewed Sephardi identity was established are equally important to establish. It is important to take careful note of the periodization of this process, because it coincides with the development of demands for the affirmation of French in Quebec.

Moreover, the arrival of these French-speaking Jews in Quebec allowed certain Quebec scholars to advance the possibility of a convergence between the Jewish minority and that of French Quebec, thus engendering the interculturalism advocated by Gérard Bouchard. There are some weaknesses in this analysis: the French-Canadians are not a minority but a majority in Quebec, and the antisemitism that exists in Quebec, as it does in Canada as a whole, does not allow the convergence that Bouchard hoped for with the Jewish community. On the contrary, Ignaki Olazabal's study presents the paradoxical situation of a Jewish community that is strong and alive, but relatively withdrawn within itself as a result of a misencounter with the majority society (using the

terminology of Zygmunt Bauman). Will Montreal's several solitudes ultimately overwhelm this small group of French-speaking Jews?

The social and economic integration of the Sephardim of Quebec has indeed been accomplished seemingly without great clashes, helped by the existence of strong communal structures, which also permitted the emergence of a social stratum that is well-to-do and can be found in some beautiful upscale neighborhoods. In many respects, we may also say that the Sephardim have created their own identity, which involves adherence to Jewishness, French, and the heritage of Sepharad. The most important of these factors remains religion, which is supported by synagogues, families, and community schools. Language plays an equally determining role in the community's interaction with Quebec society, even though its use of English as well as French demonstrates its willingness to integrate into a greater North American environment beyond that of Quebec.

This is a portrait of the Jewish Moroccan presence in Quebec today. There has been a good socio-economic integration of the community, along with retention and maintenance of the community's religious character as a marker of its identity. Nonetheless, we must add that the notion of "Sephardisme" has a complex and somewhat paradoxical character. Thus members of this group sometimes identify with Morocco, sometimes with Israel, sometimes with France. Their complex ties and history, which have been radically cut off given the conditions of their departure and their arrival, appear vaguely under the smooth surface of the statistics. Other elements contributing to the interpretation of their recent history might possibly reside in the unstated (stifled) and practically unthought (traumatic) accounts of their migrations.

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