

## 15 Forgetting and Forging: My Canadian Experience as a Moroccan Jew

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Like most teenagers, I dreamed of getting free from all the hurdles and family obligations. It was in the 1960s and I was then living in Meknes, Morocco, a city where I felt I had no place. Immersed at school and with my friends in the mainly English music and film subculture, I longed to live elsewhere, maybe in America. My American fantasy seemed unreal: too far, too complicated. But I still had a strong desire to escape a tight and stifling atmosphere. I did not entirely belong to the Jewish community because I was not part of the *Mellah*, as I was living in the French *ville-nouvelle* and went to French schools; and I could not take part in the French colonial culture, since I was an *Israélite marocaine*, even though I spoke French *sans accent*. Nor, as a Jew, did I belong to the Muslim Moroccan majority. Like many other Moroccans, I spoke enough *darija* Arabic but not classical Arabic, even though I took four years of Arabic classes in the French lycée I attended. Truly, I spoke only Judeo-arabic, the language of my grandmother. And even though I had friends in each sector of this outpost of the French colonial empire, where the Alaouite had once constructed theirs, I felt estranged from all of them. Growing up in Meknes as a Jewish girl, I was caught in the maelstrom of the last decade of the French colony and the explosion of Moroccan independence. So, when I finished high school, after a year of accrued tensions with my family and at the high school, I decided to go to France to study at the university. I am still amazed that I was able to “convince” my parents of such a project.

How could an eighteen-year-old girl leave her family and hometown in the 1960s? I figured that I could finally be free from my family and from the community tensions that were overwhelming our daily lives. Those tensions became volatile with the Arab-Israeli wars and the exile of most of our Jewish neighbours and friends in the 1960s and 1970s. For the minority of Jews who stayed in Morocco then, the relation to

Israel was complex: a dream for the promised land as well as a land overtaken by wars. We received little news from my father's family – his four brothers and three sisters and their many young children – who moved to Israel in September 1948. But my newlywed parents, who had already moved to Marseille to join them, knew that the war was raging and were reluctant to follow them. Instead, they came back to Meknes and raised their four children there. Still, we could not talk in public about Israel, since the Israeli-Palestinian wars had direct consequences on us living in Arab-Muslim lands. My own memories of Israel were contradictory: both present and absent. It was constantly there but had to be silenced. This feeling, it turned out, would be enduring, even in my life in Canada.

As soon as I could travel alone, at eighteen I made my first visit to Paris and then to Israel. Even though I was not engaged in Zionist activities, I was drawn by the kibbutz life and all the socialist rhetoric I heard about it. I wanted to check with many of my friends in high school who had been ardent Zionists and had made *Alyah* in 1967. I stayed at a kibbutz in the Galilee, and even enrolled as a student at the Hebrew university in political science. But very quickly, after a few months of *Oulpan*, I had to leave. I was unable to make Israel my own country and went back to Paris to study. This does not mean I didn't have the strongest ties to Israel. How could it be differently when half of my family lived there? Yet, I felt that it was not for me.

A baby boomer, educated from grade one in the French schools, I thought of myself as mainly French. I did not really share my friends' idealism, since, unlike them, I was not a Zionist. I thought I belonged in Paris. In fact I did not think I had any other choice, even though other friends went on to study in Casablanca or Rabat, which had public and tuition-free universities, or in Israel, if they were Zionists; but most of my peers at the French lycée went to France. For the brightest students of either nationality and for all the French, France's universities seemed to be the only "choice." For some Jewish girls who had family in France, it was also one of the best options. Eager to give me a good education but unable to stop me, my parents accepted my decision to leave. I promised to stay with family in Paris, but quickly I found another place to live my student life.

In Paris it did not take long to discover that I was not French, but a Jewish girl of Moroccan nationality. Alongside all the other migrants seeking to get their official papers, I spent many hours at the Préfecture de Police in Paris, year after year, to renew my papers. Nothing was more concrete than this bureaucratic experience to understand the colonial logic: it was a litmus test of its contradictions. How could it be

that I had to ask for a visa to stay in Paris, when I was raised with the idea that France was my only *patrie*? Feeling rather than knowing the effects of the colonization on the colonized, I thought this was utterly unfair. I thought maybe I should tell them that I was *almost* French, and clear up the situation by seeking French naturalization. Twice I went through the naturalization process, filed naturalization forms, thinking that this would correct what I thought was just a mistake, a misunderstanding, a “malentendu,” as Camus put it. After all, the French in Morocco taught me how to speak and behave like a French girl; they certainly succeeded, and I felt like one of them! I kept wondering why my applications were rejected. Not long ago, years after the fact but with the emotions linked to this blunt rejection still vivid, I went to the archives to check the “reasons” given by the French officials for rejecting my naturalization applications. They turned out to be pretty obvious: I was a student, my parents were still living in Morocco and not in France, and I had no regular income. Like most Moroccans, I did not have special access to French citizenship. This fuelled my anger even more: against the French government, against the French colonial power, against the capitalist order.

### May '68 in Paris

I had joined the student movement that was booming in 1968. By then, the events of May-June 1968 were still unfolding in the universities. I joined a leftist group, which changed my life altogether. I finally found a place where I could belong: a cosmopolitan and internationalist movement was the ideal way to convey my anger and transform it into political activism. It also provided the ideal space where I could forget who I was and forge a new identity as an active citizen of the world. As a history student, I started thinking that I might one day want to teach and use my skills to make a living and become a professional historian. If studying in Paris presented me with some administrative problems, it was nothing compared to finding a job in the profession I wanted.

Not being a French citizen, I could not prepare the *concours d'agrégation*, the key that opened the doors of teaching in the high school or university system in France. I sought the advice of my thesis supervisor, who was a communist and later became the head of the Ligue des droits de l'Homme. All she said was that a Moroccan Jewish girl like me could not pretend she could get a job as a teacher because such positions were reserved for nationals; even her own son could not get one! (And he was much better credentialed than I was!) My hard-won degrees could not translate into a career. It took me some time to realize

the implications of this situation, and I almost dropped out from the university as I was finishing my dissertation, working all the while at minimum wage on the side. It was clear that I was not going to find a job in Paris, other than the odd ones that a cousin could provide in his business. And even though I was very active in the Trotskyist and feminist movements there, which really were filling my life, I could not envision staying there once I got my citizenship rejected.

At that point, my parents and siblings had finally decided, after much thought, to move from Meknes to Montreal. It was 1974. It crushed me to see that they were finally quitting our hometown, where almost none of our family and friends remained. But their decision was made. They would join my mother's family, already established in Montreal. I visited them the following summer, and – surprisingly – very much liked Montreal and the Laurentians, where my cousins and their friends had a chalet.

### **Moving to Montreal**

Even though Quebec was not at all in my plans, the fact that my parents had moved there, and that I did not see any interesting future for me in Paris, led me to make the move a couple of years after them. It was pretty easy to get the visa as an immigrant in Canada compared with the hurdles I went through in France. As it happens, I got my doctorate degree, found a job at UQAM, and have been teaching contemporary French history ever since. I remained attached to my friends in Paris and keep going back often. I go back to Morocco, too, as well as Israel, where I have a large family and a strong emotional attachment. Even though I still bear the stigma of an immigrant, traumatized by my family's quick departure from Morocco and by the hardship of multiple migrations, Montreal became the place where I found myself: I got married, raised two beautiful children, and pursued the career I dreamed of.

For me, there is no better place to be than Montreal! I became a Québécois and a Canadian, with a Moroccan Jewish origin. In a way, the possibility of keeping a multiplicity of belongings is perhaps the greatest factor that makes Canada a hospitable place for immigrants.

How does this personal narrative fit within the wider story of Moroccan Jewish post-colonial migration? While there are as many narratives as there are immigrants, my personal trajectory fits well within the evidence-based history of Moroccan Jewish migration in Quebec and, more broadly, in Canada. Overall, this group has fared quite well economically, and has been successful in settling in Canada, compared

with other groups who arrived at the same time, such as the Haitians or the Chileans. Two main factors account for this success. On the one hand, the new immigrants were quite young and educated. On the other, their integration was facilitated by a vast mobilization of Montreal's Jewish institutions and their professional social workers.

The essential role played by JIAS, the Canadian Jewish Congress, and the main Canadian and American organizations in lobbying the governments (both in Canada and in Morocco), selecting and helping them migrate from Morocco and settle in Canada, cannot be underestimated. Their actions not only were crucial to help open the Canadian borders to non-Europeans, but they also helped find jobs and housing for new migrants and afforded them opportunities to socialize, initially inside the mainly Ashkenazi community, first in Montreal and then in Toronto. Maybe the feeling of being too much indebted to the established community led some of them to worry about how they could give it back. A fierce people with strong community traditions, Moroccan Jews resented the humiliating position they were in. Many of them who told our research team<sup>1</sup> their story of migration had "forgotten" the help given to them by JIAS: they did not remember the migration process as being a hard one, nor did they recall being helped to arrive in Montreal. Forgetting the hardship of immigration is one sure way to hide or deny the trauma of leaving one's country. The problem is that it becomes complicated to relate to your own story and to make sense of it. In my view, this is what happened with the changes that followed in their/our own representation.

### **Stories of Moroccan Jews in Canada: Becoming Sephardi Jews**

For the last thirty-five years I have been doing fieldwork in a community I belong to, alternating between sharing its fate (my personal emotions) and keeping a necessary distance (the scholar's gaze). I'd like to outline some of the complicated accommodations that have been going on since I arrived in Canada.

I found that most of this population had clung to its long-held tradition of maintaining its own community organizations. In Morocco, it was meant to preserve its identity, as a Jewish minority; in Quebec it was a way of preserving its Moroccan Jewishness. We can see this influence in two very important institutions Moroccan Jews created as soon as they arrived: their own synagogues and schools. Even if most of these migrants were secular Jews, the few young men, with some women, who founded the Association Francophone des Juifs Nord-Africains, which became the Communauté Sépharade du Québec (CSQ), wanted

to establish themselves as an autonomous group, but not a religious one. Their model was the Conseil des Communautés Israélites du Maroc, which functioned as a federation of local communities, electing a board approved by the king. The rabbis, although relatively autonomous, were nominated by the community, and the nomination of the head rabbi was also to be approved by the king. The rabbis chosen to compose the judiciary (Tribunal rabbinique) for all civil questions are officials paid by the Ministry of Justice. It is interesting to note that in a monarchy, where state and religion are not separated, all matters of religion are clearly delineated to fit the status of each religious group.

We could see that this model was brought to Quebec by those who built the structure of the CSQ, only this model does not quite fit within the Montreal Jewish Community. So when they decided to bring a rabbi from Morocco (Rabbi Sabbah) to perform what they thought could be the Sephardi Chief Rabbi, they were opposed by the Vaad (the Montreal Rabbinate) and faced the difficult task of delineating its field of competence within the CSQ. It did not take long to see the arrangement fail, mostly due to in-fighting but also to the different organization of the Jewish communities in Quebec. So instead of having one chief rabbi, Moroccan Jews had several rabbis who officiate at the many synagogues they founded in Montreal and Toronto. If in Canada the state is secular, unlike in Morocco, Judaism can be practised without any established authority, with the result that there is a plural market for "Moroccan Judaism" here that the immigrants themselves never knew back home. It was therefore not very difficult for Moroccan Jews to continue to practise their religious rituals the way they wanted. The large number of synagogues and religious centres devoted to Sephardi or Jewish Moroccan cults and traditions in Montreal and Toronto attest to that.

As far as the schools were concerned, the strong influence of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, established in Morocco with its mixed school system, is obvious. The creation of the École Maimonide in Montreal by the CSQ as early as 1969 clearly indicates Moroccan Jews' will to assert their presence in separate institutions. In Toronto, they did not create such schools but integrated in the predominantly anglophone school system, whether Jewish or otherwise. But they created their own cultural centres (such as the Kehillah Centre for instance) to transmit their Jewish Moroccan traditions and rituals, as well as Hebrew lessons and religious education.

As most of the new Moroccan Jewish immigrants spoke French at a time when French was becoming Quebec's predominant language, it was quite clear that this meant that Moroccan Jews diverged from Jewish immigrant patterns of integrating in the mainly anglophone

group. Their determination to keep French as their main language and to establish themselves in the French culture became their main asset in a time when Quebec was asserting the predominance of French in its laws (Bill 101, for example). The arrival of this group of immigrants gave birth to a separate entity based on a renewed Sephardic identity. It is difficult to know exactly how the decision to change the name of their Association des Juifs Nord-Africains came about, but the consensus fell on the term "Sephardic" Jews, rather than "Arab," "Oriental" (which would be the translation of Mizrahi), "North African," or "Maghrebi." Some members who came from formerly Spanish Morocco (Tanger, Melilla) found that Sephardic would be the appropriate name for them, since it meant retaining their old traditions from Spain. Some others wanted to gather the other Jews who were already present in Montreal – such as the Egyptians, the Iraqis, and others – under their umbrella.

The Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, which attracted many Moroccan Jews on their arrival, was founded by Sephardic families 250 years ago. This particular combination of people and the overall landscape of the Jewish community in Montreal led some to identify with an ancient Sephardic world. For the anglophone leadership, which was very much aligned with Israel and cared much about its pro-Israel support, it was also an acceptable compromise. After many years of tensions and recriminations, exiles and departures to Toronto or elsewhere, it became obvious to all that a francophone segment of the Montreal Jewish community could be an asset in Quebec. It is striking to note that while French Canadians were renewing their own identity as Québécois, Jews of Moroccan origins became Sephardi as well as Québécois.

After many years of difficult debates to get some public recognition for Moroccan Jews as a community, the question of asserting its own different identity ceased to be important after 11 September 2001. The harsh reality of a growing antisemitism, fuelled both by the populist and extreme right and by an expanding Islamist radicalism, changed their perception and the ways in which they could relate to the greater Jewish community. Religious radicalism, and Islamophobia in particular, and the pre-eminence of religion in the public sphere are now at the centre of the political realm. If in Canada the multicultural position has always encouraged the expression of individual and community (religious) identity, it is not so in Quebec, where a strong movement in favour of integral secularism (*laïcité*) is prevalent. It was finally time for the Sephardi community to join with the rest of the Jewish community in reasserting their identity as Jews.

### **Commemoration of Canadian History: Jews as Settlers and Immigrants**

Numerous celebrations marked the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Canadian federation. The many groups composing the Canadian mosaic had different, often contradictory, views of why and how Canadians should remember this moment in particular, since many people could claim different dates to celebrate. For the First Nations, it was at best a non-event, since they were the founding nations, well before anybody claimed their lands. For others, including many in Quebec who resented the federation as an imposition of a colonial power on their own sovereign nation, there was nothing worth celebrating. If anything, this moment meant the subjection of a proud people (the Québécois) to what they perceived as a foreign power (the Anglo-Protestant Canadians).

For us Jews, who as a religious minority have long lived in the margins, if not excluded or discriminated against, we can seize this moment to think about our past and present relations to this history. I like to think that, as a member of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, I am now connected to an ancient migration. Jewish migration and settlement in New France have made the Jewish contribution to Canadian history important and ancient. We are celebrating the 250th anniversary of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, the second synagogue on the continent that was established by English settlers of Sephardi origins in Montreal. Those pioneers kept the name of their countries of origin, even though they were the descendants of the survivors of the 1492 Catholic Inquisition, which chased them from Spain and Portugal. The Hart and Joseph families named their congregation Shearith Israel, the Remnants of Israel now scattered in Canadian soil. Their contribution is hardly known, but mostly their ancient presence has contributed to the making of Canadian history.

The mention of Jewish officers and merchants in the British contingent arriving in Quebec in 1763 signals their participation to the colonial enterprise. This small Jewish group of Sephardi settlers who built the first institutions of the Montreal Jewish Community was part of the anglophone elite of Montreal. Rapidly overwhelmed by the arrival of large waves of Jewish immigration from the central European ghettos in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Montreal Jewish community was transformed into a plurality of ethnic groups who spoke both Yiddish and English. The rapid integration of this small Sephardic group in the Anglo-Protestant elite was quickly forgotten with the arrival of an important contingent of eastern European Jews. The



Sephardi elite narrative of Canadian Jewish history receded behind a new narrative focused on Ashkenazi non-elites. The backbone of this new Canadian Jewish narrative has it that Jewish migrants, expelled and fleeing their old countries' antisemitism, built thriving communities and experienced first-hand, as ethnic groups, the pluralism of Canadian polity. Not only has the Sephardic content of this history disappeared but its settler's aspect has been replaced by a migrant one. So even if (Sephardi) Jews have settled in Canada for over 250 years, Jews' settlement in Canada became synonymous with twentieth-century Ashkenazi migrations.

As a relatively new migrant myself, I was happy to dig into this history to find those ancient Sephardic traces in Montreal, which make me part of an ongoing history, albeit very distant and different from my own. But I also keep on drawing comparisons between here and there, Montreal and Meknes my home town in Morocco, and between Paris, the city where I studied and got engaged with adult life, and Montreal, the city where I now live and work. I am happy to celebrate with my family Jewish holidays at the Spanish Synagogue. It gives me a sense of purpose to set my foot where other Sephardi Jews have been. For me, and perhaps for others like me, migrating to Canada was a dream come true. Here, I feel that I can renew my attachments to a larger Sephardi diaspora, rooted in a very ancient history and now dispersed all over the world.

### **A Sephardi Jewish Diaspora of the Modern Times, with Israel as Its Centre**

Does this mean that there is a global Sephardi Jewry with a more or less unique way to see oneself, whether we live in Paris, Tel-Aviv, or Montreal? There are many ways to be part of a Jewish diaspora today as there are as many ways to be Sephardi. Living today in Montreal, Canada seems to me even better than my dream of going to the United States. If the attraction of the United States has been extraordinary for my generation in the 1960s and '70s, not too many Moroccan Jews made it directly there. Instead we came to Canada largely because of the organized migration led by JIAS.

I too share an attachment to religion, Israel, and the Holocaust, which are considered to be the three main pillars that define today's North American Jewry. My emotional attraction, one associated with expressing my identity, is a feeling of being different. When I was a child, I was taught that being Jewish meant having a strong family/community attachment, representing our alliance with God, and respecting

some if not all the rituals, which in effect were differentiating us from everybody else around us. Did it mean I was religious? Not really. I considered myself a Jew in an Arab world, in which religion defined everyone's identities. My relation to the Holocaust and Israel are part of what we are today as Jews, forever part of my identity. And I am quite aware that being a Jew and a Canadian citizen are all compatible with these ties to another country and other emotional attachments.

A plural society allows for such diverse loyalties. Canada is such a place.

#### NOTES

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- 1 Yolande Cohen, dir., *Les sépharades du Québec: trajectoires de juifs Nord-Africains* (Montreal: Delbusso Éditeur, 2017); Yolande Cohen, Martin Messika, and Sara Cohen-Fournier, "Memories of Departures: Stories of Jews from Muslim Lands in Montreal," in *Beyond Testimony and Trauma: Oral History in the Aftermath of Mass Violence*, ed. Steven High (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2015), 311–31; Yolande Cohen, "The Migrations of Moroccan Jews to Montreal: Memory, (Oral) History and Historical Narrative," in *Sites of Jewish Memory: Jews in and from Islamic Lands in Modern Times*, ed. Glenda Abramson (Oxford: Routledge, 2014), 120–45.