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# 21 Marriage and Mobility of Moroccan Jews in Montreal and Paris<sup>1</sup>

MARTIN MESSIKA AND YOLANDE COHEN

## Editors' Note

*Canada's Jewish population is diverse. One of its main divisions is between Ashkenazim, who comprise about 90 per cent of the Jewish population, and Sephardim, who also boast a rich history in Canada.*

*Ashkenazim are said to derive from the Roman exile in 70 CE, Sephardim from the Babylonian exile, 657 years earlier. Where Muslim Andalusia (the Iberian Peninsula) influenced Sephardi culture, Christian Europe influenced Ashkenazi culture.*

*When Christians completed their reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula in the late fifteenth century, the Inquisition forced Jews who did not convert to Christianity to flee. Expelled Jews resettled in North Africa, the Netherlands, Italy, the Ottoman Empire, and elsewhere. Some of them eventually made their way to England. Following the British conquest of New France in 1763, a few immigrated to Montreal. Mainly merchants, these immigrants founded Canada's first congregation, Shearith Israel, and the synagogue named after their countries of origin, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, in 1768.*

*The legacy of the early Sephardic immigration largely dissipated, but a revitalization occurred when Jews from North Africa, mostly Morocco, felt compelled to leave their countries in the context of European decolonization and growing anti-Jewish sentiment following the creation of the State of Israel. Between the late 1950s and the 1980s, about 15,000 French-speaking Moroccan Jews settled in Montreal, with a smaller, mostly Spanish-speaking Moroccan community preferring Toronto.*

*According to the 2018 Survey of Jews in Canada, about 90 per cent of Canada's Sephardim are divided approximately equally between Toronto and Montreal. In Montreal, they form nearly one quarter of the Jewish population. When respondents were asked in 2018 how connected they feel to Jewish life in their city, the difference between Sephardim and Ashkenazim in*

*the proportion who said “not very connected,” “not at all connected,” and “don’t know” reached statistical significance ( $p < 0.01$ ). The immigrant generation did not always see eye to eye with the English-speaking Ashkenazi majority in Montreal, and table 21.1 suggests that the sense of estrangement persists in at least part of the Sephardic community today. About three in ten Sephardim feel less well connected to the Canadian Jewish mainstream than Ashkenazim do.*

*For two reasons, these results should be treated cautiously. First, the self-identified Sephardi subsample in the 2018 Survey of Jews in Canada is small and heterogeneous, including, like previous surveys, people of North African and Middle Eastern origin. Second, the findings should be tempered with the observation that a 2017 focus group of twenty young Montreal Sephardim expressed stronger attachment to Judaism than to the Montreal Jewish community. More recent interviews with young Sephardim show the same trend, with a minority active in Hassidic or ultra-Orthodox groups in the Montreal metropolitan area.<sup>2</sup>*

Table 21.1. “How connected are you to Jewish life in your city?” 2018, in per cent

	Sephardim ( $n = 207$ )	Ashkenazim ( $n = 1,947$ )
Very	34	40
Somewhat	38	41
Not very/not at all/don't know	28	20
Total	100	101

Note: The second column does not equal 100 due to rounding. An additional twenty respondents self-identified as “Mizrahim” (Easterners). Adding them to the Sephardim does not significantly change the findings.

Source: Brym, Neuman, and Lenton (2019).

## Introduction

Israel was the main destination of Moroccan-Jewish immigrants in the 1950s, while France and Canada were important secondary centres of immigration. The Jews who immigrated to Canada in the 1960s and 1970s first settled mainly in Greater Montreal. Those who immigrated to France settled mainly in the Paris region. In the latter cases, the immigrants were in their great majority educated in the francophone school system of the Alliance Israélite Universelle and therefore aspired to be part of the middle class in Morocco and in the countries to which they immigrated (Abitbol 2009).

How did the Moroccan-Jewish population adjust to life in Montreal and Paris? Did immigration consolidate the middle class? Or did migration to Montreal or Paris confirm the hope these migrants had of achieving upward occupational mobility? Comparative analysis makes it possible to understand such specificities of Moroccan-Jewish migration in each urban area (Green 2002). The migration took place over several decades, so one can also ask how the occupational profile of the immigrants changed over the years.

For a long time, the historiography of this immigration movement has centred on men, ignoring women's paths. However, Moroccan-Jewish immigrants, who are sometimes not mentioned in general works on Moroccan immigration, included women as well as men. The present analysis allows us to compare the ways in which men and women adjusted to life in the two cities.

Studies conducted in the years following their arrival show that the immigrants quickly became economically independent (Berman, Nahmiash, and Osmer 1970, 5). Based on the 1971 Canadian census, Jean-Claude Lasry and Claude Tapia (1989) emphasize the importance of the category "office workers and sales personnel," which accounted for 40 per cent of North African Jews in Montreal, compared with 14 per cent of the general population at the national level. Using an index of occupational status, Lasry also analysed the career paths of Jews from the Maghreb in Montreal. He established that the early stages of arrival in Montreal corresponded to a period of "prestige loss" and downward mobility. This was particularly the case for individuals who were property owners, members of the liberal professions, and small traders in their country of birth. Nevertheless, opportunities for upward occupational mobility existed for those who became blue-collar workers.

Lasry found that after seven years in Canada, immigrants were employed in an occupation with the same level of occupational prestige as the ones they held in their country of birth (Lasry 1980). This finding is consistent with that of Naomi Moldofsky (1968), who discovered that the percentage of migrants who felt that the job they held was of higher status than the one they had in their country of birth depended on how long they had been in Canada: 15 per cent for those who had been in the country for four years, rising to 40 per cent for newcomers who had been in the country for nine years or more. In addition, analyses of the 2001 census and the 2011 National Household Survey reveal a Sephardic Montreal population, including but not limited to Moroccans, that is well integrated into the working world and with a significant number of managers and professionals. It has therefore become common to consider this population as having migrated relatively

successfully in comparison with non-Jewish immigrant groups who settled in Montreal at about the same time, such as Portuguese, Haitians, and Italians.

Analysis of the French case reveals similarities, even if Moroccan natives are more difficult to identify since studies include them in the larger category of North African Jews from Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria. Thus, in her pioneering work, Doris Bensimon (1972) emphasized their economic integration into the French system – without minimizing the difficulties they encountered culturally and emotionally. Compared to Haitians who arrived in France in the same time period, Moroccan Jews fared better in terms of their socio-economic status (Cohen and Jabouin 2021).

## Sources

This chapter provides a fresh perspective on the settlement of Jews from Morocco by focusing on two dimensions indicating their degree of adjustment in the host society: marriage and occupation. It extends previous work on marriages at Montreal's Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue and two Parisian synagogues (rue Copernic and Synagogue des Tournelles), which highlights the high rate of intermarriage between spouses of North African origin in Montreal and Paris (Cohen and Scioldo-Zürcher 2014). Data on the occupations of newcomers upon arrival in Montreal and Paris derive from information collected by the social service agencies from which they received assistance (Messika 2020). Information at the time of marriage (a stage of stabilization in the host country) is based on files and marriage certificates in Parisian and Montreal synagogues.<sup>3</sup> The study covers the period 1961–75 in Paris and 1969–2014 in Montreal. To provide a basis for comparing occupations in the two cities, we used the Canadian National Occupational Classification (NOC). This categorization was refined by identifying job categories not included in the NOC.

## Arrival in Montreal and Paris

The profile of Moroccan-Jewish immigrants and the conditions of their settlement differed from the profile and settlement conditions of other immigrants who arrived in Canada after the Second World War. For example, unlike Italians, they almost all arrived with their families, were more highly skilled occupationally, and settled in urban centres. In Montreal, their settlement was supported by Jewish associations such as Jewish Immigrant Aid Services (JIAS), which offered financial

assistance and help finding housing and employment. Analysis of social agency files allows us to compose a socio-professional profile of the newcomers and offer a partial assessment of their social situation and professional background.

In their country of birth, the majority of men had been employed as office workers (including accountants; 29 per cent) or craft workers (22 per cent). The majority of women (53 per cent) had at least one previous paying job. Among those who worked in the paid labour force, 48 per cent of Moroccan-born women had been office workers (secretaries or clerks), while 27 per cent worked as dressmakers, hairdressers, and the like (27 per cent).

This snapshot of the Moroccan Jewish population upon arrival in Montreal reveals a relatively skilled population, among which office jobs predominated for both men and women. Nevertheless, during their settlement, men and women followed different paths to paid work, reflecting a period of adjustment in their return to employment. For men, arrival in Montreal was often associated with a change in employment sector. Thus, only 49 per cent of men who were office workers or accountants in Morocco and found their first job in Montreal with the assistance of a social worker were able to work in their previous field of employment. This phenomenon is common among immigrants, testifying to the difficulties they have initially in finding the same kind of job they had in their country of origin.

Women's labour force participation rates fell substantially after they arrived in Montreal.<sup>4</sup> This finding is consistent with other studies that show that the percentage of North African Jewish women without work in the paid labour force is higher in Montreal than in their country of birth. The difference can be explained by the structure of the Montreal labour market, which can be less welcoming for women than for men. In addition, JIAS social workers may have been more concerned with finding a job for the "male head of household" than for their wives and daughters (Néméh-Nombré 2017).

In the French case, analysis of reception files allows us to sketch a profile of the newcomers. In her analysis of social services offered by the Fonds social juif unifié in Toulouse, Colette Zytnicki highlighted the importance of the employed population, comprising 29 per cent of its clients. Workers and service personnel represented 18 per cent of the employed clients, craft workers 14 per cent, and tradespeople 15.7 per cent (Zytnicki 1998, 155). In Paris, at the Comité d'Action sociale israélite de Paris, 35 per cent of Moroccan-born people worked in occupations close to the craft industry, representing a larger percentage than office workers in Montreal. This difference may be related to

source bias, but may also be the result of more highly qualified Jewish populations immigrating to Canada, the latter having been selected by Canadian immigration authorities partly for their socio-occupational profile, which was not the case in France.

### **Marriage Record Samples**

Collection of data for the period 1955–70 began at Montreal’s Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue and in two Parisian synagogues, a consistorial synagogue on rue des Tournelles and a liberal synagogue on rue Copernic.

The earlier research is developed here in two ways. First, in addition to marriages celebrated at Montreal’s Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, we include marriages that took place at Montreal’s Or Hahayim Synagogue, which has a large Moroccan membership. In addition, complementary research was carried out at the Consistoire de Paris for synagogues in the Paris region, bringing together diverse places of worship, including synagogues established as chapels.

The Montreal sample consists of 1,834 marriages celebrated in the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue and Or Hahayim. Between these two synagogues, 665 marriages were celebrated between 1969 and 1979, another 629 between 1980 and 1989, 261 between 1990 and 1999, and 279 between 2000 and 2014.<sup>5</sup> Of these 1,834 marriages, we count 454 men and 309 women born in Morocco. If we consider the category “Sephardic” to include people born abroad or in Canada,<sup>6</sup> we count 831 Sephardic men and 668 Sephardic women.

Overall, the number of marriages celebrated in the synagogues in our study increased over the years, with a decrease only in the period 1969–89.

The Ile-de-France sample is composed of 2,126 marriage certificates from a variety of synagogues located in Paris and the surrounding area between 1961 and 1975. The presence of people from Morocco in the sample is a consequence of the fact that there are 1,063 records in which at least one of the spouses was born in that country – a total of 561 men and 571 women.

### **Who Do Moroccan Natives Marry?**

Previous work established that 67 per cent of the marriages that took place at the consistorial synagogue on rue des Tournelles were between natives of North Africa. This figure compares to 11 per cent at the rue Copernic synagogue and 18 per cent at the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in Montreal (Cohen and Scioldo-Zürcher 2014). The collection of additional data in other Parisian consistorial synagogues and

the study of marriages after the 1980s suggest about the same level of geographical in-marriage as in previous work among Moroccan natives in liberal synagogues and a small increase in in-marriage in the Parisian consistorial synagogues and Montreal.

For the Paris region, the most common union among North African natives was between Moroccans and Algerians (40 per cent), followed by Moroccan natives among themselves (29 per cent). The latter percentage is almost ten percentage points higher than in earlier studies. In the case of Montreal's Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue and Or Hahayim, the extension of collection dates does not change the results; unions between Moroccans compose fully 90 per cent of North African marriages. However, among Moroccan natives, most marriages are between Moroccan and Canadian natives (220 marriages compared to 177 marriages between Moroccan natives). For 30 per cent of marriages of men with Canadian natives, the fiancés are French-Canadians who converted from Catholicism to Judaism (Cohen and Guerry 2011). In Paris, there were 256 marriages between individuals born in Morocco and France, which attests to the integration of newcomers into the host society, since this figure is higher than the number of marriages between Moroccan natives.

These data show that living in Montreal or Paris is associated with relative openness in terms of choice of spouse. But if marriage to non-native Moroccans is frequent, even the majority, in the two areas studied, small disparities exist between men and women. In Montreal, 61 per cent of Moroccan-born men marry women who were not born in Morocco. For Moroccan-born women the comparable figure is 58 per cent. The situation is similar in the Paris region, where marriage between the Moroccan-born is common, but not the majority. Some 68 per cent of Moroccan-born men marry non-Moroccan women, compared to 64 per cent of Moroccan-born women. Thus, somewhat greater openness to geographical out-marriage is evident in Montreal and among men. Still, members of this first cohort of migrants, both men and women, tend to marry outside of their group of origin, while retaining their strong identification with Judaism by converting their mostly Catholic fiancés to their own faith.

### **Occupational Profile of Moroccan Jews in Montreal and Paris**

Marriage records also allow us to assess the socio-occupational situation of the migrant populations at the time of their arrival in the two cities. Analysis of these data allows us not only to draw comparisons between the migrations to Canada and France, but also to propose



avenues for drawing comparisons within these Jewish communities. The Canadian classification that we have adopted is particularly broad and is mainly concerned with economic sector, not hierarchical position. Applying this classification allows us to conclude that the occupational profiles of Moroccan Jews who married in Montreal and in the rest of Canada are similar, as are the occupational profiles of Moroccan Jews who married in Montreal and in the Paris area. However, the Montreal and Paris samples differ somewhat. Notably, the sample from the Montreal synagogues consists of 418 men and 273 women (a gender ratio of 1.5), while the sample from the Paris area synagogues consists of 573 men and 474 women (a gender ratio of 1.2).

For native Moroccans, the main occupations in Paris are in "sales and services" (126 people) and "business, finance, and administration" (119 people). Students and people in scientific occupations come next, with 87 and 75 people, respectively. The "sales and services" category includes a wide range of occupations associated with sales, but also with craft skills, while the "business, finance, and administration" category also includes some management positions. Technical occupations are included in the "trades, transportation, machinery, and related" and "manufacturing and public utilities" categories. They include workers at various skill levels.

The occupational structure of married men associated with the Montreal synagogues is similar to that of the men living in Paris. In the two Montreal synagogues, most of the men are in "sales and services," "business, finance, and administration," and "trades, transportation, machinery, and related" occupations.

However, an analysis within the main categories reveals a difference between the two populations. If "sales and service" personnel are most numerous in both cases, they include a different mix of occupations in the two cities. In Montreal, the largest group in this category, at 46 per cent, is in sales, while the comparable figure in Paris is 21 per cent. Meanwhile, the percentage of craft workers and those involved in commerce is higher in Paris. Comparing Montreal fiancés born in Morocco with those not born in Morocco also reinforces the idea of a relative concentration of Moroccan natives in the "sales and services" category.

At the time of their marriage in Montreal, 82 per cent of Moroccan-born women had a paying job.<sup>7</sup> This was not the case in the period immediately following their arrival in Montreal, as the JIAS data show. In fact, their labour force participation rate is nearly the same as that of Canadian-born women (83 per cent) and considerably higher than that of women in Canada who were born in a country other than Canada or Morocco (76 per cent).

The occupational profile of women born in Montreal is dominated by two main categories: administrative occupations (28 per cent) and sales occupations (27 per cent), the latter of which also includes some occupations associated with craft work, such as hairdressing. Native Moroccan fiancés are more likely to belong to the latter category than are brides born in other countries, testifying to the relative ease of entry into hairdressing.

This is less the case in the Paris sample, where the concentration is higher in business, finance, and administration (49 per cent) and the student group (20 per cent). The first group includes secretaries and stenographers/typists, the most common occupations. In this respect, the concentration of women in Paris in these professions as well as their weight in Montreal sheds light on the process of entry into the labour market, which was made possible in the occupations associated with secretarial work by the fact that this young and educated population either attended francophone schools in Morocco or had been educated in the host country. In France, these jobs are often the first entry point into the labour market.

Finally, we can consider the place of students in comparing the Montreal and Paris samples. The percentage of female students was higher in Paris (20 per cent) than in Montreal (16 per cent). The latter was close to the percentage of non-Moroccan women who married in the Montreal sample (17 per cent). The discrepancy between male students in Paris (13 per cent) and Montreal (3 per cent) was more substantial.

It is difficult to interpret this important Montreal/Paris difference. It can be considered on two levels. First, it may reflect the relative ease of access to higher education in Paris for a migrant population, schooled in French, in a context where it is difficult for them to find a job and where tuition is free. Second, it may reflect greater confidence among the Parisians that their entry into the paid labour force will be relatively easy after they complete their studies. The fact that the absence of a permanent job does not seem to be an obstacle in some students' decision to marry in Paris supports the latter interpretation.

### **Upward Mobility and Career Paths**

It is difficult to discern much upward mobility for men over the years, but upward mobility is more apparent for women (see [table 21.2](#) for men and [table 21.3](#) for women).

The decade-by-decade figures in [table 21.2](#) and [table 21.3](#) should be read with caution, since the number of people per decade varies

Table 21.2. Occupational distribution of Moroccan-Jewish men in Montreal, 1969–2014, in per cent

	1969– 1979	1980– 1989	1990– 1999	2000– 2014	Total
Sales and services	33	22	27	25	28
Business, finance, and administration	10	23	20	13	16
Trades, transportation, machinery, and related	14	11	16	8	13
Management	13	13	10	13	13
Education, law, and social, community, and government services	6	8	8	13	7
Natural and applied sciences and related	8	5	4	13	7
Arts, culture, sports, and recreation	7	7	0	0	6
Health	3	5	6	13	5
Students	5	1	2	0	0
Manufacturing and public utilities	1	4	4	0	2
Pensioners	0	1	2	4	1
Total	100	100	99	102	98
Number of cases	197	148	49	24	418

Note: Some columns do not equal 100 due to rounding.

Sources: Marriage records, Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue and Or Hahayim Synagogue.

substantially. Nevertheless, we can see meaningful change over time. The percentage of men in “sales and services” dropped eight percentage points between the 1970s and the 2000s. For occupations in “arts, culture, sports and recreation,” the absolute number of individuals is small, but the decline is seven percentage points between the 1970s and the 2000s. For students, we see a five percentage-point decline over the same period, likely due to the fact that the average age at marriage increased over time and the fact that men who marry do so after their studies. On the other hand, the percentage of individuals in the health field grew by ten points over the period under consideration. Although a total of just twenty people were in the health professions over the entire period, the relative importance of these occupations in the workforce may reflect an increase in professional qualifications overall.

For women, the tendency towards increased professional qualifications is more conspicuous. The professional profile of Moroccan-born women changed over the years. The proportion of women in “business, finance, and administration” fell by nineteen percentage points while the corresponding figure for students was seventeen percentage points. Sales and hairdressing were common occupations in the female

Table 21.3. Occupational distribution of Moroccan-Jewish women in Montreal, 1969–2014, in per cent

	1969– 1979	1980– 1989	1990– 1999	2000– 2014	Total
Business, finance, and administration	36	23	18	10	27
Sales and services	28	28	25	19	27
Students	17	22	11	0	16
Education, law, and social, community, and government services	9	11	14	33	12
Health	4	2	29	19	7
Management	4	4	0	14	4
Arts, culture, sports, and recreation	1	2	4	0	1
Manufacturing and public utilities	0	5	0	0	1
Natural and applied sciences and related	1	2	0	0	1
Trades, transportation, machinery, and related	1	0	0	5	1
Pensioners	0	0	0	0	0
Total	101	99	101	100	97
Number of cases	142	82	28	21	273

Note: Some columns do not equal 100 due to rounding.

Sources: Marriage records, Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue and Or Hahayim Synagogue.

population in the 1970s, but the number of hairdressers, for example, fell from twenty-three in the 1970s to ten in the 1980s and then to zero in the 1990s. On the other hand, employment in “education, law, and social, community, and government services” rose from 9 per cent (thirteen people) in the 1970s to 33 per cent (seven people) in the 2000s. Similarly, even though the number of women in the health professions remains modest, it increased between 1970 and 1990 from five to eight people. On the whole, it seems clear that women have improved their professional qualifications over time, partly because of their improved integration into Canadian society, partly because of the rising status of all women in Canadian society over the nearly half-century represented by [table 21.3](#).

## Conclusion

In the first years after immigration, some Moroccan Jews experienced difficulties integrating into Montreal’s paid labour force. However, their descendants appear to have experienced considerable upward mobility.

Women apparently had more difficulty entering the paid labour force than men did, probably because of the way the work world was structured and the greater emphasis placed on men's work. It is also possible that immigration tightened the family sphere, initially distancing women from paid work. This issue requires more research, especially through the use of surveys and oral histories. Over time, constraints on women's labour force participation faded. The labour force participation rate for women increased the longer families had to adjust to their new country, the longer the presence of women in the paid labour force normalized their taking on paid work, and the larger the proportion of women who attended school in Canada.

The occupational profile of native Moroccans who marry in the Paris region and in Montreal are similar, but not identical. For instance, there have been more students among Moroccan Jews in Paris and more salespeople in Montreal. Improved qualifications and consequent upward mobility has been evident from the beginning of Moroccan-Jewish immigration in Montreal, especially for women of the second generation.

Immigration has also enabled Moroccan-Canadians to out-marry geographically, socially, and even religiously, although women are less likely than men to do so. The results of this survey therefore suggest that marriage strategies reflect a generally positive outlook, especially among men, on the host society. However, it is the acquisition of professional qualifications that allows for upward mobility, especially for women.

## NOTES

- 1 This chapter is a revised version of Messika and Cohen (2017). It was translated from the French by Robert Brym with the assistance of Yolande Cohen and is part of a larger project on postcolonial migrations of Moroccan Jews, supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The authors thank Robert Brym for his translation, kind assistance, and thorough editing of the text.
- 2 We are grateful to Yolande Cohen for this information.
- 3 We thank Veronique Cahen and Christine Chevalier-Caron, who entered data from the marriage certificates.
- 4 In the sample cited, only 23 per cent of Moroccan-born women (sixty-three people) held a job at least once before their follow-up interview.
- 5 Data for the years 2008, 2009, and 2011 are missing.
- 6 Charles Shahar (2015, 49) defines people as Sephardic if they were born in Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Bulgaria, Egypt, France, Greece, India, Iran,

Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, North Yemen, Pakistan, Portugal, Saudi Arabia, South Yemen, Spain, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, Yemen, or Yugoslavia (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Slovenia); if their mother and father were born in those countries; if their mother tongue is French, Arabic, Greek, Bulgarian, or Yugoslavian; or if they are children in a household where both parents fit these criteria.

- 7 The percentage without a paying job is calculated from mentions of “housewife” and “unemployed” and the absence of any indication that the individual was in the paid labour force.

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