# Identity in Transition: Jewish Public Library Archives of Montreal

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### Research Goals

This project will ultimately examine and guide the Jewish Public Library Archives (JPL-A) in its outreach programmes, especially for school aged children. The nature of this particular phase of the project is exploratory and examines:

- Aspects of identity in the community building of Jewish Montreal;
- What effect this has on the JPL Archives as it struggles to establish its own self;
- The initial observations of archival heritage education with students in regards to community identity.

As an archive in major transition from basic repository to heritage outreach centre, the JPL-A must not only examine the role that identity plays in the community but also how best to promote heritage as a key component in that identity.

# **Background to the Community**

Beginning in February 2007, the province of Quebec underwent a series of public consultations under the government-initiated Commission de consultation sur les practiques d'accomodement reliées aux différences culturelles<sup>i</sup>, commonly referred to as the Bouchard-Taylor Commission after the commission co-chairs historian and sociologist Gérard Bouchard and philosopher Charles Taylor. The Commission's mandate was to, "take stock of accommodation practices in Québec; analyse the attendant issues bearing in mind the experience of other societies; conduct an extensive consultation on this topic; and formulate recommendations to the government to ensure that accommodation practices conform to the values of Québec society as a pluralistic, democratic, egalitarian society."ii The creation of the commission was a result of a public perception, fanned by media according to the final report that minority cultures in the province were being unfairly pandered to for the sake of politically correct "accommodation." A larger issue - common in Canadian society discourse and especially in Ouebec - is the balancing act that identity plays in defining the society in which we live. Immigrants, and indeed even 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> generation citizens, can cling closely to cultural identities fostered through childhood through family and/or schooling. On what level do these cultures meet then to agree on a balanced and inclusive society that does endanger varied heritage? And if society as a whole must encompass, include and adapt to changes in the cultural make-up, should not also those cultures adapt in their own micro-diversities?

Montreal's Jewish community is one of Quebec's oldest minority cultures, itself diverse and composed of several different cultural, linguistic and religious variations. The community grew in successive waves of immigrants: British Sephardic Jews after New France became part of British North America in 1763, German and British Ashkenazi Jews from 1840-1880, Eastern European Ashkenazi (mainly Romanian and Russian, including Polish and Ukrainian) from 1881-1914 and Holocaust survivors post-1945. The community was further diversified with the arrival of North African Jews starting in the mid-1960s, Ethiopian Jews starting in the late 1970s and Jews from the Former Soviet Union starting in the early 1990s.

Montreal's Jews established a self-supporting network of services – many of which still exist today – especially during the third-wave immigration period of 1881-1914. These agencies were and continue to be almost fully financed within the community, mainly through Jewish Montreal's umbrella agency, Federation CJA (FED CJA). Shifting demographics of the

community over the years though have necessitated an almost constant re-examination of who the community is, how best to serve them and where to find support for agencies and programs.

According to latest Canadian census data, the community's population now sits at approximately 92,200. An increasing portion of that number consists of an aging population, recently arrived immigrants and a growing Chasidic population. Jewish Montreal suffered somewhat during the early 1990s as it lost a large portion of young adults and families. Between 1991 and 2001, the Montreal community population went down by 8,435 people, a historically large loss. Reasons for the drop in numbers can be attributed to families looking for better economic opportunities in other provinces or the United States and also in part due to the political climate of Quebec. There now exists in the community concern over a rising intermarriage rate, which is lower than other North American Jewish communities but still on the rise; continued loss of young adults to the United States, Toronto and Vancouver; and a concern that young families have no affiliation with the "community." The absence of community and religious affiliation has also been termed "Jewishly vulnerable" under the more recent identity discussions and projects in FED CJA.

# **Background to Motivation**

In 1914, Jewish Montreal welcomed its first public library. Starting as early as 1888, various organizations within the community attempted to establish libraries for their members; anarchists, Zionists, labour Zionists, socialists and members of the Baron de Hirsch Institute had access to Yiddish and Hebrew reading material through their memberships. It was not until the founding of the Folks Biblyotek, though, that the community enjoyed the privileges of affordable access to reading materials, culture and education. The Library was the centre of Yiddish culture and education for Montreal's Jews, taking on the role of the preserver of cultural identity.

95 years later the Library continues to celebrate its Yiddish roots while at the same time being arguably one of the most flexible agencies of Jewish Montreal – changing in response to the community's needs and identities. This flexibility is illustrated by the recent announcement by the new President of the JPL Board of Directors calling for goals of targeted outreach to the growing French Sephardic community of Jewish Montreal. No part of the Library is a greater reflection of this community change than the Archives. Its collections capture the growth of Jewish Montreal institutions and families and their perception of their own identity over the last 200 years. Direct lines can be drawn between the tangible heritage of the archival collections and the present situation and identity of the community.

Currently, the JPL-A is researching and developing a comprehensive education program, *Experience Heritage*, which combines community heritage, media and information literacy and archive advocacy for middle and high school students. The teaching goals for the program aim to provide the opportunity to explore connections between a student's personal identity and his/her community.

In developing the program, the JPL-A is faced with the incongruity of promoting community identity through tangible historical sources juxtaposed with the definition of this "identity" as laid out by the visioning committee of FED CJA – the JPL-A's parent agency. FED CJA currently prioritizes projects dealing with identity and legacy as a response to the rapidly shifting demographics of the Jewish community. Definitions of identity and identities vary, however, and what can be assumed when examining identity projects that are currently funded is that a group identity through the celebration of actual local community history and origins – as well as certain aspects of diversity – is often overlooked. How then is the JPL-A best to evolve to meet its parent agency's priorities while respecting the natural evolution of the community's historical legacy? The JPL-A's research and development of *Experience Heritage* is providing discussion

on exactly what legacy is being passed onto future generations and the role the Archives plays in that legacy. The project and research are providing the direction from which the JPL-A is attempting to balance institutional, community and political needs and wants.

As an agency of FED CJA, the Library takes a great deal of direction when major initiatives are launched, such as the identity visioning. Because of this and also because of the close relationship between the semantics in promoting "identity" and "heritage" in the developing Archive education programme and FED CJA's Gen J project, the Archives must examine how to balance community initiatives with the reality of heritage outreach.

# **Current Identity Projects**

Parent Agency – Gen J

The latest major project from FED CJA that specifically targets identity, *Gen J*, funds projects based on "five critical gateways through which meaningful and engaging Jewish experiences are being developed...formal Jewish education; camps and youth programming; family and adult programming; Israel experiences; and arts and culture." The first projects to receive funding are: tuition assistance to Jewish day schools; a drama, music, and culture curriculum through the Segal Centre; delivery of free Jewish books and magazines to families with young children, cost coverage for Jewish summer camps, and activities for young adults returning from their first trip to Israel. The priority targets are, as the program name suggests, youth and young adults that fall under the Jewish Standard Definition (JSD). The JSD was developed by the Council of Jewish Federations (Canada) and Jim Torczyner of McGill University in 1981, someone is Jewish if a) they are Jewish by religion and b) Jewish by ethnicity but had no religion, "It was devised because this definition was more inclusive than if religion or ethnicity were considered separately."

These "gateways" contain elements of group identity often repeated in community planning and social welfare over the past 60 years. The purpose of surveying past documents related to community identity is to attempt to chart changes of attitude towards that identity. Given that the Archives preserves the organic records of the community's agencies – and its families and individuals – these shifting attitudes would also be reflected in that material. This places the Archives in a unique position to support current identity trends by using the original material that led to those trends. The Archives believes that this exploration of identity supports a greater connection between individual and community – the celebration of origins to explain and maintain heritage and tradition.

# Jewish Public Library – Experience Heritage

As part of its outreach and archival promotion, the JPL-A is developing an exciting education series entitled *Experience Heritage*. The series provides students with activities, often hands-on, that exposes them to Jewish Montreal's history as well as the effect of the history of the world surrounding the community. All activities utilize actual original archival material preserved in the JPL Community Archives and provide students with a tangible way to connect and engage their self or family identity with the community. The activities and materials are currently used through live interaction teaching but eventually the entire program will be digitized.

In addition to the goals of promoting precious heritage and archives, the series also offers activities with a focus on leaving students with greater information literacy skills, including: identifying context and biases in sources; examination and extrapolation from non-traditional classroom sources; questioning authenticity and reliability; searching and browsing skills; and evaluating and selecting relevant information.

When the JPL-A started to develop *Experience Heritage* after its revitalization in 2005, it was viewed by the Library as an excellent engagement tool. Once the identity visioning efforts of FED CJA and community members launched the Gen J project, the JPL-A felt it necessary to reexamine the direction of the project, looking for ways in which the two projects could guide each other.

# Procedure

To examine the links between *Experience Heritage* and past and present identity visioning in the community, an exploratory review of organizational literature discussing that identity was performed. This literature (appendix A) consists of surveys, planning, annual and project reports, and/or procedural manuals. It ranges from 1950, when there was a distinct increase in professional literature from social agencies as well as a renewal in immigration, to the 1970s-1990s when the community had to define itself in the Quebec nation and against a drop in its population. The literature was then compared with current Gen J initiatives and targets as well as the JPL-A outreach projects.

# Phase I

- 1. Literature review of past efforts to discuss changing community identity in FED CJA documents from 1950 onwards.
- 2. Identification of continuing or changing elements of what FED CJA promotes as community identity.
- 3. Comparative discussion of elements of past documents with recent efforts from FED CJA and the efforts of the JPL-A to promote identity.

The second phase of the work will use the elements culled from the literature review and current identity visioning projects to survey students and teachers in participating classes. The group will be tested prior to the *Experience Heritage* activities the students are using for their grade six level social studies projects and again upon completion. This second phase is expected to be completed by early winter 2009.

The organizational literature was chosen for review following specific characteristics. First, the literature had to have been produced directly for or by FED CJA (or under its previous names) and not by an external organization or government agency. The only slight exception to this being the demographic analysis studies produced by FED CJA using census data collected by the Government of Canada. Second, the topic of the literature had to discuss either what the widely-acknowledged definitions of Jewish Montreal were or, alternatively, variant elements of the community and how those elements affected the community as a single unit.

The literature was further broken down into specific elements of identity based on subjects: status of specific immigrant and/or ethnic groups, condition and needs of Jewish education, community engagement (interaction with the non-Jewish community), youth and/or young adults, status of older persons and status of women.

The key points in the organizational literature related the tracking of changing identity in the community came down to:

• Differences in traditions between various groups (orthodox vs. secular education, Yiddish traditions vs. modern Hebrew, etc.) are seldom discussed in literature. Instead, when examined, the groups were discussed as one unit with little exploration of the effects of groups on one another.

- Semantics of "heritage" in community identity literature rarely contains references to heritage institutions such as the two community archives, the library, the permanent Yiddish theatre, or the holocaust museum.
- The changing identity of the community (demographics) at the turn of the 20th century encouraged the founding of Federation of Jewish Philanthropies in 1914; as the community continued to change over the decades, the original priorities and structure of the organization have shifted as well.
- Discussions of minority variations in the community lessened over the past 20 years; instead the community is presented more as one unit despite census gathering illustrating diversity.
- Variations of religious beliefs in the community are left to synagogues but religion itself is presented as a "tradition" to carry on.
- Identity elements from the various documents to the current GEN J program only encompass those elements supported by current agencies; the programs may only be successful in reaching already affiliated Jews in the community.
- The elements of identity promoted by the *Experience Heritage* program support not only the GEN J initiatives and the initially funded programs but also past elements of identity not currently represented but still present in the community.

DRGANIZATIONAL LITERATURE REVIEW			
Literature Category		Related to current identity elements?	
Status of specific immigrant and/or ethnic groups	• Sephardic (Middle Eastern, North African, South American); Ethiopian; Hungarian; Chasidic community; Former Soviet Union		
Condition and needs of Jewish education	Daycares; camps; Jewish day schools	YES	
Community Engagement	<ul> <li>Situation of community under various governments, language laws</li> <li>Attitude of Quebec Anglophones</li> <li>Jewish school question (government funding)</li> </ul>	NO	
Youth/Young Adults	<ul><li>Retention in province</li><li>Youth leadership</li><li>Vocational aid</li></ul>	YES	
Aging populations	Community care of aged	YES	
Status of women	<ul><li>Leadership in community</li><li>Use of communal services</li></ul>	NO	

Fig.1 – Identity elements of organizational literature.

JEWISH PUBLIC LIBRARY ARG	RY ARCHIVES – EXPERIENCE HERITAGE INITIATIVE	
Identity Category	Defining Elements	Resources
Written Word and Arts	-Emphasis on importance of Jewish education -Promotion and celebration of Jewish writers, artists, and entertainers	-Immigrant poets and writers -Jewish schools and Jewish School Question -Jewish student school strike
Philanthropy/Response to Crisis	-Community response to crisis, in and out of the community -Development and "corporatization" of fundraising campaigns -Emphasis on the social and cultural needs of the minorities of the community	-1917 Halifax explosion documents -Campaigns for Israel -Development of social welfare system and profession in the community
Immigrant and Ethnic Diversity	-Community origins, successive waves of immigrant groups -Emphasis in fundraising campaign literature	-Push and pull factors of immigration -Community's refugees -Immigrant institutions and fraternal organizations
Engagement in Society	-Specific events or persons from the community recognized outside the community -Contributors to Quebec and Canadian society	-Specific figures in the following spheres: Politics -Economics and commerce -Sports -Arts and culture

**Fig.2** – Identity elements used by the JPL-A to create the *Experience Heritage* program. Elements in italic are also linked to elements from the FED CJA's current Gen J project's "five critical gateways."

PARENT AGENCY – GEN J INI	EN J INITIATIVE	
Identity Category	Defining Elements	Resources
Importance of Education	-Jewish day schools -Summer camps	-Individual schools and camps
Jewish Art and Culture	-Performing and visual arts instruction	-Individual schools -Segal Centre for the Performing Arts
Religious Affiliation	-Identification of family with a Montreal synagogue	-Individual synagogues -Teaching of Jewish law in schools, moot Jewish courts
Organizational Affiliation	-Support of FEDERATION CJA and its agencies -Membership or partnership in community agency	-Campaign canvassing by FED CJA -Outreach by individual FED CJA agencies
Intermarriage	-Participation of at least one parent and children in the Jewish community.	-Agency outreach through Gen J initiatives
Connection to Israel	-Continued youth visits to Israel -Continued education on Israel post-visit	-Continued community financial support of youth visits to Israel

Fig.3 Identity elements as per FED CJA's Gen J project.

# Discussion

Overall, in comparing past and present literature, little to no discussion is provided on merging an individual's identity with a community identity. This oversight of the individual or the smaller unit may block the individual's membership into the community for various reasons such as: ideological differences between minority and official "community" positions on issues such as Israel, language, education, community spending, religion, etc.; minority background within the community that is better preserved and reflected by just that group and not the community as a whole; religious differences from the norm or not believing in religion; choosing to attend non-Jewish school or not to participate in Jewish day camps and therefore being excluded from or unaware of planned community programs.

Additionally, the literature tends to focus on creating or promoting an identity of a more global nature, less so one that is tied directly to Montreal. Past organizational literature focuses on the details of variations in the community and how it affects the community as a whole. Current literature, specifically Gen J, is focused on what is perceived to be programmable solutions for keeping the traditions of the community.

Review of the literature was a useful exercise before initial testing of *Experience Heritage* lectures and activities, as it raised questions on how best to integrate past discussions on diversity in the community, diversity that still exists, into the current view of community identity that may overlook the individual or variants. The absence of a Jewish identity belonging to Jewish Montreal in the organizational literature also shaped the archival lectures and activities as a way of testing the viability of promoting such a direction for identity.

# Limitations of Research (initial and on-going):

- Collecting and preservation behavior in FED CJA departments has been and to a point continues to be inconsistent. Numerous records were destroyed, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, because of cut-backs, space restrictions and high staff turn-over rates.
- There are some Jewish day schools that provide "Jewish history", based on biblical text up to the founding of Israel. These schools are also obligated, however, to fulfill provincial requirements; the politicized history of Quebec mainly focused on the majority of which the community has not played a part. Students participating in activities in the Archives enter with little or no knowledge or personal connection with the specific MONTREAL Jewish community.

#### **Current Status**

Phase II of this project began Summer 2009 with student visits to the JPL-A as well as full lectures and activities delivered for grade six students at one of Montreal's Jewish day schools. These initial visits and activities provided instructive observations of student and teacher reaction and interaction. These observations will be the basis of the survey questions that will be given to students in winter 2009 prior to beginning their heritage projects and then again upon completion. The most striking questions that will shape the survey include:

- What structures and traits exist that are uniquely Montreal-oriented and that would benefit the community identity here? Stories of descent? Common traits and practices?
- Is it possible to promote a community identity based on criteria that are not necessarily inherent to individuals, but rather directed at marketing a message to a large group?
- Archives deal in the tangible, should we then promote the imagined community?
- How far does the role of an Archive go in promoting a community memory?
- How do you define the borders of a community that is based on Diasporas?
- Is it possible to promote an imaginary community in order to preserve a geographic one?

Students participating in the initial activities and visits had little trouble understanding that actions today create tomorrow's history, nor did they have difficulty, and were actually very enthusiastic, analysing historical documents, photographs and artefacts. However, despite being enrolled in Jewish day camps and schools, few made links between Montreal Jewry and Jewish history or their own heritage.

#### Other observations included:

- Students have little knowledge of immigration of other groups outside of their family units in the community
- Students have little to no knowledge of how much impact the Jewish community has had on the city at large.
- Students have great interest in immigrant stories once presented to them in a dynamic way.
- Job of the Archive is to promote the community and lost elements of the community but perhaps not to initiate discussion on creating change in the community in regards to those elements.

#### **Initial Conclusions**

From the review of the organizational literature as well as the initial testing of *Experience Heritage*, the JPL-A is focusing on promoting identity through Montreal heritage, an element of identity visioning that is very much missing. It is the hope of the JPL-A that by providing outreach in this particular area, groups within the community that are underrepresented in the archives will feel comfortable in participating in tangible history preservation.

# APPENDIX A

# Organizational Literature, AJCS/Federation CJA Fonds, Jewish Public Library Archives Container 006

File 002 – Canadian Immigration Act; Self-Organized Immigrant Groups Immigrant Integration; Data on Polish Immigrants.

File 003 – Sephardic Community [study].

File 004 – Study Committee on Housing for the Aged [study].

File 005 – Home Care Systems and services elsewhere [study].

File 006 – The Poor Among Us: Project Genesis [study].

File 007 – Study on Poverty. – 1972.

File 008 – Understanding Jewish traditions, customs and practices [report].

File 010 – Mission to Israel [Montreal study]. – 1969.

File 013 – Soviet Jewry. – 1969.

#### Container 007

File 001 – Jewish Educational Council Report. – 1983.

File 002a – Study of Attitudes Towards Jewish Education, Part I. – 1971.

File 002 – Study of Attitudes Towards Jewish Education, Part II. – ca1971.

File 003 – Conference on intermarriage. – 1980.

## **Container 018**

File 002 – Women's Federation, reports and position papers on "The French Fact".

#### Container 021

File 001 – Women's Federation (Seminars). – 1966-1971.

Note: Also includes report on "French Speaking Jewish Immigrants".

#### Container 042

File 001 – Community Survey. – 1959-1965.

File 002 – Community Survey. – 1959-1965.

# **Container 047**

File 003 – Jewish Welfare. – 1951-1952.

Note: Includes correspondence, reports, statistics for Baron de Hirsch Institute, child welfare, Jewish Immigrant Aid Services and the Jewish Hospital of Hope.

File 008 – Committee on Jewish Education. – 1972-1973.

Note: Includes report on École Sépharade.

File 012 – Community Planning Committee. – May 19, 1966.

Note: Includes report, "Study on Housing for the Aging"

File 013 – Community Planning Committee. – ca1981.

Note: Includes Jewish demographic statistics in Montreal from 1961-1981.

File 014 – Community Planning. – ca1981.

Note: Includes report on Jewish education in Montreal.

File 025 - Conference, "Community Care for the Aged: A Practical Approach." - 1966.

Note: Includes correspondence and lists of attendees for the conference.

#### Container 048

File 007 – An Understanding of Jewish Practices, Customs and Traditions. / Jewish Family Services of the Baron de Hirsch Institute. – July 1984.

File 008 – The Communal Challenge: Final Report of the Long Range Planning Committee. – November 1983.

File 015 – Community Care for the Aged: a practical approach (working papers). – ca1966.

#### Container 051

File 002 – A Self-Study of Montreal's Jewish Community Camps / Herman A. Eigen, Study Consultant – August 1970.

File 003 – Report of the Day Care Study Committee / Community Planning and Allocations Committee, Allied Jewish Community Services. – October 31, 1975.

File 004 – Policy Recommendation on AIDS / Social Policy Committee, Community Planning Department. – November 1989.

File 005 – Jewish Vocational Service Long-Range Planning Report: Strategic Issues and Directions / Harry Schwartz et al. – February 20, 1991.

File 006 - Montreal Jewish Community: Attitudes, Beliefs and Behaviours (Executive Summary).

Community Planning Department, Allied Jewish Community Services. - November 1991.

File 007 - Preliminary Findings, Census Series, Part I. / FEDERATION CJA. - August 1993.

File 010 – [Reports and Statistics] / Jewish Education Council of Montreal. – 1982.

File 011 – Jewish Communal Leadership in Montreal: A Case Study. / Yogev Tzuk, Ph.D. – July 1984.

#### Container 053

File 001 – Projet Action Rapprochement / Allied Jewish Community Services. – ca1984.

File 002 – Montreal Jewish Community in Transition, Conference proceedings. / Allied Jewish Community Services. – May 28, 1979.

File 003 – French Fact, reports, memos, correspondence. / Allied Jewish Community Services. – ca1970-1971.

Note: File also includes position paper written by David Rome, "Position Paper on Jewish Program for our Future in Quebec"

File 004 – French Fact, A Study on the Attitudes of Quebec Anglophone Students towards their future plans regarding education and residence. / George Kantrowitz, Ph.D., Research Department, Allied Jewish Community Services. – ca197[?].

File 005 – Minority Communities in Quebec Society. – 1981.

Note: File consists of memos, position briefs and a report.

File 006 – Precise of White Paper on Cultural Development. / Jack Kantrowitz, Ph.D., Jewish Community Research Institute. – March 1979.

File 007 - Progress Report in the Field of Youth / Montreal Council of Social Agencies. - June 1970.

File 017 – Canadian Conference on Aging / Federation and Canadian Welfare Council. – 1964-1965. Note: File consists of correspondence and reports on the conference.

#### Container 053

File 021 – Evaluation Study of Youth Retention Program of Jewish Vocational Services / Research Department, Allied Jewish Community Services. – September 1984.

File 023 – Report of Youth Retention Action Survey / Research Department, Allied Jewish Community Services. – Summer 1980.

# Container 054

File 008 – Report on Services to the Aging / Allied Jewish Community Services. – November 1979. Note: File also includes minutes from the committee, 1968.

File 009 – Study Committee on Housing for the Aging. – 1966-1969.

Note: File consists of minutes, correspondence and studies from and used by the committee.

File 011 – Toward a new consensus: preliminary report of the long-range planning committee / Allied Jewish Community Services. – August 1982.

File 012 – AJCS Annual Meeting and Conference. – 1972, 1972, 1976, 1982, 1983.

File 015 – Yeshiva and Chasidic Needs Survey / Community Planning Department, Allied Jewish Community Services. – May 1985.

Website. http://www.accommodements.gc.ca/commission/mandat-en.html. <4 July 2008>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>i</sup> Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences.

ii Commission de consultations sur les practiques d'accomodement reliées aux differences culturelles.

iii Shahar, Charles, 2001 Census Analysis Series: The Jewish Community of Montreal; Part I: Basic Demographics (Montreal: FEDERATION CJA, 2003), p.2

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>iv</sup> The 1991 Canadian Census indicated a 58% increase in intermarriage of identified Jews (based on the Jewish Standard Definition), from 1981 to 1991.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>v</sup> Gerry Soiferman, "President's Address" (Annual General Meeting, Jewish Public Library, Montreal, Quebec, September 4, 2008).

vi Gen J, "Five Gateways to Jewish Identity", Federation CJA, Montreal, <a href="http://www.genj.ca/index.php/gateways/?langID=1">http://www.genj.ca/index.php/gateways/?langID=1</a>" (accessed August 2008)

vii Department of Community Planning, FED CJA, "Issues of Jewish Identity, Part 2" Dec. 1994.