

VICTOR TEBOUL

ESSAYS ON QUEBEC
NATIONALISM AND THE JEWS
(1976 - 1985)



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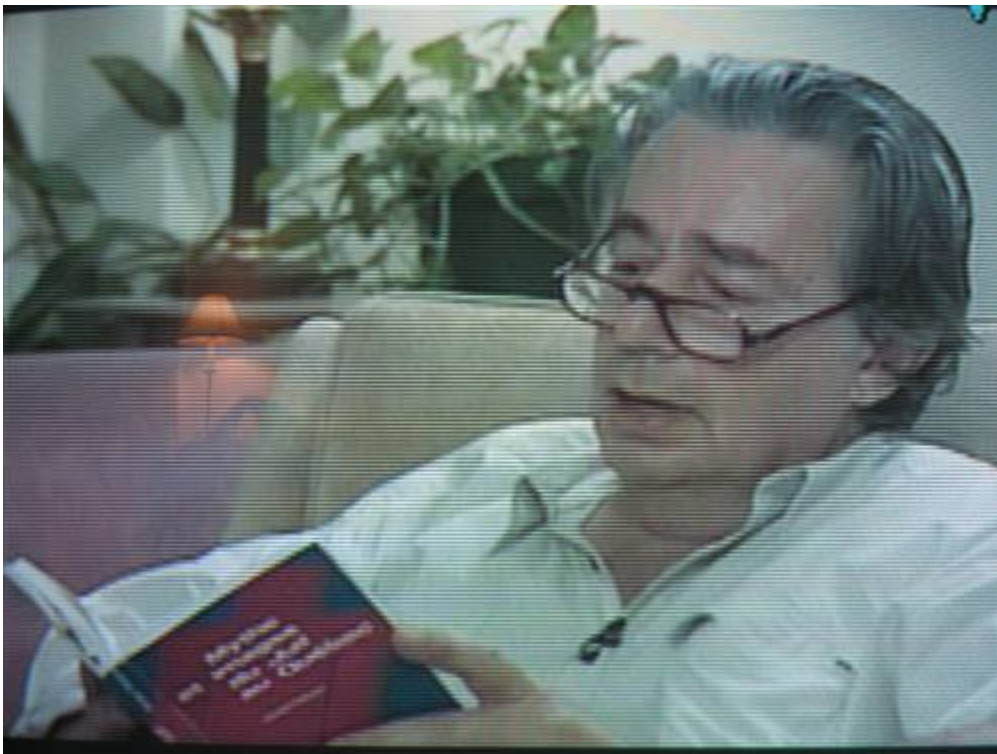
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About this Book

In 1976, the nationalist Parti Québécois came to power in Quebec and governed the province until 1985. A tense period followed its election within business circles and among the Jewish community. In the midst of this crisis, Victor Teboul's *Mythe et images du Juif au Québec* had just been published and it exposed a negative portrayal of Jews in Quebec's most well-read novels and history books. The book had a strong impact on the Jewish leadership and created some controversy among Quebec's francophone intellectual elite.

In his provocative *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!*, published in 1992, Mordecai Richler drew extensively from Victor Teboul's *Mythe et images du Juif au Québec*.



“Needless to say that as a Francophone writer, I obviously do not agree with his conclusions”, says Teboul. The picture above has been taken from the documentary “Mordecai Richler, le Cosaque de la rue Saint-Urbain”, released in 2010. Richler keeps reaching for Teboul’s book while being interviewed by Madeleine Poulin on antisemitism and nationalism in Quebec.

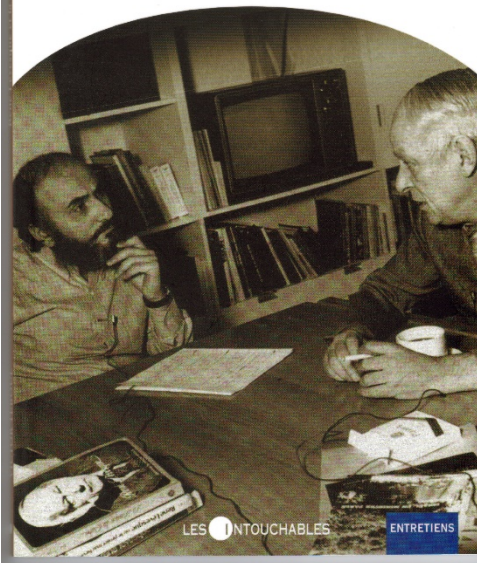
Following the PQ's election, Teboul presented his views about Quebec’s nationalist movement and its relation to the Jewish community in various publications and public forums, and proposed several venues to bridge the gap between Francophone Quebecers and the mostly Anglophone Jewish community.

In 1981, Victor Teboul was named Quebec’s Executive Director of the Canada-Israel Committee, as the Jewish Community’s principal lobby group was then called, with the mandate to develop academic and political exchanges between Israel and Quebec and to promote a better understanding of Québécois-Jewish relations.

Following his nomination, several high-level exchanges took place between Quebec academics and representatives of Israeli universities, and between Quebec’s syndical leaders and members of Israel’s Histadrut (general federation of labour). Teboul also arranged visits to Israel for several high-profile Québécois intellectuals, such as Pierre Bourgault and Monique Simard, and led a writer’s delegation on an official visit to Israel.

In November 1981, Teboul interviewed at length then Quebec Premier and PQ founder, René Lévesque, on Israel and on Quebecois – Jewish relations. The interview was broadcast on Radio Canada’s radio network and was published in Teboul’s essay [*René Lévesque et la communauté juive*](#).

VICTOR TEBOUL
René Lévesque
et la communauté juive



The essays gathered in the present collection represent a synthesis of Teboul's writings and reflections on that period, and constitute a document of historical significance for a better understanding of the Jewish community's relations with the Québécois. They reveal the crucial role culture played in Quebec's sovereignist movement and, in retrospect, they explain the difficulties that nationalists face today, considering the leadership that Francophones have acquired on an international scale in various scientific, technological and artistic fields.

About the Author

Victor Teboul, Ph.D. was born in Alexandria, Egypt. He has produced several radio series for Radio-Canada and is the author of numerous essays and novels. The expulsion of Egypt's Jewish community during the Suez Canal crisis was at the heart of his widely-read novel, [*La Lente Découverte de l'étrangeté*](#). As an academic, he has taught history at Université du Québec à Montréal and Quebec literature at a French-language college near

Montreal. He holds a Master's degree in literature from McGill University and a Doctorate in French Studies from Université de Montréal. He has sat on the Jury of the Governor General's Literary Awards for non-fiction. Dr. Teboul is the current Editor of the online magazine Tolerance.ca. For more information, please visit his web site: www.victorteboul.com

Also by Victor Teboul

Libérons-nous de la mentalité d'assiégé. Dits et écrits iconoclastes, Essay, éditions Accent Grave, Montréal, 2014.

Revisiting Tolerance. Lessons Drawn from Egypt's Cosmopolitan Heritage, Tolerance.ca Publications, Ebook, Kindle, Kobo, Google Play, 2014, 2015.

Jean-Charles Harvey et son combat pour les libertés, Essay, Tolerance.ca Éditeur, Montréal, Ebook, Kindle, Kobo, 2013.

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La Lente découverte de l'étrangeté, Novel, Éditions Les Intouchables, Montréal, 2002.

René Lévesque et la communauté juive, Essay and Interview, Éditions Les Intouchables, Montréal, 2001.

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Mythe et images du Juif au Québec, Essay, Éditions de Lagrave, Montréal, 1977.

Magazines (Founding Editor)

Tolerance.ca®, webzine, online since 2002: www.tolerance.ca

Jonathan, monthly magazine, published in Montreal (1981 – 1986).

Radio broadcasts

Author and host of the following series aired on the cultural network of Radio-Canada: Diversity in Quebec, Quebec's Jewish Community, Israel's 40th Anniversary, Liberalism in Quebec.

Articles

Essays and commentaries published in collective works and in various periodicals.

For my friend, Leon

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Quebec's nationalism and its cultural elite

In the late seventies, with a sovereigntist party leading the province, Quebec and the Federal government were competing to ensure maximum visibility to their respective national holidays, namely Saint-Jean-Baptist Day, which is celebrated on June 24, and Canada Day on July 1st, which marks the founding of Confederation. The following article appeared in the op-ed pages of Montreal's *Gazette* in July 1978.

Now that both governments have spent their millions to promote Canadian and Quebecois culture, it might be worth considering closely, with the festivities of Canada Week and Quebec's Saint-Jean Baptist Holiday still fresh in our minds, the political significance of culture.

Culture, at least in Canada, seems to manifest itself as an opposing force. Canadian nationalism has for some time thrived by opposing American control of what was considered to be specifically Canadian. It turned out our intellectuals were especially concerned with the excessive number of American professors in our universities.

By the same token, our Canada Day holiday has expanded into an expensive Canada Week Festival as a reaction to the Saint-Jean Baptiste festivities, particularly since the Parti Quebecois' election. Culture, here in Canada, thrives as long as it has some force to oppose, and nowhere is this defence mechanism so effectively expressed as in Quebec.

This is all the more true in that Quebec's mythology seems to derive directly from its political situation in Canada. The situation

has structurally conditioned Quebecers to feel and act as a minority and as such has obliged them to be constantly on the defensive.

This legitimate attitude has led French Canadians and particularly their nationalistically inclined elite, especially writers, to be opposers: they opposed conscription during the two world wars, they opposed immigration, Jewish schools, non-Catholic unions, industrialization, and even the screening of supposedly corrupting U.S. movies.

Inevitably this defence mechanism has impregnated culture, where resistance and revolt run as a tradition.

This resistance has permeated Quebec's culture so proudly that it has become an integral part of the Quebecois' identity. It can even be discovered in non-separatist authors such as Gabrielle Roy and Yves Thériault, who belong to a category of writers usually considered politically inactive.

But nowhere is this reaction so massively propagated as in the songs of 'chansonniers' where the connotations associated with the term Quebecois are equated with the idea of oppression.

For the mythological image of the Quebecois that most often dominates in the collective psyche - and which is not all fiction - is that of an underdog, oppressed and dominated throughout Canada's history - usually commencing with the defeat of the French, an event which, of all ironies, is called 'la Conquête'.

Such an idea comes through clearly, although at times implicitly, not only from songs but also from novels, plays, poems, even films and it gives legitimacy to aspirations for freedom.

People in the media are usually sensitive to this image if it is not overdone. Critics seem in general favorably inclined towards artistic forms containing such a perception. Quebec's movie critics association has recently awarded their annual prize to Gilles Groulx's '24 heures ou plus', a film withheld by former National Film Board Commissioner Sydney Newman, who considered it subversive.

Struggle and resistance are then deeply entrenched in Quebec's culture. Among Quebec's singers, those most popular amid all age groups, whether Pauline Julien or Félix Leclerc, are also, at least culturally, its chief standard-bearers embodying through their songs a struggle of two centuries.

Contrary to the American ant-war songs, now part of history, the protest song is alive and well in Quebec, and it will be until Quebec is not regarded a minority as in the present political structure.

It is of no surprise that since the PQ's election, the Saint-Jean-Baptiste festivities have had no more need of the 'chansonniers' to boost the collective ego and to voice this resistance. Both have been institutionalized with the independentists' arrival in power.

Conversely one can understand why the super-shows of Canada Week can only round up French-Canadian entertainers (as opposed to 'chansonniers') who in addition to being able to sing in English, can (one is tempted to add) also appeal indistinctly to vast audiences of various ethnic backgrounds

So we were offered bilingual singers such as René Simard and Nanette Workman whose hips beat to the ephemeral disco sound;

singers straight out of the 1960s as Michel Louvain and Pierre Lalonde and even Elvis imitator Johnny Farago.

These shows seem typical of the desire to project at all costs the image of a bilingual Canada, but in fact succeed in confirming in the minds of most Québécois the atonality of Canadian culture. For what is distinctly Canadian in the disco beat?

Contrary to this type of plastic culture where the lyrics of the songs have no profound significance, that of the resisting Québécois counter-culture remains strongly influenced by literature and poetry in particular. This is what makes its force.

Gilles Vigneault is essentially a poet as is Fernand Dumont, sociologist and mastermind of the White Paper on Culture. Poetry everywhere has been subversive; this is a way is its nature. From Michèle Lalonde, now an important functionary in the cultural affairs department, to the legendary Gaston Miron, the same struggle is conveyed. Quebec's 'protest' song seems then the natural extension of poetry, the latter offering to the former its intellectual background. It is that same revolt which explains the popularity in Quebec of cajun singer Zachary Richard, whose blue jeans, old accordion and plaintive melodies echo a theme very popular among the Québécois, that of the uprooted, the exploited, the oppressed.

But the appeal of lyrics or the art of using words has long been part of French Canadian culture as Quebec's leaders were quick to discover from Henri Bourassa to Maurice Duplessis and closer, to us, Pierre Trudeau and René Lévesque. They all share one common characteristic: effective rhetoric.

It is this literary tradition that characterizes to this day Quebec's elite. And although French Canadian publishers constantly growl at the foreign control – particularly French – of their sector, few nations of five or six million inhabitants produce such an incredible number of books monthly which specifically deal with one same topic: themselves.

Such a tremendous amount of energy coming of all groups from a predominantly and brilliant part of the elite will inevitable tint if not stain Quebec's collective subconscious if Quebecers do not achieve equal status with the rest of Canada.

Quebec's intelligentsia, its most creative people, constitute a powerful force behind the nationalist movement, a force most often ignored by analysts who generally minimize the importance of culture and literature and who do not perceive the essential role writers and poets have played in Quebec in arousing and keeping alive French Canadian identity.

In this perspective, fighting the PQ in a referendum is equivalent to fighting French Canadian mythology. That is precisely the major flaw in the current debate: Quebec's present situation is treated as a purely political issue.

Although such issues may entail long term consequences, they are tied to immediate factors – unemployment, inflation and so on – and are centred on political figures whose constitutional views may well prevail for a few years. On the other hand, Quebec's mythology is probably here to stay permanently and so is this defensive-minority complex as long as Quebec's minority status is not modified.

A negative result to the coming 1980 referendum will only perpetuate the resistance mythology even if the PQ is no longer on the scene, for the real issue is a question neither of politics nor economics. The real issue is deeply rooted in Quebec's collective conscience.

Québécois culture at odds with Americana

Elected for the first time in Canada's history to lead Quebec's government, René Lévesque and his Cabinet struggled to get their sovereignist option recognized in the United States. The following article examined a mission Lévesque led to California in October 1978. It was published in the op-ed pages of Montreal's *Gazette*.

The journalists who recently accompanied René Lévesque's party in the United States unanimously agree: the cultural aspect of his public relations tour in California was a complete failure.

Originally planned to introduce Quebec's culture to the Americans of the West Coast –especially Berkeley's intelligentsia – it only succeeded in attracting the French Community of San Francisco.

Geared to an audience expected not only to be aware of Quebec's problems but that could also understand French – and Québécois French at that – the public relations cultural tour projected the image the elite here has always favored: that of an oppressed culture, an oppression equated in a theatrical performance with that of women.

In addition to Pauline Julien, the passionaria of Quebec's independence, the seven-day display of this nationalist theme also included among others, poet Michèle Lalonde, whose work is passionately opposed to American mass culture.

This first encounter with America is in a way ironic. For the fact is that not only has a Quebec government never been so intent on

acquainting Americans with Quebec's culture (and indirectly with Canada) but furthermore it is a nationalist government that has inaugurated these regular promotion tours.

For a movement usually branded by its opponents as narrow-minded and uncommunicative, these sincere attempts by the Parti Québécois to present to the United States the particular character of Quebec is most courageous. This is especially so because, for our southern neighbours, nothing really differentiates us from them except for our being geographically situated north of the U.S. border,

As it turns out, America has never heard as much of Quebec (and therefore of Canada) as it has since the November 15, 1976 election: Lévesque has given countless speeches and granted numerous interviews to the American networks, and the Dinah Shore show, taped one of its programs in Quebec city to promote tourism, thanks to the material and financial facilities granted by our provincial government.

The failure of this first cultural tour to attract the American public's attention should, it is hoped, raise some questions. It appears, if one examines closely the cultural scene, that one of the reasons could reside in the inhibitions Quebec's elite has developed toward North American culture and in particular toward Quebec's artistic expression in the English language. Why, for instance, wasn't there an English-speaking contribution to the California tour, other than Robin Spry's film *Action* (on the October Crisis) which supports the repetitious oppression theme? Why wasn't there someone like Leonard Cohen? Isn't he considered part of Quebec's culture? And wouldn't such an artist

have served to bridge a gap that has been widened, not by language differences, but by the cultural perceptions of an elite that has often been caught dreaming of a 'New France' throughout Canada's history.

In contrast, as our sports entrepreneurs are well aware, Quebec's people are naturally attuned to North American culture. But the elite usually looks down upon popular sports, and its newspaper *Le Devoir* compares poorly, as far as sports coverage is concerned, with the more popular tabloids.

Popular Québécois culture is usually frowned upon by Radio-Canada, an elite stronghold, whose criteria of good quality broadcasting are oriented toward Europe. The French language spoken on the air, especially the accent used, are as remote to Québécois French (and I do not mean 'joual') as the British accent is to the Southern U.S. drawl.

But this purist fixation on language and intonation is a continental complex. In Europe, the language and the accent that prevail in the media and the movies, contrary to North American tendency, are not those of the general public but of the ruling classes.

The cultural connotations of the Radio-Canada Sunday evening program *Les Beaux Dimanches* are typical of this elitist tendency. Following an hour of Quebec's singing talent, we were treated on October 15, 1978 to an in-depth news report on culture, complete with a story on the artistic designs of our shopping bags and an interview with Cultural Affairs Minister, Denis Vaugeois.

The final part of *Les Beaux Dimanches* was devoted to the trip to Austria of the Young Soloists of Montreal. It was an occasion for

the network to show us Beethoven's tomb, before an hour of classical music played by the young musicians in a typically European setting, a balcony of a sumptuous Austrian manor.

Although such programming is certainly enriching, it reveals nevertheless a strikingly different trend with the rest of the networks, both Canadian and American (except for PBS). At about the same hour, the topic on W5, on CTV, was alligator meat. Will we eat it? anxiously asked the reporter as a final note. On CBC, *Ombudsman* was again defending some underdog, this time, Small vs Big Business. Mighty Midget (a small store) was being evicted by powerful Plaza owners.

On the popular French-language Channel 10, in tune with what the station believes to be popular taste, we were offered a topic more up to date with the news: Anthony Quinn was being elected pope in the movie *The Shoes of the Fisherman*. On Channel 5, to cite one example of Americana, Bob Hope was giving a salute to baseball.

Such different cultural tastes from those of Quebec's elite – however refreshing in a North American atmosphere which has a tendency to monotonous conformity – seem to hinder efficient communication with the Americans when it comes to conveying Quebec's culture.

The obstacle to conveying Quebec's culture to Americans might come down to the elite's hostility to modern mass media. Its feats were inscribed in official policy such as in the government White Paper on Culture tabled earlier this year at Quebec's National Assembly.

Its authors, because of what they consider to be the fragility of French culture in Montreal, called this city a ‘dangerous zone’. But the rest of Quebec does not seem safer either, for the authors, powerless and apprehensive added that ‘television rules’ everywhere.

Culture – of the refined and purist brand – is in fact the bread and butter of the elite, which uses it, be it only in the form of language, as the substance of its trade in the teaching profession, in the judiciary, in broadcasting and newspapers; and in the arts.

It is only natural then that the White Paper on Culture was written for and by its members. Although they are avid readers of *Le Devoir* and of French weekly magazines such as *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Quebec’s highbrows ignore American popular magazines such as *The National Lampoon*. *Le Devoir*’s movie critic, usually an admirer of American films, found *Animal House* (written by the *Lampoon*’s editors) to be of rather poor taste. Similarly, the members of this European-oriented elite have probably never heard of the television comedy show *Barney Miller* and they most likely don’t even know, to judge from Quebec’s own inefficient television network, Radio-Québec (which has since changed its name to Télé-Québec), that there exists imaginative educational programming in the United States, the land of mass culture, which can be viewed on Channel 33.

Quebec’s version of educational television draws extremely low ratings because of this scholastic mentality pervading most of the elite, for whom this type of broadcasting means in effect back-to-school programming.

Radio-Québec seems to have one constant preoccupation and that is to teach history to its viewers. But instead of producing attractive programs to get the message across, the network hires prestigious history professors complete with blackboard, diagrams and stick, who talk endlessly uninterrupted by commercials.

It succeeds boring an already limited audience. As Radio-Québec is back on the air after the second long strike in its short existence, we will shortly find out if it has learned from its setbacks.

History, it seems, is the third major element which, together with language and a discreet admiration of purist Europe, constitutes the culture of Quebec's elite.

Quebec's motto 'Je me souviens', which the PQ brought to everyone's attention by inscribing it on car license plates, is symbolic of the importance the revival of the past has in the minds of the elite. For Quebec's history is not meant to provide nostalgia. On the contrary, it serves not only as a constant reminder of survival and of the perils entailed, but also of the presence of the past.

And here contradictions inevitably appear among the elite, for it cherishes the ancient French expressions and songs the Québécois have managed to preserve. Yet this vocabulary is not aired on radio or television.

But other than that, identification with things past is quite strong among the elite, as the high prices of ancient furniture and French-Canadian handicrafts testify. Genealogical societies are also very active as is the surveillance of ancient buildings liable to be

declared of some historic value. *Le Devoir* runs a regular column to that effect called 'Le Patrimoine'.

The elite, in short, is close in its conservative mentality to the traditional New England upper classes, except for one important difference: it lacks the same power and wealth.

Stereotyping of Jews in Quebec

The following article was published in the spring of 1978 in the Montreal's *Gazette's* op-ed pages. *Ici Québec*, a nationalist French Canadian magazine, had qualified Zionism as being a form of cancer and prominent members of the PQ government were associated with the periodical. As my essay *Mythe et images du Juif au Québec* had appeared a year earlier, the following article examined perceptions of Jews among Quebec's intelligentsia.

The virulently anti-Jewish articles published by *ICI Québec* recently have once again raised the question of anti-Semitism in Quebec and have confirmed in the minds of many in the Jewish community what is thought to be a true reflection of Quebec's nationalists.

The facts however are much more complex.

The ties this periodical has with the Saint Jean Baptiste Society seem to reveal right-wing tendencies which could be traced to the much respected and admired Lionel Groulx whose thoughts have influenced generations of Quebec's intellectuals.

Groulx's nationalism, inspired by French monarchist Charles Maurras, was voiced in his own periodical *L'Action française* of which he was the editor in the 1920s and where anti-Semitic and xenophobic sentiments occupied considerable space. When Maurras' *L'Action française* was condemned by the Pope, Groulx

hastened to change the name of his own publication to *L'Action nationale*,

It reappeared in the 1930's edited by André Laurendeau, later one of the editors of *Le Devoir* before being appointed co-chairman of the B & B Commission in the 1960s. Strongly influenced by Groulx, it continued its anti-Semitic stand, was vehemently opposed to immigration and proclaimed its pro-fascist sympathies. Although André Laurendeau later acknowledged and regretted his anti-Semitic feelings, most nationalists today tend either to ignore these anti-Semitic sentiments of their idols or consciously attempt to veil these disagreeable aspects of their past.

However, today's nationalism is not of the same brand that prevailed until the 1940s – this conservative, guild-oriented ideology of which *ICI Québec* is reminiscent – for politically its objectives are, if not socialistic, at least socially inclined.

Nationalism, however, has no exclusive claim on anti-Semitism in Quebec. In fact anti-Jewish feelings in the 1930s were quite common in North America; people as popular as Lindbergh were openly Nazi sympathizers.

There is one basic difference. After the war, intellectuals of most western nations became aware of the animosities expressed toward the Jews in their own countries and tried to scrutinize these feelings. In Quebec, historians tended to say that anti-Semitism never existed here, or that it was expressed only by marginal groups and individuals such as Adrien Arcand.

In fact, it was predominant in history books, well-read newspapers and periodicals and was never discouraged energetically by the clergy.

Scholars here became interested in the matter in the early 1970s and only incidentally while studying other topics.

Part of Quebec's problems stems from the fact that Quebecers are not aware of their past or conveniently disregard episodes of their history which could be instructive.

In the same vein, many intellectuals do not like to be told by outsiders or by non-French-Canadians, especially if they are themselves francophones, realities that do not correspond to their own particular thought.

Quebecers in general are above all still very touchy when one tries to break down stereotypes still widespread here. And no other stereotype is as deeply entrenched as the one concerning Jews.

Although it is not verbally violent as is the classic anti-Semitic portrayal of the Jew, it is nonetheless closely connected to anti-Semitism. In reality this stereotype is so rooted in the collective mind that it is that closer to a conviction than a legend and consequently has the attributes of a myth.

The mythical image of the Jew has one main characteristic: its association with money. It has proven to be so wildly spread that it has found its way in well-read and admired Quebec novels. It comes indeed as a shock to discover in Gabrielle Roy's books, among others, that Jewish characters are so preoccupied with money. Debasing characteristics (more often peddlers, always

merchants) evoke quite explicitly the unscrupulous manner money has been acquired or the supposed stinginess of Jews.

One could rightfully argue that a great number of Jews at the turn of the century and later on were in fact tradesmen and were not all ideal images of honesty and uprightness.

But it should be pointed out that literature tends to freeze a character and to confer upon him an extra-temporal duality. It creates what is commonly called symbolic types, which remain in the reader's subconscious if they do not serve to reactivate and reinforce already existing misconceptions.

The image is so persistent that even popular comedian Yvon Deschamps makes it the centre of one of his monologues where the biblical figure of Abraham is transformed into a unilingual English-speaking merchant always eager to make a good deal and who would even go as far as to cut his own son's throat to attain his goal.

This is designed to provoke laughter and the whole audience seems to have a good time listening to Deschamps. The peculiar thing about it is that when the same comedian, with a tongue in cheek attitude, resorts to the stereotype of the woman, we can hear the same audience protest.

I was a little surprised to hear Deschamps use the stereotype with no other evident intention but to obtain easy laughter, for in a preceding monologue he had tried to confront his audience with its own prejudices and had depicted an Orthodox child in such a way as to neutralize prejudice. This monologue, entitled appropriately

Intolérance, was worthy of praise, for it had a strong, stunning effect on the audience.

If the image is prevailing and persistent, it is not the only one. After World War II a second image appeared which I called in my essay, the Ideal Jew, in opposition to the preceding mythical figure.

It is an idealistic perception in that it corresponds to what French Canadian intellectuals value most, culture. So the Ideal Jew is cultivated, has a refined taste, likes music and art, and speaks perfect French, a useful prerequisite. He is also Ideal Jew is honest and intelligent and is even seen himself as a victim, especially of Nazi anti-Semitism.

A third figure that comes out quite clearly in Quebec's literature is that of the Jewish female, which appears also in the 1950s and 1960s.

It is an erotic figure that predominates, because French Canadian authors were then discovering physical love and could express their fantasies more freely through her. Perceiving her as a foreigner, they felt less inhibited than they would toward the French Canadian woman. Physically, she usually evokes an exotic biblical image.

These are the three main images of the Jews as they appear in Quebec's literature. Attitudes toward Jews in Quebec either correspond to these images in some way or other, are a combination of these or derive from one of these.

In the early 1960s, for example, there has been a strong leftist current among French Canadian intellectuals which identified with the Third World and with oppressed minorities.

Well-known nationalist writers such as Hubert Aquin, Pierre Vadeboncoeur and even Pierre Vallières perceived Jews as underdogs of society. They drew parallels with their own ordeal in non-fiction essays.

But although the writings of these authors are certainly influential, they do not have an impact on a massive scale, where unfortunately the Mythical Jew tends to reappear, unchallenged.

Québécois culture, an aura of untouchability

Although Quebec has become diverse and multicultural, the French-language television networks still continue to project a monolithic image of society, despite the fact that several leading Québécois writers and artists come from varied cultural and racial backgrounds. This projection of Québécois identity is in striking contrast to the English-language media's representation of Canada. The following article appeared in the summer of 1978 in the op-ed pages of Montreal's *Gazette*.

It was mentioned earlier that French Canadians tend to react in an oversensitive manner when someone questions their cultural perceptions, especially if that critique is expressed by someone who is not a native Quebecer.

For culture in Quebec appears to be the only authentic form of expression possessed by French Canadians, contrary to other modern nations whose particulars may be revealed through other means, such as a distinct technology or a specific national industry.

Because of this uniqueness, cultural forms –whether novels, plays or films – have an aura of untouchability which tends to deflect serious criticism. This aura fortunately is receding, but at an extremely slow pace.

This oversensitivity derives from an idyllic, almost condescending image many Québécois have of themselves as a fragile entity in North America and it is this image that a great number of intellectuals, especially creators, project whether they adhere or not to the nationalist ideology. It is kept alive and perpetuated by history books, literature, plays, songs, even television.

In a way this could be explained by Quebec's history, which was characterized until the 1960s by rebuffs to newcomers, its rejection of industrialization and its refusal of liberal-capitalist philosophy of North America.

These reactions, although in the name of survival, were nevertheless reactions of an insecure minority, insecure even in its own province. And, as the word province implies in French, some degree of subordination is involved in the political status Quebec has had within Confederation.

Such a status has never really been accepted by intellectuals of French Canada, and bilingualism in the 1960s could be viewed as an attempt by English Canada to give Quebecers (but significantly not Quebec) some form of equal status, at least within the federal superstructure.

The mental barriers erected by the clergy and Quebec's classically educated intellectuals do not just fade away overnight. Newcomers today, even though they speak French, do not become as easily part of French Quebec as they can become part of English Canada. It is at times quite frustrating.

The term Québécois is still too restrictive. One can become a Canadian, for there exists such a nationality. One cannot become a Québécois for the latter has no legal definition.

Yet Francophone Quebecers who are not French Canadians feel the pressure of having to identify with the Québécois while this identity remains undefined and appears to designate a closely knit group, in other words, a minority. Who would like to be part of a minority, and if the desire is present, how can one do so?

The Québécois today still tend to perceive themselves as one big family. If one's name is Polish or Greek, he is definitely not seen as being a potential or actual Québécois.

One's accent is also a straight giveaway in a context where language is more than a preoccupation. It's an obsession, as one is reminded daily by Quebec's major newspapers whose linguist columnists comment on how to speak.

The French Canadian accent is what seems to an outsider the most difficult part of the language to be acquired. Indeed, it seems an impossible task, for the French Canadians themselves – and especially their elite – look down upon it. In a way they want you to speak French not Québécois: and the latter remains the language of an in-group, similar in some respects to Yiddish.

It is not surprising that this restrictive and static image of the Québécois as white, French Canadian and Catholic is projected by the media.

Some people in the ad business have cashed in on these cultural minority traits by using them very effectively in the commercials

they conceived for major companies. A well-known advertising executive has even compiled a handbook on how to utilize them effectively in ad campaigns.

On French television, reporters who appear on the screen are almost exclusively French Canadian, in striking contrast to the English networks, where the image projected is multiethnic and where even French Canadians with strong French accents appear as the hosts of television shows.

The soap operas also depict a 'pure laine' universe where Jews, when they appear, are characterized as people who do not speak French.

This image obviously does not correspond to reality, for Quebecers of various ethnic or racial backgrounds represent a different dimension of Quebec with which the Québécois themselves come into contact every day and form an integral part of Quebec.

Yet they do not appear in popular mythology as being part of Quebec. Television in particular instead of contributing to modify cultural perceptions, projects day after day in the minds of millions a monolithic and partial image of Quebec and of Quebecers.

Consequently one could argue that it is not the Quebecers of other origins who should integrate into Quebec's francophone majority, but the Québécois and especially their artists – script writers, film makers, authors – who should mentally integrate in their collective psyche the cultural differences of these Quebecers.

French Canadians have until the present tended to perceive other ethnic groups living in Quebec through the prism of an insecure

minority, which excluded any form of possible integration of these groups within the mental and restrictive definition French Canadian had of themselves.

When Claude Ryan had become publisher of *Le Devoir*, he became aware of this cloistered mentality and he opened his paper's columns, particularly in the 1970s, to people who had suffered from it. Furthermore, he hired a Lebanese-born Armenian editorialist (though significantly he comments on international affairs and is rarely asked to look at the Quebec scene). The support Ryan got from ethnic groups while running for the Liberal leadership derived quite naturally from what he practised at *Le Devoir*.

If the opponents of the present Lévesque government felt they needed a leader, such as Claude Ryan, who could command respect and who could embody values of integrity, intellectual perspicacity and openness, they owe it to the Parti Québécois which in the minds of many represents these values in the new political morality such as the law regulating party financing.

To many Anglophones, even among the Jewish community, the Parti Québécois does evoke these values were it not for its nationalist stand which blots them out. What they do not perceive, however, is that today's nationalism is not similar to the one that prevailed until the 1950s, even though some of its archaic expressions occasionally reappear. And what is more important, they fail to see that nationalism is an attempt to overcome this minority syndrome that has characterized French Canadians ever since Confederation.

In fact today's nationalist movement stands out when compared to other political organizations as the only authentic democratic party in Quebec. How could it be otherwise when most of Quebec's intellectuals, most of its writers and creators are, to a certain degree, behind it and have through their works, in one way or another, contributed to its emergence in the political scene?

In that same vein of intellectuality, intelligence and public exchange of ideas that has been introduced by the PQ's election, Jewish individuals have until now tended to shy away from political discussion about the future of Quebec, unfortunately accustomed, just as other groups have been in the past, to leaving their leaders speak for the community or to undertake lobbying.

The most articulate intellectuals of the Jewish community still seem to evolve and discuss ideas in the limited Anglophone circles, if not in the Jewish organizations.

It is important for all concerned Quebecers to break through cultural and mental ghettos. For whatever the outcome, Quebec has reached a unique stage in what has been so often called the awareness of its identity. Is it not time for the Québécois to also become actively aware of the cultural differences existing within Quebec?

Such awareness can only take place if Quebecers of all ethnic and religious backgrounds actively participate at the intellectual level and have their ideas voiced effectively. Quebec could only gain from such diversity.

On being a Francophone Jewish writer in Quebec

The following article appeared in *Viewpoints*, the literary supplement of the *Canadian Jewish News*, in May 1983. I had been appointed two years earlier to the position of Executive Director of the Canada-Israel Committee's Quebec Bureau, the principal Canadian Israeli lobby group, following the publication of my essay *Mythe et images du Juif au Québec*.

To fulfill my task I initiated, among other programs, the launching of a French-language magazine which, following various consultations, I decided to name *Jonathan*, after Yonatan Yoni Netanyahu who had commanded the 1976 Israeli raid on Entebbe, where he died in combat. Unique in its format, *Jonathan* hit the stands every month, except for a summer break. It attracted as contributors «la crème de la crème» of French-Canada's writers and intellectuals.



During my mandate I learned that, although Israel can be characterized as a dynamic and self-critical society unequaled in

the West, Jews in Quebec are oversensitive, because, among other reasons, language and cultural barriers often cut them off from the mainstream thinking of Quebec society; and this has a tendency to create misconceptions such as perceived anti-Semitic or anti-Zionist discourse, which become exaggerated in Jewish minds.



Also, one should bear in mind that René Lévesque's Parti Québécois was then in power in Quebec, a government with which the Jewish community was not, to say the least, on the best of terms.

In the *Viewpoints* article, I tried to put forward to an English-speaking Jewish audience my perspective on Quebec as well as the

intellectual background which contributed to my outlook as a Francophone author. I had not yet, at the time, published any novels. The following text was originally a presentation made during Jewish Book Month events held at the Jewish Public Library in November 1982.

Writing constitutes above all a tradition: by writing one becomes part of a specific society just by using a particular language or idiom. One places oneself within a certain sociological context which one proceeds to question. Being a Jewish writer in France or in the United States is certainly not the same as in Quebec, One can of course abstract oneself from the Quebec context, but for me it is a question above all of inserting oneself within this tradition; I must also say that at the moment, I prefer the essay form to fiction. This is because the Quebec novel does not appear to reflect the reality of daily life as well as does the essay, which embodies within its form the cultural and political realities of Quebec.

Less lyrical than the novel, although lyricism is no stranger to it, the essay remains in my view, the intellectual genre "par excellence". The writings of Olivar Asselin, Jean-Charles Harvey, Pierre Vadeboncoeur, and Hubert Aquin, played a major role in influencing me. What impressed me most in their work was their defense of liberty; which attracted me to them was the strength of their convictions, the power of their thoughts, which were completely opposed to the ideological currents of their times. This was not surprising since I discovered that their ideas evoked analogies between their condition as French Canadians and that of Diaspora Jewry; this was particularly true of Hubert Aquin and Pierre Vadeboncoeur where I found echoes of Albert Memmi and in particular of his "Portrait of a Jew".

Further in the past — still a recent past Asselin and Harvey discovered in the Jew a model to emulate. But if one places oneself in the context of the time - the turn of the century for Asselin, the 1930s for Harvey, the conception one had of another being's cultural difference specifically of the Jew is very revealing, The pejorative aspect commerce had acquired signified not necessarily a certain anti-Semitism, but more a refusal to establish a relationship with persons of different backgrounds. The perception of business entrepreneurship determined the kind of "rapport" one wished to establish with a stranger. This was not accidental for this attitude was confirmed by Benjamin Sulte, historian of Trois-Rivières, who was known for his genuine interest in the Hart family, and who favored the industrialization of which they were the forerunners.

POINTS OF REFERENCE

To get to know Quebec and its thinkers I had to empathize with their ideals; I also wished to discover the perception they had of me. I undoubtedly needed points of reference. This explains the publication five years ago of [*Mythe et Images du Juif au Quebec*](#), a work which posed, - admittedly in a rather blunt manner — questions which had seldom been asked in Quebec. Had there been then, one year after the Parti Quebecois took office, a blacklist of ethnic leaders, I assure you I would certainly not have been defined as a 'souverainiste'!

It was not permissible then to question the stubborn stereotypes which appeared to be polluting the atmosphere of normal relations that should exist between Jews and non-Jews. My attempt was perceived in certain nationalist circles as a brutal attack against the "Quebecois" soul, against a certain idyllic purity of the Quebecois - at least that was the conception which prevailed among those who modeled and propagated Quebec's culture. These were precisely the circles I had in mind while writing this book.

UNACCUSTOMED TO CHALLENGE

It must be admitted that the Quebecois intelligentsia was not accustomed to being challenged by an individual who did not come from their own milieu. It would undoubtedly have been less disturbing to them had I limited myself to describing imaginary or local ill-treatment undergone in a totalitarian and consequently anti-Semitic regime and had I evoked long periods of confinement in Egyptian jails for lack of Siberian experiences. I discovered - as did probably my readers - that there was a price to my integration and that any intelligent person could not really integrate into Quebec's society without also questioning his new milieu. The Québécois essayists whose work I had read and studied had achieved their objective: they had successfully transmitted to me their sense of questioning and continuity.

It was with this viewpoint that I also questioned the history of Quebec and some prevailing determinist interpretations. This questioning, which I continued during three years of research, resulted in my forthcoming work describing the revolutionary current which liberalism has represented in Quebec during the years preceding the Second World War. It was a mistake, in my view, to ignore the influence on the world of ideas, of a school of thought which vigorously opposed in Quebec the narrow nationalism of that period. (This work was published in 1984 : [Le Jour. Émergence du libéralisme modern au Québec.](#))

Sounding the dissident undercurrent in Quebec, which dared to distance itself not only from the federalist trend, but also and chiefly from the strong nationalist movement which has always dominated the cultural scene, is a very refreshing activity. Novelists such as Arsène Bessette and Albert Laberge in the 1910 decade, or Jean-Charles Harvey in the 1930's, and more recently authors Michel Morin and Claude Bertrand are stimulating examples of this dissidence.

While Québécois society constituted for a long period an exotic anomaly in the North American scene, in a certain sense a dissident society, we must not overlook the fact that it could not have survived unless it exercised great caution in its relationship with the outside world. Any overtures to foreign cultures could have influenced and modified its particular character. This was probably an instinctive necessary reaction not atypical of minorities.

NATIONALIST GOVERNMENT

Also, the fact that a nationalist government took office in 1976 represented in my mind the overtaking of these hermetic tendencies and the possibility, hitherto unexplored, of discovering and recognizing our differences. I considered it significant that a Parti Québécois Minister of Immigration (Gérald Godin) would begin the study of Greek in order to better penetrate the Greek mentality of his constituents. This attitude meant a change in the electoral attitudes of Québécois nationalists. The motive was undoubtedly political. but isn't polity a perfect place of interchange? Lionel Groulx whose name graces so many public places in Montreal, the father of Québécois nationalism, who personified the distrust of that period toward the outsider, this cleric, undoubtedly well versed in ancient Greek, must have turned in his grave at the thought of one of his disciples having to learn modern Greek in order to make himself more easily understood in the country of Maria Chapdelaine. Did this not prove that, after all, everything could change in Quebec?

The necessary recognition of a difference, and the determining role it can play on the political chessboard, indicated at least that a nationalist MNA, later promoted to a minister, benefited from this democratic exchange between the Parti Québécois and Montreal's pluralistic masses.

The nationalist movement had reached a new level. For while affirming the French identity of Quebec, was it not also discovering its heterogeneous character? Was it due to an irony of history or of the political power it has just acquired?

I am certain that the Montreal MNAs (members of the National Assembly of Quebec) of the Parti Quebecois know Quebec better today than when they were elected. Truly a milieu of exchange between people of different cultural backgrounds (one should read *Montreal Interdite* by Alain Medam), Montreal had for a long time been rejected by the French Canadian psyche. Politics, it seems, do affect collective dreams.

This undoubtedly explains why the municipal political scene of Montreal reflects more accurately the pluralistic dynamics of our North American cities. The three municipal parties easily surmount the linguistic and cultural differences which are too often the subject of debate in Quebec. The most recent municipal elections have clearly illustrated that the progressive forces in Montreal, those who strongly favor change and community action, come from the immigrant and Anglophone communities.

If the astute politician has good reasons to take into account the ethnic composition of his or her constituency — a natural dialectic in a continent populated by immigrants — it is quite a different matter in the realm of artistic representation. In the first instance, as we have noted, a necessary symbiosis is established, which is still lacking in the cultural scène.

At a recent colloquium organized by the "Institut d'Histoire d'Amerique Française", I tried to communicate the difficulty I felt in attempting to make the history of Quebec my own. I said, essentially, that although I could effectively speak of my street, and my neighbourhood, I could not speak of my history when dealing with Quebec's history. This applies also to culture: not only that which is lived daily by Montrealers, but that which represents

us, which is seen on television, in the cinema, in our daily newspapers and our novels. We must ask ourselves if certain books, like the one by Yves Beauchemin which is very popular today, entitled 'Le Matou', do not come to us directly from the 1930-1940 era, a period when foreigners represented all the evil influences which threatened the innocent and disarmed French-Canadian hero who came into contact with them.

Similarly, is not the world evoked by Yvon Deschamps in his monologues already "dépassé"? In other words, this Québécois culture, which he represents, is it not, in spite of itself, still full of all the elements of resistance toward America, which until now have characterized it and given it, to a certain extent, its specific identity?

When I think back to what attracted my parents to this continent, while already in the 1950's, in Egypt, they were thinking of Canada, I realize that it was a certain idea of America which brought us here. Despite our middle class values, a certain equality in the opportunities available to all, as well as the idea of individual initiative and entrepreneurship fascinated us. We, who had lived first under a monarch, well-disposed though he might have been toward his middle-class, whatever its origin, and then under a dictator who mobilized his masses and exercised his power against foreigners, including Jews, we Alexandrians ardently longed for the America we already knew. For Alan Ladd, Clark Gable or Rita Hayworth represented so well America at the Sunday cinema.

But later, in Paris, in the late 1950s, in the great hall of the Chief synagogue of the Rue de la Victoire (which we called the "Cathedral"!), when we young Jews, refugees from Arab countries, met our co-religionists from America who were visiting France, we felt a culture-shock. The young women wore glasses shaped like birds' wings, the young men had short crewcut haircuts and wore

baggy pants, and what's more, some of them were blond. Such encounters of the third kind were really the ultimate!

JUDAISM TRAUMATIZED

We, Mediterranean Jews, who bathed in the culture and languages of this part of the world, saw our Jewishness as being open to and in perpetual relationship with other cultures. The Montreal Jewish community that I discovered in the 1960's seemed to me to be the exact opposite of that which I had known during my adolescence in France and earlier in the countries of the Middle East.

Compared to American Judaism, multi-faceted and rich in philosophical reflection, Montreal's Judaism seemed to have been traumatized by the Quebecois' affirmation of their identity to the point of polarizing itself into extreme positions — either of closing in upon itself, or of defining itself solely in the context of this Quebecois affirmation.

It would evidently be a little too easy to see in the Sephardim a new expression of Jewish identity because of their assertiveness, as well as because they have been less traumatized by their contacts with non-Jews — at least in their recent past. Nevertheless, one must forcibly close his eyes not to realize that the Sephardim have established in Quebec a new relationship with the Quebecois, fundamental in my view, which is a rapport between equals. It is also not surprising that they have assumed today the leadership of French Jewry, whether in the realm of contemporary cultural or spiritual thought, as exemplified by essayist Shmuel Trigano or, by the Chief Rabbi of France, Rene Sirat, who is himself a Sephardic.

Consequently, in France today there is a new much clearer definition of the Jewish identity, chiefly due to the influence of the Sephardim. That the term "Jew" is once again being used in preference to the term 'Israélite', long considered more acceptable in post-Napoleonic French society, since it was more self-effacing

— this is in itself significant in a country noted for its tenacious and recurrent anti-Semitism.

In Quebec, however, because of linguistic differences, being Sephardic often means being given the role of intermediary between the authorities and the diverse organizations of a largely Anglophone Jewish community. However privileged or serious this responsibility may be, it does not correspond to the role of leadership, because of the lack of involvement of the Sephardim in the large Jewish organizations. The true leaders are recruited, to use the new Quebecois terminology, from among the "old stock" Jewish families. I will not elaborate on the relationship between the Sephardim and the Ashkenazim — some of my best friends are Ashkenazim!

NEW MAJORITY

Being Sephardic in Montreal also means being exposed to an ignorance of the Sephardic fact among certain American Jewish intellectuals. This ignorance manifests itself in the great American newspapers and even in such prestigious periodicals as the New York Times Magazine and the New York Review of Books. What upsets these intellectuals most is that the Sephardim in Israel constitute today a new majority who demographically and culturally have greatly modified the socialist ideology which has for so long characterized that country.

That Oriental Jews elect Menahem Begin and acclaim him as "Melekh Israel" - King of Israel - this is a far cry from the egalitarian ideal of socialism, which is after all a western ideal the kind liberally inclined intellectual Jews in the U.S. are nostalgically longing for. That the Sephardim, more traditional than the political establishment who held power until the arrival of

Begin, produced a sharp break in this ideology - this was undoubtedly intellectually difficult to absorb. That furthermore, these Sephardim take seriously every word uttered by their enemies, under whom their parents lived as minorities (we should read to that effect Albert Memmi's illuminating work *Juifs et Arabes*), is admittedly disconcerting to western-imbued thinkers who wish to believe in the miraculous effects of dialogue .

Today, more than ever, to be a Jew is to be a dissident, that is, to be a provocation to conformity, to proclaim openly the right to be different. And within Judaism the Sephardic branch is the living example of this difference. The convergence of the Ashkenazic and Sephardic branches of Judaism, not only in France and in North America, but above all in Israel is an eloquent illustration of the complementary dimension each one offers to the other. Their converging evolution into the modern Israeli identity serves to confirm, if need be, the indissoluble unity and strength of the Jewish people.

If it is true that being Jewish is a provocation to conformism and homogeneity, it is even truer for the Israeli, whose very existence is a permanent danger to totalitarian regimes, since it represents a clear model of self-determination to all minorities, beginning with the minorities within the Arab countries. When supposedly moderate Arab intellectuals, right here in Montreal and in Quebec City, in so-called academic forums publicly declare that Israel prevents Arab unity, one can understand the symbol which the existence of Israel represents not only for Jews, but for all minorities in the world.

Writing, I have learned, involves a serious responsibility. The old adage "Words disappear, but writing endures", is even truer today when every word spoken on the electronic media passes for the

truth. I must say that despite the power of the media, writing, in a slower and profounder way, still retains its influence.

Writing, then for me, means essentially creating ties between Jew and non-Jew; it also means questioning pre-conceived ideas and truncated perceptions. It is, finally, a means of strengthening, in times of crisis, the bonds that tie us together as a community and as a people.

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