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Jewish Public Library Archives: Relevant Resources of the 1960s

Montreal's Jewish community lived a very particular experience of the 1960s, as evidenced by the collections held at the Jewish Public Library Archives (JPL-A). As a community repository that has been collecting at the grass-roots level for over one hundred years, the stacks at the JPL-A provide insight into this tumultuous era. They reveal the complexity and shifting realities of local Jewish identity. The Jewish Public Library (JPL) was founded as a 'folks' library, a library for all which was the consolidation of smaller ideology-based libraries already in existence in Montreal. The collections of the JPL are broadened and enhanced by the onsite Archives, which since 1914 operate under the mandate to collect, preserve, and make available the social, economic, and cultural accomplishments of Montreal's Jewish community. The collections document the stories of individuals, institutions, associations, and schools. They provide a tangible image of Jewish life in Montreal over the last 250 years.

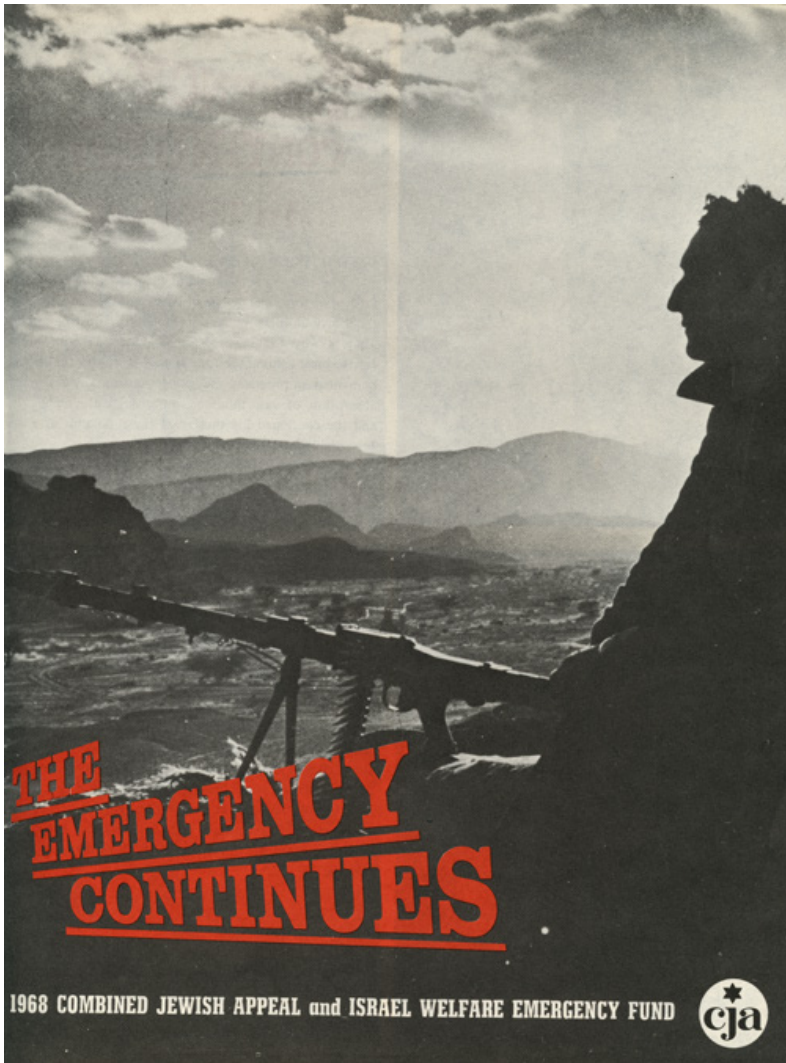
The Arab-Israeli War – Community Engagement

The photographic collections of the JPL-A contain hundreds of images capturing the Six-Day-War of June 1967. The documents in the Federation CJA (Combined Jewish Appeal) collection reveal the extent of the passion and planning that went into the emergency campaign arranged for Israel. As one of its oldest holdings, the JPL-A holds almost 36 meters worth of materials related to Federation CJA. Founded in 1916 as the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, it originally consisted of eleven Jewish agencies: the Baron de Hirsch Institute, Mount Sinai Sanatorium, Ladies Hebrew Benevolent Society, Herzl Dispensary and Hospital, the Montreal Hebrew Orphans Home, the Montreal Hebrew Sheltering Home, the Ladies Jewish Endeavour Sewing Society, the Young Women's Hebrew Association, the Beth Israel Day Nursery and Infants Home, the Hebrew Ladies Aid Society, and the Friendly League of Jewish Women. It renamed itself in 1951 to the Federation of Jewish Community Services, and again in 1965 to Allied Jewish Community Services. Under each name the Federation oversaw Jewish welfare, health and employment services, culture, advocacy, and summer recreation.

By the turn of 1960, Federation CJA was deeply involved in international relief work, aid to the Joint Distribution Committee (an international Jewish relief agency founded in 1914), as well as being a major partner in the campaign supporting immigrant settlement in Israel. In the weeks preceding the 1967 war, with no knowledge that Israel's military strategists were confident in Israel's position, Canadian Jews were convinced Israel faced an immediate threat of annihilation. As the crisis worsened, Canadian Jews, even those with no previous attachment to the country, joined in unanimous support of Israel. The community organized mass demonstrations, the largest of which brought together an estimated 14 000 Jews to the ballroom of the Sheraton Mount Royal Hotel. At capacity, the overflow of thousands began spontaneous demonstrations outside the hotel.¹ The threat to Israel intensified the anxiety of Montreal Jews who were already ill-at-ease in the new political and linguistic reality unfolding around them in the context of the Quiet Revolution.



Unidentified men assisting soldier from helicopter to ambulance during the 1967 Arab-Israel War, Israel. Fonds 1255, PR009871.



Joint Campaign Material: "The Emergency Continues". Published by the 1968 Combined Jewish Appeal for Allied Jewish Community Services, United Israel Appeal, and Israel Welfare Emergency Fund. Fonds #1001, File 00252.

The combination of the Six-Day-War in Israel and the intense social change shaking Quebec created a powerful bond connecting Montreal Jews to Israel and Jews around the world. While the war created a surge of all things Jewish as an expression of this sense of connectedness with the fate of the larger Jewish diaspora, Jews' new identification with Israel provided an alternative to the *Yiddishkeit* version of Jewish culture and identity that permeated Montreal of the era. We know this because the Federation CJA collection shows that its Emergency Campaign was flooded with support in the forms of pro-Israeli sentiment, fundraising success, volunteer work, community participation, and institutional growth. Certainly, the collection reveals the earnest plight of local Jews, their willingness to volunteer and provide support, and the creativity and selflessness of the community's organizers.

Soviet Jewry – Street-Level Expressions of Dissent

The Six-Day-War brought to the fore a heightened awareness among Montreal Jews of the plight of world Jewry and specifically that of Soviet Jews. Soviet Jews who proclaimed their Jewishness and support for Israel suffered greatly under that regime, and Canada's new identification with Israel extended to people oppressed in its name. The newly formed Committee of Concern for Soviet Jews reached out to Jews around the world for support, and Jewish student groups responded rapidly.



Save Soviet Jewry demonstration, YM-YWHA, Montreal, c. 196-? Fonds 1255, PR010119.

Street-level activism called for Soviet Jews to be allowed either to live as Jews or to emigrate. Other forms of protest soon followed and gained momentum well into the 1990s. B'nai Brith Hillel, the YMWHA, United Talmud Torah, Jewish People's and Peretz Schools (JPPS), the Jewish Labour Committee, and the Jewish Defense League, all Fonds which the JPL-A holds, contain unique stories of community-led dissent. These collections reveal community activism that included picketing Soviet tour-groups, boycotts of Soviet goods, targeting the Kremlin with a "Let my People Go" postcard campaign, and Montreal children being bar mitzvah-ed were twinned with Soviet Jewish children denied the opportunity. Support was also solicited from non-Jewish speakers with Jewish-community representatives provided to anyone interested in the topic. For the organized Jewish community and its leadership, the late 1960s was a time of identity renewal and revitalization. Institutional growth, community programming, and political action set the tone for the decade, and it was at this pivotal moment when a second wave of Jewish immigrants began arriving in Montreal.

Sephardic Immigration – Embracing Internal Plurality

Montreal's Jewish community in the 1960s was unique in North America in welcoming thousands of Sephardic immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East. This is well represented in the photographic collections, oral histories, and Federation CJA collections of the JPL-A. Moroccan independence in 1965 and the uprising against French rule in Algeria caused a panicked outflow of Jews seeking new homes. The Canadian Jewish community negotiated successfully with Ottawa for admission of Jews from Morocco, Iraq, and elsewhere in the Middle East. An estimated 11 000 French-speaking, Sephardic Jews arrived in Montreal over the course of the 1960s decade.²



Unidentified family meeting A. Rosen, accountant at the Jewish Immigrant Aid Services office, Montreal, c. 196-? Fonds 1255, PR002329.

Spearheading these efforts were Jewish social services agencies, and in particular the Jewish Immigrant Aid Services (JIAS), established in 1919 in response to the need to settle Jewish refugees post-World War I. JIAS Intervened on behalf of current and prospective immigrants, helping to secure housing, employment, language, and citizenship classes. As more Sephardic families arrived in Montreal, the community grew stronger as did its new sense of unique cultural, religious, and linguistic heritage. Instead of integrating into the established community mainstream, resourceful North African immigrants formed a parallel existence and leadership, with unique communal and institutional infrastructure. In turn, already established Jewish social agencies restructured their programs to better complement the cultural needs of the growing Sephardic community, and Montreal gained a Sephardic flair unknown in the rest of Canada. In 2008, JIAS merged with Jewish Family Services and Jewish Employment Montreal, and was renamed collectively as Ometz, the Hebrew word for courage. The JIAS Fonds are held at the Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives, while the collection of Agence Ometz is held at the JPL-A.

These are only a few of the Fonds housed at the Jewish Public Library that relate to the Montreal Jewish experience of the 1960s. The collection reveals an impressive breadth of material relating to an evolving Jewish identity. The events of the decade shaped the reality Canadian Jews live today, and tell a story unique in both place and time. The JPL-A continues to document the social and communal happenings that define the local Jewish community, its growth, and its identity.

1

Troper, Harold Martin. 2010. *The defining decade: identity, politics, and the Canadian Jewish community in the 1960s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 150.

2

Ibid., 231.