

“No Litvaks Need Apply”: Judaism in Quebec City

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Introduction

This article will examine the organized religious life of Jews in Quebec City from its mid-nineteenth century origins to the present. While individual Jews most certainly lived in Quebec City from the beginnings of British rule in the 1760s, organized community life was relatively slow in developing, especially in comparison with Montreal, which saw the establishment of its first congregation, Shearith Israel, as early as 1768.¹

The presence of a synagogue in Montreal, relatively accessible to Quebec City, certainly helped satisfy the religious requirements of those Jews who lived in Quebec who felt the need for these services. Thus in August, 1844, six Quebec City Jews pledged to contribute to the support of “a Reader [cantor, prayer leader] and Shohet [kosher slaughterer] in Montreal...for which they will be entitled to the services of the said Reader and Shohet for themselves and families whenever required”.² Three of them renewed this pledge in June, 1845,³ On December 3, 1846, the minutes of the Trustees of the Montreal Congregation records a request from Simon Levy of Quebec asking the

¹ On the development of Judaism in Montreal, see Ira Robinson, “Le Judaïsme à Montréal” in Pierre Ancil and Ira Robinson, eds., *Les Communautés juives de Montréal: histoire et enjeux contemporains* (Sillery, QC, Septentrion, 2010), pp. 23-37.

² Canadian Jewish Congress Charities Committee National Archives (Montreal) [henceforth CJC] ZD 1/1. The men who signed this pledge were Abraham Joseph, Isaac Benjamin, J. Craig Hart, Lionel Levey, A.A. Jones.

³ *Ibid.* The three men were: A. Joseph, Isaac Benjamin, A.A. Jones.

Congregation to send its *mohel* [circumcisor] so that his son could be properly circumcised, and the agreement of the Trustees on condition that Levy send the Congregation the sum of ten pounds (five for the congregation and five for the travel expenses of Mr. Mendells, the *mohel*, plus another three pounds to Mr. Mendells for performing the ceremony).⁴

The First Organized Community

While many religious needs thus could be and were provided through contact with the Montreal synagogue, inevitably Jews in Quebec City, when their numbers rose sufficiently in the mid-nineteenth century, began organizing communal institutions. As in nearly all North American Jewish communities, the first organized Jewish religious activity in Quebec City was the burial of the dead. According to Rachel Smiley, the first Jewish dead in Quebec were buried at a cemetery located on rue St. Joseph at the corner of rue Caron, a location now occupied by the Church of Notre Dame de Jacques Cartier, prior to the formation of a synagogue.⁵ The present Jewish cemetery was inaugurated some time in the 1850s, simultaneously with the founding of the first synagogue.⁶

In the first census of Lower Canada, taken in 1831, three Jews were listed as residing in Quebec City, as opposed to 85 in Montreal and 19 in Three Rivers [Trois Rivières].⁷ The census of 1851 lists forty Jews in Quebec City. The Jewish population

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Rachel Smiley, "Historic Sketch of the Quebec Jewish Community and Synagogue", *Dedication of the Beth Israel-Ohev Sholom Synagogue and Community Centre* (Quebec, 1944), pp. 9-11. The church in question was constructed in 1851, and was near the Cemetery of St.-Roch, which was closed in 1854, shortly after the inauguration of the Church.
<http://eglisesdequebec.org/ToutesLesEglises/swNotreDameDeJacquesCartier/NotreDameDeJacquesCartier.html> [accessed January 9, 2013].

⁶ Guy Wagner Richard, *Le Cimetière Juif de Québec : Beth Israël Ohev Sholom* (Sillery, Septentrion, 2000), p. xxvii.

⁷ Denis Vaugeois, *The First Jews in North America the Extraordinary Story of the Hart Family* (Montreal, Baraka Books, 2012), p. 153.

of the city had by the early 1850s thus grown to a point where there were sufficient numbers to contemplate forming a congregation. The first Quebec City synagogue, Canada's fourth⁸, was opened in 1852 at the corner of rue Saint-Jean and rue Saint-Augustin,⁹ moving to 7 Garden St. [rue des Jardins] in 1857.¹⁰

We gain an important insight into the Jewish community of the city in this era from a memoir of the first rabbi known to have served the congregation, Charles Freshman. Rabbi Freshman is not included in any published list of the Jewish spiritual leaders of Quebec because, during his tenure in Quebec City, he became a Christian and subsequently served as a minister in Ontario. Despite this, Freshman's autobiography contains several important insights with respect to Jewish life in Quebec City in the 1850s.

Freshman, who was born in Hungary and prepared for the rabbinate in Prague, arrived in Canada in the summer of 1855. On the recommendation of Rev. Abraham de Sola of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in Montreal,¹¹ he went to Quebec City and was accepted as rabbi of the Quebec synagogue, whose president was Henry Benjamin. He served as rabbi there, according to his testimony, "for about three years".¹² He was, by his own testimony compensated well for his services: "the support which I had received from the synagogue was liberal (my salary, together with presents and other

⁸ There were then two synagogues in Montreal and one in Toronto.

⁹ Smiley, "Historic Sketch", p. 10.

¹⁰ Luc Noppen and Lucie K. Morisset, « Lieux de Culte situés sur le territoire de la Ville de Québec », fiches analytiques-2-118, Synag. Beth Israël Ohev Sholem, p. 598.

¹¹ On de Sola, see Richard Menkis, Menkis, Richard, "'In this Great, Happy and Enlightened Colony:?' Abraham de Sola on Jews, Judaism and Emancipation in Victorian Montreal," *L'antisémitisme éclairé: Inclusion et exclusion depuis l'Époque des Lumières jusqu'à l'affaire Dreyfus*, ed. Ilana Y. Zinguer & Sam W. Bloom (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

¹² Charles Freshman, *The Autobiography of the Rev. Charles Freshman; late of the Jewish Synagogue at Quebec, and Graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary at Prague; at Present German Wesleyan Minister at Preston, Ontario* (Toronto, Samuel Rose, Wesleyan Book Room, 1868), p. 50.

perquisites, amounting to much more than a Methodist preacher usually receives)”.¹³ He also provided religious services, such as funerals, not merely for the Jews of Quebec City, but also for Jews living in Three Rivers.¹⁴

Freshman described his congregation and its worship in the following way:

My congregation in Quebec was composed of mixed nationalities of Jews, but chiefly German and English. I used to officiate in the Hebrew and German languages. It was not until I had been a long time among them that I tried to conduct a service in English. I had, however, overestimated my own powers, and miserably failed.¹⁵

The synagogue was thus quite typical of mid-nineteenth century North American synagogues both in terms of the ethnic makeup of the congregation (English and German) and the linguistic abilities of the rabbis, who were nearly all speakers of German, and whose ability to preach and conduct services in English developed gradually.¹⁶

The Jews of Quebec City supported an “Orthodox” synagogue in the 1850s, and, indeed, a non-Orthodox Jewish house of worship has never existed in Quebec City. The congregants, however, were themselves far from Orthodox in their personal lifestyle. Concerning the lack of traditional Sabbath observance among the Jews of Quebec City, Freshman wrote:

One thing struck me as very strange,—this I observed in connection with my charge in Quebec, almost as soon as I had entered upon the discharge

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁶ On contemporary rabbis in the United States, see Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2004), p. 96ff.

of my duties there: it was the little regard which the Jews paid to their Sabbath-day (Saturday). Many of them, after the services of the synagogue were over, would repair to their usual places of business, or go to the pursuit of their usual pleasures, apparently unmindful of that command so strongly set forth in the law: "Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath-day." I was horrified at their impiety, and remonstrated with many of them, reproving them severely for their conduct. Their excuse was, that the observance of the Christian Sabbath was enforced by law, and they could not afford two whole days in the week [away] from their business. Besides, they had to compete with the Christians in business, and if they would not accommodate their Christian customers on that day, they would withdraw their patronage, without which they could not make a living. These, of course, were weighty objections, but I succeeded in a few cases in over-ruling them, and enforcing strict observance of the Sabbath, according to the requirements of the Mosaic law. But my success in this respect was not very marked or extensive. I used to spend the Christian Sabbath in visiting my congregation, as they mostly spent that day in idleness or recreation.¹⁷

¹⁷ Freshman, *Autobiography*, p. 52.

Another incident related by Freshman sheds light on the lack of strict observance of the Judaic dietary laws [*kashrut*] in Quebec City. During Freshman's tenure as rabbi in Quebec, he met:

a Jewish Rabbi from Palestine [His name in the Hebrew is Nachum Hakohen], who had been sent out to America to collect money for the poor Jews of Jerusalem and Damascus...After he had collected something among the Jews in Montreal, he asked me whether I could do anything for him among my congregation in Quebec. I readily agreed to do all in my power...¹⁸

This visit of the rabbi from Jerusalem lets us know that Quebec City's Jewish community was considered substantial enough to be worth the while of a collector for Jewish charity from Jerusalem to visit. Regarding the observance of the Judaic dietary laws among the Jews of Quebec, Freshman records of the rabbi that:

He would not even take a meal of victuals anywhere but in my house, for fear they might not have been prepared in strict accordance with the requirements of the Jewish religion.¹⁹

The spiritual leader who succeeded Freshman after the crisis of his conversion to Christianity was Rev. Charles Kalomon, who came to Quebec in 1857. His title of "Reverend" likely indicates his lack of formal rabbinic ordination, something he would share with many of his successors. Kalomon's lack of satisfaction with the Quebec Jewish community, and, indeed with Canada as a whole, may well be judged by the

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

following notice which appeared in the largest Jewish periodical in North America in this era, *The Occident*, six times from August, 1857 to January, 1858:

TO CONGREGATIONS.

The undersigned is desirous to obtain a position as Hazan [cantor], Teacher, and Shochet, within the limits of the United States: he has the best testimonials from Rabbins in Europe, and the congregation of Quebec where he officiated for sometime. Address Rev. Charles Kalomon, No. 6 Amable Street, Quebec, Canada East.²⁰

It is evident from this advertisement that Kalomon, and probably Freshman before him, performed the duties of prayer leader [*hazan*], teacher, preacher, and ritual slaughterer [*shohet*]. In larger Jewish communities like that of Montreal, these jobs were divided among several men, but in smaller communities, like that of Quebec, one man perforce performed all these necessary communal functions.

Kalomon was evidently followed by a series of spiritual leaders of whom little is known: E. Marcusson, formerly of Nashville, Tennessee, in 1859; Levi Stern or Stein in 1861; Moses Cohen in 1862-1863; W. Steinberg in 1863-5; Simon Goodman in 1872; Scholom Schmidt in 1883.²¹ No rabbi was listed in the Quebec City directory from 1865-1871 and from 1873-1878. In 1878, the synagogue moved to the Masonic Hall, located at 51 Garden Street. In 1883 the directory has no record of a synagogue. In these years, the Quebec City synagogue was apparently not very active, paralleling a substantial decline in the Jewish population of Quebec City in the censuses of 1871 and 1881. One observer stated in 1866 that:

²⁰<http://www.jpress.org.il/Default/Skins/TAUEn/Client.asp?Skin=TAUEn&enter=true&sPublication=OCC&Publication=OCC&Hs=advanced&AppName=2&AW=1327081442456> [accessed January 21, 2013]

²¹ CJC.

In Quebec City the synagogue is open only three or four times a year, and a minister who traveled east to that city to celebrate a marriage rounded up a minyan [quorum for public worship] with some difficulty.²²

Evidently, the organized Jewish community that had been established in Quebec City in the 1850s had all but dissipated.

The Eastern Europeans

The 1891 Dominion census recorded only 45 Jews in Quebec City. By the 1901 census, however, the number of Jews in the city had risen to 302. This significant increase in the city's Jewish population was obviously the result of the arrival of significant numbers of Eastern European Jewish immigrants to Quebec City, part of a wave of immigration that was to thoroughly transform the Jewish community in Canada as a whole.²³ Once Eastern European Jews were in the city in sufficient numbers, they organized a synagogue that bore the name Bais [Beth] Israel ["House of Israel"] on Henderson Street. This congregation was described in 1896 as:

a dingy room in the third floor of a sailors' boarding house, far down in the shipping district...conducted by Russian Jews" who were said to be "touched with the air of London from the stovepipe headgear of the men to the "fried egg" of the little chaps.²⁴

²² *Hebrew Leader* October 19, 1866.

²³ Tulchinsky, Gerald, *Canada's Jews. A People's Journey* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2008), p. 93ff.

²⁴ Cited in Michael Brown, *Jew or Juif: Jews, French Canadians and Anglo-Canadians, 1959-1914* (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1986), p. 64.

This synagogue was aided by the remnants of the older “English and German” Jewish community in Quebec. As Smiley states:

After their [Eastern European Jews’] arrival, a gesture of friendship and brotherhood was made by the old Jewish Community of English descent which had rapidly diminished, to their less fortunate fellow Jews who had just landed. And among other things handed them over their sacred scrolls, rich with English and Spanish tradition, the proud record of the people of the book.²⁵

By 1897 the synagogue founded by the “Russian” Jews relocated to 164 Grant Street and in 1898, it advertised for a *shohet* [slaughterer] who would also serve as spiritual leader. This advertisement, which appeared in a New York Yiddish newspaper, attracted the attention of the newly established Jewish newspaper of Montreal, the *Jewish Times*, because one of the provisions of the advertisement was that “no ‘Litvak’ [Lithuanian Jew] need apply”.²⁶ While the *Jewish Times* article made the Jews of Quebec City objects of ridicule for this stipulation, the advertisement indicates that the “Russian” Jews of Quebec City stemmed from an area in the old country where Hasidism dominated, and in which, therefore, the slaughtering customs of Lithuanian *shohetim* would not have been considered proper.²⁷ The congregation ultimately secured the services of Moses T.

²⁵ Smiley, “Historical Sketch”, p. 10.

²⁶ *Jewish Times* (Montreal), May 13, 1898.

²⁷ Shaul Stampfer, “The Dispute Over Polished Knives and Hasidic *Shehita*” [Hebrew], Immanuel Etke et al., eds., *Mehkarei Hasidut* (Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 1999), pp. 197-210. On Hasidism in North America in this era, see Ira Robinson, “Anshe Sfard: the Creation of the First Hasidic Congregations in North America”, *American Jewish Archives* 57 (2005), pp. 53-66. <http://www.americanjewisharchives.org/journal/PDF/2005pp53-66%20Hasidic%20NA.pdf>

Eliasoph,²⁸ who would remain with the congregation as its *shohet* and spiritual leader from 1898 through his death in 1934.²⁹ Another rabbinic figure, David Rattner, is recorded as having served in Quebec City from 1898 to 1899 and possibly served another small short-lived “Russian” congregation.³⁰

It is important to note that Eliasoph’s official position in Quebec City, in a formal sense, was that of *shohet*. Though Eliasoph without doubt possessed more rabbinic learning than the members of his congregation, he was not considered a rabbi in the strict sense of the word by his congregants. When the Jews of Quebec City did feel the need for expert rabbinic guidance, they turned elsewhere. Thus in 1910, David Ortenberg of Quebec City wrote an “Open Letter to the Canadian Rabbis”, published in the Montreal Yiddish newspaper, *Der Keneder Adler* concerning the death of a Jewish peddler. Ortenberg raised the *halakhic* [legal] question of the disposal of the deceased man’s assets, which had been deposited by the Jews of Quebec City with “the *shohet*, Mr. Eliasoph”. In that case, the Quebec City Jews received an authoritative legal answer from Montreal Rabbi Hirsch Cohen that was also published in the newspaper.³¹

The Bais Israel synagogue relocated in 1907 to a building on rue St. Marguerite that would serve the community until the early 1950s, and the congregation was formally incorporated on April 14, 1908.³² In 1910, a second synagogue, named Ohev Sholom [“Lover of Peace”] was founded. This second congregation was certainly a sign that Quebec City’s Jewish population was growing significantly. On the other hand, it was

²⁸ Ville de Quebec, Service du greffe et des archives, file QP 1-4/194-198.

²⁹ A copy of Rabbi Eliasoph’s records of births, deaths, marriages, etc. from the years 1913-1929 is to be found in CJC ZD 1/4

³⁰ Richard, *Le Cimetière Juif de Québec*, p. xxv.

³¹ “An Ofener Brief zu di Keneder Rabbonim”, *Keneder Adler*, June 5, 1910; “An Antfer fun ho-Rav Zvi Ha-Kohen”, *Keneder Adler*, June 8, 1910.

³² Smiley, “Historical Sketch”, p. 10. The incorporation reference of the congregation is: 8 Edward VII, chapter 153

also likely that those Jews who founded Ohev Shalom seceded because they were dissatisfied in some way with the Bais Israel synagogue. The very name, “Ohev Sholom” is thus as likely as not an indicator of strife.

One piece of evidence that speaks to this possibility is that when the Montreal immigrant Orthodox synagogues were divided in the 1910s and 1920s between two rival “chief rabbis”, the two Quebec City congregations were to be found on opposite sides of the quarrel.³³ The new congregation Ohev Sholom was located on 51, rue des Fosses (now boulevard Charest). Its known spiritual leaders were Max Caplan (1910) and Hyman Meyer Crestohl, 1911-1919.³⁴ Crestohl, like Eliasoph, did not have the formal title of rabbi, and was known in Quebec City as “the *shohet* Reverend Crestohl”³⁵. The Ohev Sholom synagogue lasted less than two decades and was merged with Beth Israel in 1927.³⁶ The major reason why the second synagogue did not last, has to do with the demographics of the Quebec Jewish community. Though the Jewish population of Quebec City had increased almost tenfold between 1891 and 1911, Quebec City was only major Canadian city where the Jewish population actually declined between 1911 and 1921.³⁷ The Quebec City Jewish population stagnated after that as well for a

³³ Ira Robinson, *Rabbis and Their Community: Studies in the Immigrant Orthodox Rabbinate in Montreal, 1896-1930*. (Calgary, University of Calgary Press, 2007), pp. 45, 48.

³⁴ Richard, *Le Cimetière Juif de Québec*, p. xxv. On Crestohl, see Robinson, *Rabbis and Their Community*, pp. 81-84.

³⁵ T. Wein, “A Brif fun Quebec”, *Der Veg* (Montreal), February 25, 1916.

³⁶ Noppen and Morisset, «Lieux de Culte ». Long after the merger, however, there was still a recognizable “Ohev Sholom” group within the congregation. See Congregational minutes, CJC ZD 1/5 February 17, 1946.

³⁷ Joshua D. MacFayden, “Nip the Noxious Growth in the Bud: Ortenberg v. Plamondon and the Roots of Canadian Anti-Hate Activism”, *Canadian Jewish Studies* 12 (2004), p. 79.

considerable period so that, in 1944, Rachel Smiley acknowledged that the Jewish community contained “less than 400 souls, only 25 more than in 1921”.³⁸

One major reason has been proposed for the stagnation of the Jewish population of Quebec City from the 1920s to the 1940s, while elsewhere in Canada Jewish population continued increasing: the public manifestation of antisemitism. While dealing with the phenomenon of antisemitism in Quebec is beyond the scope of this article, it is quite clear that antisemitism existed in the Province of Quebec as a whole and in Quebec City in particular in the first half of the twentieth century.³⁹ Two very antisemitic journals appeared in the city: *l'Action Catholique* and *la Semaine religieuse de Québec*. Moreover, the 1910 speech of Notary Jacques-Eduard Plamondon which defamed the Jews and became a *cause célèbre*,⁴⁰ took place in Quebec City.

The communal furor aroused by Plamondon's libel against the Jews invaded the religious life of the Jews of Quebec. In the aftermath of that speech, “young hoodlums attacked the synagogue while people were at prayer, throwing stones and breaking windows”.⁴¹ When Quebec City Jews Ortenberg and Lazarovitz brought Plamondon to court for having defamed the Jews as a community, this violent demonstration formed part of the case that was presented against the accused.⁴²

On the other hand, the simple diagnosis of antisemitism as the sole cause of the Quebec City Jewish community's demographic decline needs to be reexamined on the basis of a most interesting description of the Jewish community of Quebec City published

³⁸ Smiley, “Historical Sketch”, p. 10..

³⁹ See the articles of Richard Menkis, Michael Brown, and Pierre Anctil in Alan Davies, ed., *Antisemitism in Canada: History and Interpretation* (Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992).

⁴⁰ Rome

⁴¹ Israel Medres, *Montreal of Yesterday: Jewish Life in Montreal 1900-1920* tr. Vivian Felsen (Montreal, Vehicule Press, 2000), p. 125.

⁴² Smiley, “Historical Sketch”, p. 9..

in 1916, shortly after the Plamondon affair. That description indeed speaks of Quebec City's heavily Catholic atmosphere, but mentions overt antisemitic acts not at all. On February 25, 1916, the Montreal Yiddish newspaper, *Der Veg* published a "Letter From Quebec" written by a "T. Wein". It commences with a description of Quebec City that emphasizes the strength and influence of the Catholic Church on French Canadians and gives this power a decidedly negative valence without, however, connecting this power to any detrimental effect on the lives of Quebec City's Jews:

Quebec City is an old French city where religion has a great influence. Priests there have more influence over the ignorant French people than God Himself. The dark power of Catholicism is more widespread there than over the rest of America. Quebec is the stronghold of the priests who are becoming stronger from day to day...

When, immediately after the description of French Catholic Quebec, the author turns to the Jewish community, he portrays it as something of a paradise for Jews and for Jewish life:

It is therefore very interesting to know how approximately eighty Jewish families live there. Economically the Jews are quite well off. The families of the 25 Jewish peddlers, 15 storekeepers, and 30 workers living there make a fine, tranquil [*ruhig*] living. Everyone here lives tranquilly and quietly just like in the old home [in Europe]. Jews in Quebec...have the time to pray three times daily, to rest on *shabbes* and in general to lead Jewish lives like in the old home...As you can see we find in Quebec a Jewish *shtetl* with the

spirit of home. This *shtetl* has two synagogues, two *shohtim*, four teachers of Hebrew [*melamdin*], and four Jewish grocery stores...

It is possible that the author wished to use the article to attract Jews to settle in Quebec City, and therefore de-emphasized the issue of anti-Semitism in the city. I do not think, however, that an argument from silence is valid in this case. A mere three years after the notorious Plamondon trial, which nearly all of the readers of the Montreal newspaper would have heard about, it is doubtful that the author could think to “get away” with a relative whitewash of antisemitism in Quebec City if he did not think his narrative to be true to the facts as he perceived them. For the purposes of our analysis, it is also significant that the article describes a small Jewish community whose religious observance is so traditional that it merits comparison with the Jewish life of Eastern Europe, the “old home”.

Even prior to the passing of Rabbi Eliasoph in 1934, the effective spiritual leader of the congregation became David Barnholtz, who functioned as rabbi, cantor and *shohet* for the community from 1930-1937.⁴³ In 1937, however, the Quebec City congregation began a new experiment in hiring the first in a fairly long series of rabbinical graduates of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University in New York,⁴⁴ Rabbi Bernard Mednick, who served the congregation from 1937 to 1945. The appointment of Rabbi Mednick is of significance in several ways. First of all, the position of rabbi of the Quebec City congregation was differentiated from that of *shohet*, which position was kept by Barnholtz. Secondly, Rabbi Mednick was the product of an

⁴³ In this connection, it may be significant that Eliasoph’s official register of births, deaths, and marriages CJC ZA 1/4 does not go beyond 1929.

⁴⁴ Gilbert Klaperman, *The Story of Yeshiva University: the First Jewish University in America* (New York, Macmillan, 1969).

American rabbinical seminary trained to fill the needs of North American Orthodox congregations, and thus constituted a new sort of rabbinical figure, significantly different in his education and orientation from the European-trained Orthodox rabbis who often did not receive American-trained rabbis as full colleagues.⁴⁵ In its appointment, the Quebec City synagogue was in effect declaring its confidence in the future of an “American” Orthodoxy.

It is evident from the synagogue minutes that from the beginning there was tension between Rabbi Mednick and *Shohet* Barnholtz. On December 18, 1937, Rabbi Mednick complained of “many unfair underhand proceedings that have been instigated against him even though he endeavored to reach an understanding with Rev. Barnholtz.” The major issue was that of prestige and precedence. Mednick insisted that the congregation place an advertisement in the *Canada Eagle* [*Keneder Adler*] that he, Mednick, is the only rabbi in Quebec City and that Barnholtz has no right to the title of rabbi.⁴⁶ Obviously Barnholtz, at least in Rabbi Mednick’s perspective, had been exploiting his previous leadership position in the community to exploit dissatisfaction with the new rabbi.

Another problem the congregation had at this point was with Quebec City’s only kosher butcher. In June, 1937, the congregation had to deal with the fact that the butcher, Mr. Weisberg, had raised the price of meat by 3 cents per pound without consulting the synagogue’s executive. It was stated at that time that, if no satisfactory compromise could be reached with butcher Weisberg, another butcher could be imported from

⁴⁵ On the ambivalent reception of American-trained Orthodox rabbis in Montreal in the 1950s, see Steven Lapidus, “‘The Problem of the Modern Orthodox Rabbinate’: Montreal’s *Vaad Harabbonim* at Midcentury”, *Studies in Religion* 40 (2011), pp. 351-364.

⁴⁶ Congregational Minutes CJC ZD/1/5 Cf. also meeting of February 17, 1937.

Montreal.⁴⁷ The essential problem, of course, was that the Quebec City Jewish community in the late 1930s, with an estimated ninety families, could provide a kosher butcher with a living only provided that all Jews in the community bought kosher meat from him. However as early as 1939, it was clear that there were not sufficient people purchasing their meat from the kosher butcher to ensure the kosher butcher's living.⁴⁸ In a congregational meeting of May 21, 1939, therefore, it was decided that it would be necessary to impose a tax on all synagogue members to support the kosher butcher. However in August, 1939, Mr. Martz, the butcher who had evidently replaced Weisberg, complained to the synagogue executive that the membership tax plan was not working and that it was impossible for him to pay the *shohet's* salary and make a living himself, and so he wished to leave. He was prevailed upon to stay at least until after the upcoming holiday season.⁴⁹

In July, 1939, Rev. Barnholtz left Quebec City. In response to its advertisement for a new *shohet* and cantor, the congregation received twenty applications from such places as Lachine, Quebec and Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, where small Jewish communities maintained this sort of Jewish religious functionary.⁵⁰ Barnholtz's successor was hired at a salary of \$25.00 per week plus an extra \$100.00 for serving as cantor during the high holidays.⁵¹ By 1943, the next time the engagement of a new cantor and *shohet* was dealt with in the minutes, Rev. William Shuster, who came to Quebec City from Saskatchewan, was hired at a salary of \$45.00 per week. At the same meeting, the price

⁴⁷ Congregational Minutes June 30, 1937. Cf. May 30, 1938, when Rabbi Mednick stated that Mr. Weisberg was not conducting the butcher shop properly, and, June 29, 1938 when the minutes announced Mr. Weisberg's replacement by Mr. Martz.

⁴⁸ Congregational Minutes April 11, 1939.

⁴⁹ Congregational Minutes August 28, 1939.

⁵⁰ Congregational Minutes July 16, 18, 1939.

⁵¹ Congregational Minutes August 6, 1939.

of slaughtering chickens was set at 15 cents, and the synagogue subsidy to the kosher butcher was set at \$15.00/week.⁵²

New Synagogue

By the 1940s it was clear that a significant number of Quebec City Jews had moved their residences away from close proximity to the rue St. Marguerite synagogue. There was a strong movement in the congregation to build a new synagogue. After several attempts, the community leadership found a site for a new synagogue. Its location was to be at the corner of Cremazie and de Salaberry. In 1943, the synagogue minutes record the congregation's intention "to build with [good] fortune and in an auspicious time a synagogue for the coming generations: that means for the children and for their children."⁵³

Unfortunately, the members of the congregation ran up against a wave of public opposition to the planned new synagogue building stemming from their Catholic neighbors that influenced the Quebec City municipality to oppose the building of the new synagogue. The Jewish perspective on this opposition is perhaps best summarized in the words of A.M. Klein:

Our readers will no doubt remember that for the last several years, Quebec Jewry has been desirous of building itself a place of worship in that pious city. Every time a site was purchased, however, the city fathers of Quebec

⁵² Congregational Minutes July 11, 1943.

⁵³ Congregational Minutes April 4, 1943.

found...that a building permit could not be granted...the synagogue question has already been converted into a political playground...⁵⁴

On the recommendation of the Canadian Jewish Congress the Quebec City congregation took the matter to court and began building on their site that the Quebec municipality had officially expropriated for park land. While the matter was before the courts the basement of the synagogue was built.⁵⁵ As Rachel Smiley describes it, “with hostile mass meetings taking place in the adjoining park, the building took shape.”⁵⁶

From the perspective of the congregation, the city fathers of Quebec were taking one unconstitutional step after another to prevent the construction of a place of Jewish worship. As A.M. Klein wrote:

They did, in fact, prepare the intellectual (?) background to acts such as finally occurred. When certain influences, week in week out invoked all the shibboleths of mediaevalism and went rampaging in a veritable orgy of Jew-baiting, they did, in fact, without benefit of torch or phosphorous, prepare the milieu for a deed such as was finally perpetrated.⁵⁷

On the eve of the dedication of the new synagogue, scheduled for May 21, 1944, there was a fire in the synagogue. It was immediately and widely reported that this was a case of antisemitic arson and Quebec City received a very bad reputation as a city which had forbidden the construction of a synagogue and burned a synagogue which had been built

⁵⁴ A.M. Klein, “Quebec City Gets Another Park” (18 June, 1943), in *Beyond Sambatyon: Selected Essays and Editorials, 1928-1955*, ed. M.W. Steinberg and Usher Caplan (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), p. 191.

⁵⁵ William Kernaghan, “Freedom of Religion in the Province of Quebec With Particular Reference to the Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Church-State Relations, 1930-1960”, doctoral dissertation, Duke University, 1966, p. 138.

⁵⁶ Rachel Smiley “Historic Sketch”, p. 9.

⁵⁷ A.M. Klein, “Incendiary Antisemitism” (26 May, 1944), in *Beyond Sambatyon: Selected Essays and Editorials, 1928-1955*, ed. M.W. Steinberg and Usher Caplan (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), p. 219.

in the midst of a war in which the Allies were on record as fighting for, among other things, “freedom of religion”.⁵⁸ In the aftermath of the fire and its attendant publicity, strong official opposition to the synagogue had obviously become politically untenable. In April, 1948, Quebec City officially rescinded the by-law expropriating the land on which the synagogue had been built and informed the courts that the case had been settled.⁵⁹ The upper part of the synagogue was completed in 1950-51 and it represents, in the words of Noppen and Morisset, “un des edifices les plus intéressants de l’architecture moderne à Québec”.⁶⁰

While the Jews of Quebec City had at last acquired a new synagogue, the rue St. Marguerite synagogue continued to function as a house of worship for the “Down Town members” until the early 1950s.⁶¹ The synagogue minutes in 1945 indeed expressed the sentiment that “as long as there are Jews Down Town who need a shul, a shul must be downtown.”⁶²

Postwar

Rabbi Mednick resigned as rabbi of the Quebec City congregation in 1945. Cantor/*shoḥet* William Shuster filled in until Rabbi Ephraim Carlebach was hired in the fall of 1945 at a salary of \$65.00/week.⁶³ Shuster himself was succeeded in his role of

⁵⁸ Isidore Goldstick, “Where Jews Can’t Pray”, *Contemporary Jewish Record* 6 (1943), pp. 587-597. For documents on this case from the perspective of the Quebec municipality, see Ville de Quebec, Service du greffe et des archives, file QP 1-4/194-198.

⁵⁹ Kernaghan, “Freedom of Religion”, p. 139. Congregational Minutes, May 2, 1948.

⁶⁰ Noppen and Morisset, “Lieux de Culte”.

⁶¹ Congregational Minutes, November 12, 1944; July 12, 1945.

⁶² Congregational minutes, February 17, 1945.

⁶³ Congregational minutes, October 20, 1945.

Cantor and *shohet* by Rev. Irving Kleinman, who served the community in that role until 1959.⁶⁴

In the 1950s, the Congregation published a series of weekly bulletins, of which a number of issues, published in 1951 and 1957-1959, are extant. Through these bulletins, we are able to get a reasonably clear picture of the congregation's activities and problems. One of these problems was sparse attendance at services on the Sabbath, likely due to the fact that many of the male congregants, who alone were counted in the quorum [*minyan*] required for communal prayer, were owners of stores that were open for business on Saturdays. Thus the bulletin of January 31, 1951, outlined a plan supported by Rabbi Joshua Epstein, another Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary graduate who served in Quebec City in the years 1951-1952. According to the plan, every member of the community would volunteer to be present at Sabbath services once every four weeks. It was evidently one of those plans that worked better on paper than in reality. On February 21 of that year, Rabbi Epstein issued a reminder for those who had committed themselves: "Friends, let's all work together and don't fail us if you are called". In the Bulletin of March 6, it was clear that the plan had run into difficulties as the rabbi commented that he was "surprised last Sabbath morning when some who had promised to attend every 4th Shabbat did not." Another indication that religious observance in Quebec City had fallen off is that, on January 17, 1951, the notice of the Sunday morning service followed by a congregational breakfast came with the reminder, "Don't forget your tefillin". This perhaps indicates that some of the men in the community, even when they came to the synagogue Sunday morning, were not putting on tefillin as required by *halakha* for males praying on weekday mornings.

⁶⁴ Congregational Bulletin, CJC ZD 1/7 February 6, 1959.

These trends toward lesser observance are confirmed in the memoirs of Rabbi Norbert Weinberg, who served the Quebec City community in the years 1957-1959. Rabbi Weinberg noted that the bulk of his congregants were not Sabbath observers in a strict sense.⁶⁵ In particular, Weinberg observed that the prohibition of driving automobiles, a key element in contemporary Sabbath observance for the strictly observant, was being widely ignored by his congregants.⁶⁶ Similarly, Weinberg noted that the standards of the dietary laws required for a strictly kosher home “simply did not apply to these people”.⁶⁷ Sparse attendance on ordinary Sabbaths was connected to the fact that the stores owned by members of the congregation were in fact open on Saturdays. On Jewish holidays that coincided with regular workdays, Weinberg found when he began his rabbinate in Quebec, that the cantor would schedule an early service especially if *Yizkor* [memorial prayer] was scheduled for that day so that the businessmen would be able to pray and then go to their work.⁶⁸ Weinberg took a public stand against this and the service was discontinued.⁶⁹

The Quebec City synagogue contained a *Mikveh* [ritual pool], an essential element of full ritual observance for Jews. Its main use in contemporary Orthodox communities is for the ritual purification of married women after their menstrual period in order to resume marital relations with their husbands, and it is also used in the ceremony of conversion to Judaism. Weinberg found that, when he came to Quebec City, the subject of *Mikveh* “was not discussed with brides before marriage as a result of which it was all

⁶⁵ Norbert Weinberg, *A Time to Tell: Stories and Reflections of a Rabbi From Kristallnacht to the Present* (Bloomington, IN, Author House, 2004), p. 88.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

but shunned by married women.” Weinberg began raising the subject in premarital meetings, but admits that for the ordinary Quebec City Jewish couple, the *Mikveh* was, at best, a once only ceremony prior to the wedding itself.⁷⁰

An interesting aspect of religious life for Quebec City Jews in the postwar period was the growth of interfaith dialogue between Jews, Protestants and Catholics.

“Brotherhood Week” in February, 1951 was celebrated with a mass meeting organized by the Quebec City B’nai Brith Lodge in the Chateau Frontenac Hotel for “all faiths”, with the main speaker being the director of the Ontario Knights of Columbus.⁷¹ Later that week, Rabbi Epstein addressed a meeting of thirteen Protestant ministers of Quebec.⁷² He also had the opportunity to present Judaism to a larger public through a program on radio station CJNT, scheduled on Sundays at 4:00 P.M.⁷³

In the late 1950s, Rabbi Weinberg found that interfaith work had become an expected part of his rabbinate. One difference between Weinberg and his predecessor was that he was called upon to meet formally not merely with Protestants, but with Catholics as well, whom Weinberg found to be “correct, polite, and friendly...very outgoing in their efforts at forging some kind of dialogue”.⁷⁴

The extant weekly congregational bulletins of Rabbi Weinberg’s tenure are distinguished by the inclusion of a weekly message from the rabbi, in which Rabbi Weinberg attempted to convey to his congregants some of the areas he hoped to improve in the religious life of Quebec City. On February 21, 1958, for instance, Rabbi Weinberg anticipated the celebration of Purim with a message entitled “Shushan and Quebec”.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

⁷¹ *Magineinu*, [Congregational Bulletin], CJC ZD 1/6, February 21, 1951.

⁷² *Magineinu*, February 28, 1951.

⁷³ *Magineinu*, January 17, 1951.

⁷⁴ Weinberg, *A Time to Tell*, p. 109.

From the Purim story, as related in the Book of Esther, Rabbi Weinberg pointed out that the members of the Shushan Jewish community, who were “not all saints...were invited, being social equals of their gentile neighbors, to the banquet of the king Achashvairosh. At this banquet, not at the king’s insistence, they participated [sic] of foods and wines which were forbidden to them by their religion. The result, our Rabbis tell us, was the Purim crisis.” For Rabbi Weinberg, the message was clear:

...a Jewish community, whether modern or ancient, can, if only they are willing, live according to genuine Jewish law, and be happy and prosperous as a result. Quebec is strikingly similar to Shushan. We also are a provincial capital...we are the only walled city in North America. We are not quite as saintly as we could or should be...

In another message, published in the March 7, 1958 bulletin, Rabbi Weinberg attacked the practice of scheduling large Jewish celebrations at banquet halls that did not afford facilities for kashrut, using as an excuse the “circumstances of a ‘small town’”. As rabbi, Weinberg found himself in an impossible position:

Although this reasoning cannot find justification in Jewish law, I have tried my best to be sympathetic to the problem. With saddened hearts have the religious leadership of our Synagogue attended the ceremonies following these [non-kosher] dinners, with the soul-shattering knowledge that Jewish law was publicly being violated in the name of a religious ceremony or organization.

Rabbi Weinberg announced that he had taken the initiative to find a Quebec City catering establishment that would cooperate with the rules of kashrut, as well as a kosher caterer in Montreal that would service events in Quebec City. In light of this, he announced that: “I must categorically state that I will no longer associate myself in any way with dinners running contrary to Jewish law”.

Decline

In retrospect, the late 1950s appear to have marked the apogee of the Quebec City Jewish community.⁷⁵ The congregational bulletin of September 5, 1958, for instance, celebrated the beginning of the Talmud Torah [religious school] session by stating that the enrollment was the highest in school history. Some time in the 1960s, however, the community began a demographic decline that had become apparent to all by the 1970s. What was the cause of this decline? For some, the culprit is antisemitism. Thus Noppen and Morisset, referring to the controversy engendered by the building of the synagogue in 1944, express the opinion that: “Cet épisode a finalement convaincu une majorité de Juifs de Québec d’émigrer ailleurs”.⁷⁶ Given the apparent flourishing of the Quebec City Jewish community through the 1950s, however this suggestion does not seem likely. What, then, caused the decline?

Part of the answer has to be attributed to a global trend in smaller Jewish communities in North America with a Jewish population of under 1,000, studied by Lee-Shai Weissbach. Until approximately the middle of the twentieth century these communities had been sustained largely by a class of merchants and shopkeepers.

⁷⁵ *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), April 30, 1984

⁷⁶ Noppen and Morisset, « Lieux de Culte », p. 598.

However basic changes in merchandising and in educational opportunity that began in the postwar period helped to cause the decline of dozens of these smaller Jewish communities in North America as the stores closed and the children of the small town shopkeepers received professional educations and migrated to larger cities.⁷⁷ This trend is certainly in evidence among the Jews of Quebec City.

The other major change that affected the Quebec City Jewish community negatively was the global decline of the Anglophone community in Quebec City to the point where English-speakers now make up less than 2% of the population. The sources utilized for this study clearly indicate that the Jewish community of Quebec City, insofar as it did not utilize Yiddish for the business of the synagogue, was run in English. Like the larger Jewish community in Montreal, therefore, it had opted for acculturation in English Canada and therefore it shared the fate of English Quebec during the era of the Quiet Revolution. It is only in the 1980s that there is evidence for official communal bilingualism: an attempt at reorganizing the Quebec City Jewish community included the creation of a “Centre Socio-Culturel Judaïque de Québec”.⁷⁸ An extant copy of the congregational bulletin, at this point entitled “Kol Hakehila”, from 1987 is bilingual in English and French.⁷⁹

In the 1970s the declining situation of the Jewish community of Quebec City was of concern to Canadian Jewish Congress, which sent a group of investigators in 1974 to take stock of the community. The report of this committee indicates that the members of the community then estimated its numbers to be from 50-55 families. It further recorded the

⁷⁷ Lee-Shai Weissbach, *Jewish Life in Small Town America: a History* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2005).

⁷⁸ Ena Robinson to Gerald Roiter, May 26, 1982. CJC ZD 1/2.

⁷⁹ CJC ZD 1/8, 10 March, 1987.

opinion of the community's spiritual leader, Rabbi Samuel Prager, that "all [emphasis in original] students leave for the big city immediately after graduation." The poor financial condition of the congregation is indicated by the fact that the communal leaders acknowledged that they could not afford to pay a rabbi appropriately.⁸⁰ By the 1980s, the congregation numbered only 35 member families, getting a *minyan* had become difficult, and the 275 seat synagogue could not be properly maintained.⁸¹ The synagogue was converted into a theater in 1984-5.⁸²

Rabbi Samuel Prager, who had begun serving the Jewish community of Quebec City in 1966, when it still boasted approximately 100 families, became a part-time rabbi and presided over the closing of the synagogue that had served as the Quebec Jewish community's official address since 1944, and the opening of a new synagogue, a converted private home.⁸³

Jewish religious life in Quebec City is maintained presently by the "Communauté juive de Québec City Jewish community". The spiritual leader of this community is a Chabad rabbi, Dovid Lewin, and his affiliation with Chabad is evident within the community's website. In addition to services on Shabbat and holidays, the community advertises a weekly religious school for boys and girls ages 4-10 on Wednesday afternoons, and a Thursday morning Tefillin club.⁸⁴ Rabbi and Mrs. Lewin also maintain a kosher catering service geared toward Jewish tourists to Quebec City⁸⁵ as well as outreach to Jewish students at nearby Université Laval.

⁸⁰ Rabbi Joseph Deitcher to Mrs. J. Richman, June 5, 1974. CJC ZD 1/1.

⁸¹ *Globe and Mail*, April 30, 1984.

⁸² Noppen and Morisset, « Lieux de Culte », p. 597.

⁸³ *Canadian Jewish News*, October 15, 1992.

⁸⁴ www.jquebec.com [accessed January 20, 2013].

⁸⁵ www.kosherquebec.com [accessed January 20, 2013]

In this study of Judaism in Quebec City, it has become clear that we have traced the history of two religious communities that were founded and declined. The first community of “English and German Jews”, founded in the mid-nineteenth century, had declined by the end of that century. The second community of “Russian Jews” was founded at the end of the nineteenth century, flourished in the mid twentieth century, and declined in the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. Will the decline of this second community mark the effective end of organized Jewish religious life in Quebec City, or will a new Jewish group emerge in Quebec City, to which the remnants of the second community will pass the torch, as the remnants of the first community did for the immigrant Russian Jews at the end of the nineteenth century? As Gershom Scholem has written in another context, the answer to such a question “is the task of prophets, not of professors”.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, Schocken, 1971), p. 350.