

Shalom Montreal: Stories and Contributions of the Jewish Community. McCord Museum, Montreal, Quebec. 3 May – 11 November 2018. Curated by Guislaine Lemay.

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The exhibition *Shalom Montreal: Stories and Contributions of the Jewish Community*, at the McCord Museum, takes a broad look at the contributions of Montreal's Jewish community to the growth and development of the city over the span of the 20th century. The title *Shalom Montreal* (literally, "Hello Montreal") sets the tone for the exhibit, which welcomes and informs all exhibition goers, not just those from the Jewish community. Exhibition designers chose a thematic timeline approach, with themes including culture, economy, architecture, health care, social progress, cuisine, science, law, and the arts. The exhibition spans over 4,000 square feet and is composed of audiovisual material, textiles, artifacts, photographs, texts, and original artworks.

The exhibition opens with an oral history account by journalist Elaine Kalman Naves. Against a background of *klezmer*, traditional music from Ashkenazi Jewish culture, Naves recounts her family's arrival to Montreal in a mixture of English and French. Visitors are then provided with a concise background on the major waves of immigration caused by anti-Semitic oppression, the introduction of pogroms, and the *Shoah* (Holocaust). Discussion of the establishment



FIGURE 1 Installation view, Shalom Montreal: Stories and Contributions of the Jewish Community, McCord Museum. Source: Photograph © Marilyn Aitken, Musée McCord Museum.

of members of the Jewish Diaspora in Montreal is accompanied by an account of Canadian immigration policies during each time period.

Through a combination of text and artifacts, the exhibition points out that, while the mass migration of Jewish peoples as a result of anti-Semitic, punitive laws led many to Montreal, these communities also faced anti-Semitism in Canada. Examples of anti-Semitic views prevalent in Montreal include the McGill University quotas for Jewish students in the 1930s and the unofficial prohibition against selling property to Jewish people that lasted well into the 1960s. The exhibition utilizes archival materials as evidence of these anti-Semitic laws and practices. One example is a sign from circa 1930 that declares (in French), “The money you spend in this store will serve communism to combat Christianity. Let’s unite to buy from Christians only.”

One of the underlying strengths of the exhibition is its combined use of archival materials and oral histories, which together add a rich layer of context and reinforce the exhibition’s overall thesis. The inclusion of oral histories draws on and emphasizes their importance in the Jewish community. Oral histories

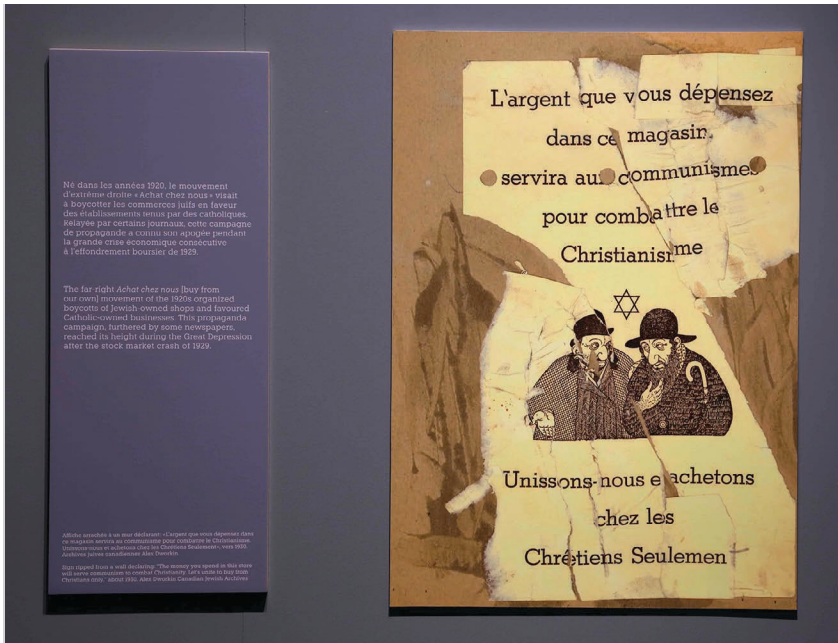


FIGURE 2 “L’argent que vous dépensez dans ce magasin servira aux communistes pour combattre le Christianisme.” Courtesy of the Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives. Shalom Montreal: Stories and Contributions of the Jewish Community, McCord Museum. Source: Photograph © Marilyn Aitken, Musée McCord Museum.

serve as a living archive passed down through generations and act as a means of safeguarding culture against the instabilities and loss caused by war, expulsion, and oppression. Videos and short interviews are included, sometimes alongside objects of significance. For example, a beautifully handcrafted doll labelled *Doll, Toniska, made shortly after Daisy’s birth by Daisy’s mother and Antonia Nicodemova, the family cook* (about 1941), is accompanied by a short, moving interview with Holocaust survivor Daisy Leierova. Leierova recounts how her parents’ maid gave her the doll shortly before she was separated from her parents as a child. She named the doll Tonsika, after its maker, the woman she credits with saving her life. Leierova recounts her connection to the doll, which gave her comfort in a time of unspeakable turmoil. The combination of the oral history with the doll elicits an emotional response that may not have been possible without the background context provided by Leierova’s own words. Like similar examples



FIGURE 3 Installation view, *Shalom Montreal: Stories and Contributions of the Jewish Community*, Musée McCord Museum. Source: Photograph © Sarah Nantel.

within the exhibition, this combination reinforces viewers' awareness that some of these archival documents, objects, and textiles are the only surviving pieces of culture left to families fleeing the war.

Another strength is that, unlike many museum exhibitions, *Shalom Montreal* places archives and archival materials front and centre. In so doing, it demonstrates how effectively archival materials can be used to provide rich support for the narrative of an exhibit. Within the exhibition space, archival sources help weave together the stories and continued narrative, illustrating how fragments of lives past have interconnected to create the fabric of Jewish Montreal. The exhibition is put together almost entirely from the contributions of archival institutions. These include the Jewish Public Library Archives, the Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives, the Montreal Holocaust Museum, the National Film Board of Canada, Library and Archives Canada, Concordia University, and the

McCord Museum Archives and Documentation Centre. The exhibition even gives an archivist a small spotlight, with its inclusion of a short clip of the Director of Archives at the Jewish Public Library of Montreal, Jessica Zimmerman, who discusses the importance and power of archives and their meaning to family and the community. Archivists often work in the background, arranging and describing materials, providing reference services, and helping researchers develop their ideas and projects. It is therefore refreshing to see an archivist brought to the forefront; this shows that archivists cannot and do not work in isolation from their communities. Community archives in particular are spaces of power that have the ability to connect individuals, families, and marginalized communities to larger social history narratives, a point that was driven home in this exhibition.

The exhibition effectively conveys the overall accomplishments of the Jewish community in Montreal throughout the 20th century in areas of health and science, political activism, architecture, food, arts, and others. However, some aspects of Jewish community contributions are notably absent. Examples include the philanthropic impact of the community, the production of whisky and spirits during Prohibition, and – perhaps one of the larger omissions – the Expos, brought to Montreal by businessman and philanthropist Charles Bronfman. While it is impossible to adequately represent all of the accomplishments of the community, these contributions deserve mention in the overall narrative, and their absence is noteworthy. It is also worth noting that the Jewish community in Montreal is not homogenous, nor is it unified. Rather, it is made up of many different Jewish cultures, defined by factors such as religion, political affiliation, language, Ashkenazi or Sephardic identity, and so on. The exhibition's presentation of Jewish Montreal as a single entity is problematic because it does not adequately portray the diversity of the community, particularly to museum visitors who may be from external communities.

The exhibition ends with a video that features contemporary Jewish community members speaking about community contributions, current issues, and hopes for the futures of Jewish communities in Montreal and the city as a whole. It includes tidbits such as common (and very important) Montreal debates: Fairmount or Saint-Viateur bagels? Schwartz's, Moishes, or Snowdon Deli for smoked meat? There are even jokes about the ever-present reality of Montreal construction. These debates and anecdotes, taken up by virtually all Montrealers at some point, serve as a significant reminder of a shared history of the city.

Overall, the exhibition successfully showcases the rich history and contributions of a vibrant and diverse community. Despite facing oppression, this community continues to flourish and support health services, art, and community services that benefit both the Jewish community and greater Montreal. As the exhibition reminds us, the community may be small, but its contributions have been anything but. Indeed, contributions such as those made to health science and social services, including Sun Youth and Auberge Shalom pour femmes, for women and children affected by domestic violence, are vital to the health of the city and have helped support many in Quebec. Perhaps most significantly, the exhibition presents the willingness of the community to open its doors to serve every facet of city life. In this way, the exhibition captures the very essence of the term *shalom*, a word that symbolizes “openness to others and friendship.”