

The synagogue Beth Schloïme of Montréal

And the Jewish presence in Québec



Interior view
Photo: C. Turmel

The origins of Québec Jews

The origins of the Jewish presence in Québec date back to post-conquest times. The French monarchy did not tolerate the presence of Jewish communities in its colonies. This was due to the fact that freedom of worship was simply not the policy in those days. The British colonies, on the other hand, attracted Jewish immigrants from all over Europe. It was therefore only after the English took over New France that Jews were able to enter the country freely.

Since the beginning of the 19th century Montréal has been considered commercially as one of the most go ahead of Canadian cities. Consequently the Jews, who were very involved in business, decided to settle there. The first Jewish congregation was formed in Montréal in 1768, and the first synagogue was built on the rue Saint-Jacques in 1777. About sixty years passed before a second synagogue was constructed on rue Chenneville, an area principally occupied by the Jewish community at that time. It was built between 1838 and 1890.

After 1881, the persecution in Eastern Europe led to a considerable number of Jews congregating in Montréal. In 1891 almost 3000 of them were living on the island. At the beginning of the 20th century, the area of boulevard Saint-Laurent near avenue des Pins formed the heart of the new Jewish quarter. About ten synagogues could be found in the southern part of the Saint-Louis quarter.



Interior view
Photo: Synagogue

A very different tradition to those already established in Québec

Religious practice, a place for worship and liturgical forms are the fundamental elements of Jewish worship. Architecture sometimes takes second place in this context where rites are predominant. Jewish congregations therefore frequently met in houses which they had modified according to their needs. Architecturally, their places of worship were modest and discreet and they fitted in perfectly with the residential area surrounding them. Inside, one of the principal characteristics consisted in establishing a clear distinction between the two assembly areas one of which was reserved for the women so that they could not distract the men.

The synagogue Beth Schloïme: witness to a former Jewish quarter

Out of the six synagogues in the former Jewish quarter of Montréal (the Saint-Louis quarter), only one is still in use. It was installed in a residential building dating back to 1899 on rue Clark. In 1921 the architect Fenster was commissioned by the Beth Schloïme congregation to transform the building into a place of worship. On the outside, only the main entrance and the openings on the ground floor were modified.

As is the case for all synagogues, it is not possible to immediately recognise the religious function of Beth Schloïme. It is, in fact, considered more as a meeting place than a place for prayer. Religious ceremonies mainly take place in the family home. What really distinguishes a synagogue from a catholic church is the use of the space inside. The ground floor is rectangular and entirely reserved for meetings. In the centre, there is a dais for the person presiding. The space is open on two floors which allows for natural illumination. This elevation also allows for a horse-shoe shaped gallery supported by two columns. This space is reserved for the women, in accordance with traditional Jewish custom.

The most distinctive piece of furniture in the synagogue is the Holy Ark which you find situated in a dominant central position. Imported from Belgium, the Ark had been designed for the Shaar Hashomayim synagogue built in 1886 on Rue Mc Gill College. It contains the Holy Scriptures, which are of course an essential feature in Jewish common worship.

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