

Indexing the Jewish Vital Records of Quebec 1841–1942

by Ruth and Stanley Diamond

In 1942, when microfilming of vital records was virtually unknown, a truck lumbered from archive to archive in Quebec. In it, homemade camera equipment, using a 2,000 watt lamp powered by a dynamo hooked to the truck motor, captured the vital records of Quebec—for all religious denominations—on microfilm.

Because of a change in Quebec privacy laws in 1994, that truck and equipment are today an integral part of genealogical lore for all researchers tracing their family in Quebec. For the Jewish Genealogical Society of Montreal (JGSM), those 1942 microfilms were the source of a major four-year indexing project completed in early 2002.

The indexes to the 1841–1942 Jewish vital records of Quebec include more than 16,000 surnames or variations of surnames from a Jewish population that has never exceeded much more than 100,000. The overwhelming number of different family names underlines the varied background of Quebec's Jewish population and its roots to Jewish communities all over the world.

Canadian Jewish History

Montreal is home to one of the oldest Jewish communities in North America. The first Jewish settlers arrived in 1760, and in 1768 a dozen families founded the first Jewish congregation in Canada, Shearith Israel. The congregation, now Spanish and Portuguese, follows the Sephardi *minhag* (ritual) and remains to this day a vibrant component in the life of Jewish Montreal.

The Jewish community of Canada grew slowly: 107 by 1831 and 451 by 1851, virtually all in Montreal. A port city, Montreal was a stopping-off point for immigrants from all over the world, and it was no different for the Jews. The community started to increase significantly at the end of the 19th century with an influx of new arrivals, mostly Ashkenazim from Europe drawn by an open door for immigrants, a stable British Dominion and a booming clothing industry.

By the middle of the 20th century, the Jewish population exceeded 80,000. The years 1951–76 saw another increase; many newcomers were Holocaust survivors, but a large number were Sephardim from North Africa and the Middle East. Fluctuations over the next quarter century have now stabilized the Jewish population at just over 100,000.

Vital Records of Quebec

With one exception, Jewish and non-Jewish genealogists in Canada and the U.S. share a common research

resource—civil registrations of birth, marriage and death records. The exception, the province of Quebec (and its predecessor, Lower Canada) has an extraordinary religious and civil records system that dates back to the early 17th century. It is not uncommon for families of French Canada to trace their ancestry back in the vast records system to the shores of France as well as to document a major percentage of the earliest forebears' progeny.

This area of North America was a homogeneous religious entity. Virtually everyone was Catholic, and the Church's power was unchallenged. All life cycle events were recorded by the Catholic Church. It wasn't until the 19th century that other churches, and later synagogues, were allowed to register their events. Religious registration remained the norm, although a civil registration process existed for those who did not belong to an organized religion. Separate record keeping by the Jewish community started in 1841.

From 1621 to January 1, 1994, churches were responsible for the registration of all births, although starting in 1926, births also could be registered in civil registers. Civil marriages were not permitted by law until 1980. Churches prepared the death certificates until January 1, 1994. (These are not the same as municipal burial permits that are the principal current source of genealogical death information in Quebec.)

Churches prepared two registers for the calendar year; one was deposited with the Prothonotary's Office of the Civil Archives (*Direction de l'état civil*). The registers are held by this department for approximately 100 years and then transferred to a regional branch of the Quebec National Archives. The same rules applied to Jewish records.

With centuries of records and wide-open access, Quebec was a genealogical heaven—for Jew and non-Jew alike. But that ended in September 1992 when the original records were moved from municipalities, where they had been relatively accessible, to the Quebec provincial offices. At this point, all post-1899 records effectively became sealed and closed to researchers.

On January 1, 1994, changes to the Quebec Civil Code were made, passing the tightest privacy laws in North America and putting the closure (which had previously just been an administrative decision) into law. This was devastating for the majority of Jewish genealogical researchers, for whom the 20th-century history of their families in Quebec is the primary time period of interest. For long-time genealogists, the new situation became an irritant, increasing the difficulty of rounding out informa-

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tion about known family members or chasing after remote or parallel branches that sprouted in the 20th century. For new researchers, it was a wall of silence, one requiring ingenuity and perseverance to try to get around or, at best, peek through.

Researching Jews in Quebec

While the major centers of Jewish life in Quebec Province were the principal population centers of Montreal, Quebec City, Sherbrooke and Three Rivers, until World War II, Jewish families also lived in smaller towns of the province. A family that arrived in Canada before the turn of the 20th century may have settled in an outlying area and owned the local haberdashery, grocery store or scrap yard. Jewish families that lived in towns without synagogues registered vital events in nearby towns or, in some cases, in Protestant or Catholic registers.

Civil registers of births for Montreal and other cities and towns include a surprisingly large number of registrations of births for individuals of Jewish descent without apparent synagogue affiliation. In addition, Montreal civil birth registers contain many re-registrations for records of births destroyed by water damage in a fire at the old courthouse on March 11, 1915.

Drouin Genealogical Institute Microfilms of Quebec Vital Records

For five years after 1994, genealogists lamented the loss of what had been so easily accessible in the past. Then, in what seemed like divine intervention, the JGS of Montreal learned of a long-hidden alternate resource that—under any other jurisdiction and vital record registration system—likely never would have been created. It was the Drouin Genealogical Institute microfilms of Quebec vital records made in 1942.

That year may surprise readers. Although the principles of microfilming have been known for more than 150 years, only after World War II did the use of microfilm methods become popular as a technique for reproducing the printed page. In the genealogical world, the first active microfilming of records by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) began with Britain's vital records in 1946. That's what makes the Drouin collection so unusual.

In 1941, Montreal notary Gabriel Drouin approached the provincial government with a proposal to microfilm all the vital records of Quebec. Drouin's reasons were simple; as an expert genealogist, his goal was to create a money-making enterprise to sell family trees. Intermarriage made him recognize the importance of easy access to the records of all religious denominations.

Drouin not only built special microfilming equipment, he outfitted a truck to carry the equipment from one archive to another. By the time this filming was completed, the Drouin collection included more than 2,300

microfilms, mostly Quebec records, but some for other parts of Canada and nearby U.S. states where large groups of French Canadians had settled. In 1948, Drouin printed an attractive 40-page booklet to document the remarkable achievement and to market his specialized services.

For many years following the filming, the Drouin Genealogical Institute did a thriving business, but with the death of Gabriel Drouin, the driving force, the institute closed and the films were forgotten. When access to the courthouse records was cut off by the new privacy laws in 1994, the Drouin collection—with the pre-1942 records—acquired immense importance to all genealogists researching their Quebec families.

Normally, under current Quebec privacy law, no records less than 100 years old can be made public. But the management of the Montreal Municipal Library's genealogical section—ignoring potential legal ramifications—made the daring decision to purchase a complete set of films from the Drouin Institute and make them available to researchers. Soon thereafter, the JGSM acquired the 18 films with records from 41 synagogues and three additional films of civil registrations of birth for Montreal and Island of Montreal suburbs—Westmount, Outremont and Lachine.

These civilly registered births were for families not affiliated with a synagogue or church and include atheists, Seventh Day Adventists, Spiritualists and Free Thinkers, agnostics and some Chinese and Japanese names with no religion given. A large percentage were Jewish registrations. In total, the 21 films include about 70,000 records of Jewish births and marriages and 4,300 deaths or burials. Unfortunately, records for some years are missing from half of the synagogues—usually just a year or two—but for a genealogist, even one year is too many.

Indexing Jewish Vital Records

In February 1998, JGSM inaugurated a project to create indexes of the Jewish vital records in the Drouin collection. The first step was to create an inventory of the films and photocopy whatever index pages existed.

At the end of each calendar year, all religious institutions were obliged by law to deliver to the Prothonotary of the province the indexes of the previous year, listing the births, marriages and deaths registered in their congregation. At the beginning of each year's records is a page with an official stamp. It mentions the number of folios (double pages), the name of the synagogue, the rabbi's name, the year and the nature of the records, births, marriages and burials.

It seemed so simple at first; we had the films, we assumed there were yearly indexes, we were all set. JGSM made arrangements with McGill University for eight volunteers to use its bank of microfilm readers and printers on a quiet Sunday to index the films and start the photocopying of index pages.

That day we learned that our dreams of a simple, quick and painless indexing project were totally unrealistic. In looking back, we are almost convinced that some of the rabbis of Quebec in the 19th and early 20th century purposely laid a trap for the technophiles of the 21st century. The truth is that most of the rabbis were immigrants and not highly literate in English. It was their third or fourth language, and their indexes, as well as their birth, marriage and death records, make that quite apparent. How many ways can you spell bachelor? Ruth counted about 15!

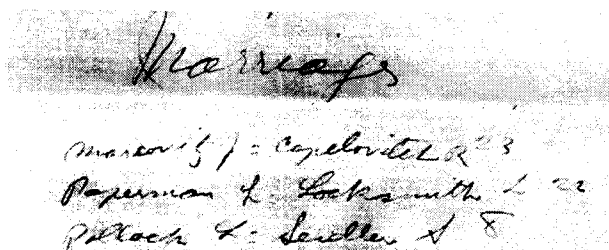
Inconsistencies in the organization of the Quebec records were significant. For example, in records from Poland and other countries, the births, marriages and deaths are grouped separately. In the Quebec records, however, events were recorded in one continuous sequence, making research more difficult and interrupting the natural flow in the indexing process. We concluded that the exact format of the registers and yearly indexes were not well documented and prescribed by the Quebec authorities, and the rabbis did whatever was most comfortable for them or—all too often—simply did not bother to create yearly indexes.

As it turned out, the most important, exacting and time-consuming part of the Drouin indexing project was the need to look at the actual records and check or recreate the indexes. Ruth did just that, for all 75,000 of them.

Registers, Folio Numbers and Page Numbers

One might assume that reviewing the images frame by frame, while time consuming, would be straightforward. Each frame has an identifier strip on the left-hand side with the synagogue name and year of the register, but another legacy of the Quebec rabbis is their haphazard page-numbering conventions. At the beginning of each year, some synagogue registers included the official government sheet stating "this book contains number folios." Traditionally this means a certain number of double pages, a left-hand and a right-hand page. It seemed logical that these double pages would either have the same folio number or the pages would be numbered consecutively. Unfortunately, the rabbis often used their own system. Sometimes, the left- and right-hand pages have one folio number for both; other times, the left-hand page would be numbered 1, the right hand page would be 2, but the left-hand page of the next folio was also numbered 2.

In some cases, the rabbis listed the pages in their indexes as 12 and 12v, v standing for *verso*. This meant that the right-hand page was 12 and the left-hand page of the next folio was 12v. The right-hand page of that folio was 13 and the right-hand page of the next folio was 13v, etc. To simplify the indexing and the work of future researchers, this problem was solved by arbitrarily numbering the two adjoining pages the same—no v's, no b's



Portion of the marriage index maintained by the rabbi to identify the names of the grooms and brides. Note the error in the marriage of Leizer Paperman to Basia Marcovitch. Her name is listed as "Locksmith" which actually was the occupation of the groom.

or a's.

Late Registrations

One of the more remarkable statistics to emerge from Ruth's study of each individual record is the relatively large proportion of late registrations. For 28.7 percent of the more than 35,700 births, registration was not done until at least one year after the child was born. Often the delay was decades, not years, and, in one case, 65 years. When the high frequency of late registrations became apparent, we decided to include the exact date of such births in the indexes.

In the 19th-century records, rabbis often made excuses for delayed registrations of a birth, such as "the father forgot" or "the rabbi forgot." Or they added such comments as "at the time of the birth, the father lived many miles away and had an obligation to continue working," the father was sick, or there was a snowstorm. (In Quebec that was a good excuse!)

Group registrations of two or more children born over many years are frequent. Most seem to have been triggered by the birth of a son for whom a circumcision had to be arranged, so a visit to the synagogue was part of the process.

An unusual feature of late registrations is how often the number of the day corresponded with the number of the year, such as the 12th April 1912, the 29th September 1929 and so forth. The odds of this seem slim. Rather, it seems possible that the father told the rabbi something like, "she was born just after Rosh Hashanah, 10 years ago." The rabbi needed to record an exact date, so he said, "Fine, October 1929; OK, October 29, 1929." It is obvious that the fathers did not really know or remember when their children were born; if one is lucky, they remembered the year. One late registration for two sisters included birth dates in September 1922 and January 1923.

Where they exist, most rabbis delivered indexes that are legible and fairly easy to transcribe. Some synagogues, however, had no indexes for many years, and these included years with several hundred births. Others

Montreal September 3rd 1906
By authority of justice of the publication con-
stitute Sunday's St. Lazar Paperman, age thirty
two the son of Abraham Papernin from Chatorinsof
of Russia Lockonik, Womens name also Basie
daughter of Mordechai Mayer Masconitch, age thirty
from City of Yassi County Romanie, were
United in Matrimony of Charing this third day
of September Ninethly hundred and six before
The undersigned Parties, and witnesses
Bride Lissy Masconitch
Bridegroom Lazar Papernin
Signature of Witness 3rd Romanie
Rabbi Naphtali Tord

Sample Jewish marriage record from the Drouin Genealogical Institute microfilms. Note that the information includes the ancestral town of the father of the groom (Ekaterineslof, Russia) and of the father of the bride (Yassi, Romanie).

were illegible. In many instances, only the experience gained over more than two years of studying every record made it possible to decipher what was actually written. Ruth's Dutch background and familiarity with European styles of script played a vital part. Often the index pages were of little use. Some births were recorded by last name only; others were indexed by initial, not of the newborn, but of the father.

Early in the project, we realized that even the good indexes could not be taken for granted because some births were not included in the index. These were the numerous births resulting from court rulings and noted in the register as "Entered by Judgement." Often, copies of these court documents are included in the register, and these, too, were filmed. The explanations in court documents or the records varied from "my name or second name was spelled wrong," "they omitted my second name," or "my mother's maiden name," etc., where the complainant was getting his wish and the record got amended or corrected. Since these court judgements usually were made years or decades after the event or original records were submitted, the corrections were not recorded in the original index. Without a record-by-record review of the films, these corrections would not have made it into the indexes. The decision to view each record also turned up anecdotal detail that should be a warning to researchers: Study each record with care and perhaps look at other records kept by the rabbi during the same time period.

The ability to sort the Drouin information in the database by fields, such as surname, first name, date, synagogue or folio number, may shed light on some family

mysteries. One woman who had been born in Montreal in 1919 and had left for the U.S. with her family in 1923 had trouble later finding information about her birth. Naturalization and passenger records showed her two sisters, but not her own name. Word had leaked out about the project, and we were asked for help.

By sorting the fields in the spreadsheet, we discovered that a child with this woman's first name had been registered in 1923 immediately after her two sisters. Further sorting revealed that this child was listed as the daughter of her father's sister and the sister's husband, whose marriage was also listed in the Drouin records. Was she really the daughter of an aunt whom she had been told was killed in a shipping accident on her honeymoon? The old mystery has now been replaced by a new one.

In some instances, perhaps because of self-importance, the most prominent name in the birth records is the rabbi's name. You have to read almost every word to find the child's name. In some records, the child's name is never even mentioned. The basic birth certificate should include the name of the baby, names of the father and mother, when and where the child was born, and the name of the cleric/rabbi registering the birth:

On this day, of this month, of this year, in the city of Montreal, I, [], rabbi of the [] congregation, registered the birth of [], son/daughter of [] and [], who was born on this [] day of this [] month of this [] year.

One of the variations is:

I, [], rabbi of the [] congregation, of the city of Montreal, had this day come before me [], who testified that on the [] day of the [] month of the [] year a son/daughter was born and his/her name was [].

It was apparent from the record-by-record review that the baby's name was more likely to be recorded correctly when the father signed the certificate. In some records, the rabbi wrote the family name as Weinberg, but the father's signature is clearly "Vineberg." If the father could not write English and signed in Yiddish, some of the information in the record may be suspect. If the father was totally illiterate and made his "mark" and the rabbi testified that xxxxx was the family name, this may have been the same rabbi who mangled the name of the father in the first place. Clearly having the father's signature is very helpful. Unfortunately, it was also rather rare. So, even having checked every birth record for the correct names, genders and dates of birth, there can never be assurance of total accuracy.

Bonuses in the Records

Many birth registrations have just minimal information—date, city, name of father, name of mother, name of the child and usually, though not always, name of the rabbi. Some, however, offer genealogists pleasant surprises and unexpected bonuses. Some rabbis included extensive detail in birth registrations, including address of the parents, name of the doctor and/or the midwife, and sometimes even the nurse assisting and the name of the

hospital. Others mention the profession of the father, maiden name of the mother and birthplace of the parents—usually the country, not town. Some synagogues used printed forms requiring the rabbi only to fill in the birth date, name of the father and mother and name of the child, but the majority of Quebec synagogue records were handwritten. Generally, information varied from synagogue to synagogue.

It was always fun to encounter the birth certificates of family members or other people we know in the community. Often the first names had been discarded, middle names conveniently forgotten and more formal names adopted. Stanley has a cousin “Pansy” who was not happy with our discovery.

Civil Registrations of Jewish Births

Indexing Jewish births in the civil registrations was generally straightforward. After 1930, the printed registration form has notations in the left margin recording the residence of the parents and the origin, “Scotch, Russian, English, C.F. (Canadien Francais), Welsh, Irish, colored, Jewish and Hebrew.” The use of “Jewish” or “Hebrew” appears to be random. In some records, the father is Jewish, or rather, has a name that seems Jewish, and in some cases the mother’s name is Jewish. After 1936, the left-hand notation included the place of birth, namely the hospital or residence, often with the address.

It is difficult to form conclusions about the reasons for civil registration of so many obviously Jewish children. Perhaps the family was new in town and not yet affiliated with a synagogue. Maybe they could not afford synagogue membership, or the father worked downtown near the city hall. The parents may have been anarchists, communists, agnostics or in a mixed marriage. Or the key may lie in simple economics. A large percentage of Jewish civil birth registrations were baby girls. Sons almost always were registered at a synagogue in conjunction with a circumcision. The fees or expected donations at the synagogue may have been far greater than that for a civil registration. At the end of each year’s register is a list of illegitimate children, usually the registrations noting “father unknown.” There are also a large number of parents unknown, likely foundlings left at the church door. In all the civil records, 1900–41, only two Jewish women registered their children with unknown fathers.

Conversions, Adoptions, Annulments, Divorces and Deaths

Records include 57 conversions at Temple Solomon and five at Chevra Kadisha Congregation, as well as 52 adoptions interspersed throughout the birth registrations. Legal documents recording an annulment or divorce were included in the register at the end of the year in which the marriage took place. Virtually all were actions by wives against husbands. Reasons cover a wide gamut of

human frailty, including, “He was impotent when we married, he is still impotent, he will always be impotent.” “He is a degenerate and pervert.” “He lied that he was a doctor,” and “He was already married!”

While deaths are recorded in the registers of the majority of the synagogues, they are generally for random or incomplete sequences of years. The exceptions are the synagogues in Quebec City and Sherbrooke, which appear to contain a complete record of deaths for these congregations. Remarkably, four of the synagogues recorded only one death in all their registers. One wonders if this was not a high official in the shul who was being honored in this way. As noted above, civil burial permits are the official records of death in the province.

Marriages in Quebec

Prior to the 1930s, many of the rabbis considered the surname of the groom as the important one for the indexes. Since brides would be taking their husbands’ names, why bother to record maiden names? Other rabbis indexed all the names; some included only last names; first names were apparently considered unimportant. The final indexes do, however, include all the “hidden” brides whose names could only be found in the records themselves. Indexing the marriage records presented a unique set of problems, generally caused by the horrible handwriting of many rabbis. The solution was to become familiar with the formula. Just like the handwritten, paragraph-style records in Poland, Quebec marriage records followed a general format. Typically, a marriage registration stated:

On this date, Mr. Abram Adelman, son of Hyman Adelman and his wife Eva Applebaum, a bachelor (or widower or divorced man), of (town), and Miss or Mrs. or Dame Bessie Yudelson, spinster (or widow of Yankel Langleben), of (town), daughter of Yudel Yudelson and his wife Ida Gutlieb, were united in marriage by me, the undersigned rabbi, in the presence of the undersigned witnesses, without opposition.

Since the register page was signed by everyone named in the record, it offered three or four opportunities to get the groom’s surname right—when he is mentioned, if his father’s surname is included and the signatures of the groom and the father are legible. If both the groom’s name and his father’s name are difficult to read, then the signature becomes all-important. That’s when you discover that the groom and his father signed in Hebrew or Yiddish and who knows how they transliterated the name into English? And, of course, that may have been a year when the rabbi did not bother to index the records.

Similar and also other problems occurred with brides’ names. In some records, the only way to determine if the bride was a widow is to see if her last name differed from her father’s. Fortunately, some rabbis were careful to enter the full name of the deceased first husband. In such cases, our indexes include the name of the late husband or divorced husband. This will be invaluable for those

searching for the issue of a first marriage and, for some descendants, will be the only source of information about the name of their birth father or grandfather.

Some of the marriage registrations include additional detail that will be a pleasant surprise for researchers. Examples are street addresses of both bride and groom, country of birth of both parties, the marriage license number and even name of the notary who drew up the marriage contract. This is important in Quebec where notarial records are indexed by the name of the notary which, in turn, could lead to finding records in the files of the same notary for entire families.

Caveat Emptor

On many marriage certificates, the maiden name of the groom's mother is on the line above the name of the bride. This proximity, combined with the handwritten marriage registration format, resulted in numerous indexing errors, typically with the name and maiden name of the groom's mother entered instead of the bride's name. Careful reading of the marriage certificate was often needed to identify the correct name among the six individuals noted in the record.

The professions of both groom and bride sometimes were included. This apparent bonus actually increased the possibility of errors cropping up in the rabbi's year-end index. To wit, only by examining the marriage record of "L. Paperman to L. Locksmith" did we learn that the groom Lazar Paperman's father was a locksmith and the bride was Basie Marcovitch! This discovery has a special twist. Lazar Paperman was the founder of Montreal's preeminent Jewish funeral home and it is Paperman and Sons' meticulous records which today are an invaluable source of genealogical information for researchers with Montreal ties.

The 1935 marriage record of Stanley's mother's cousin Freda to Henry is a classic case of a shockingly misleading vital record. In it Freda is shown as the daughter of her husband's parents and Henry, the son of his wife's mother and father. In the 1920 marriage record of Stanley's parents, signed with handwriting we all know well, virtually every fact is incorrect or inaccurate except for the names of the bride and groom. Their ages, places of birth, and Stanley's father Harry's father's given name are all wrong—to say nothing of the butchered spellings of the maiden names of the bride's and groom's mothers.

The implications are alarming. If we could readily spot two family records full of false information, what about all the other (marriage) registrations? How accurate are they? Without knowledge of a family or the availability of other documents, how does a genealogist sift out the true from the false? Each time another seemingly unusual example of poor record keeping popped up, Ruth made an entry in the notes column of the spreadsheet. Here are some examples of the notes' content:

- Certificates were filled out, signed and witnessed—then crossed out with the notation "Did not return for religious ceremony."

- Some marriage certificates were signed by the couple whose actual certificate was written on the next page and vice versa.

- Some certificates had signatures but very little information and were clearly not fully filled out.

Genealogists generally believe that marriage records are the most reliable of the vital statistics records because (presumably) they were filled out by the people involved—yet the question screamed at us: Why did people sign certificates that were full of errors? Didn't they say, "Hey, my mother was born in New York, not Russia." Or, "My mother's maiden name is spelled with a U, not an O." And if not, why not? These and other examples make it clear that the registers often were signed by all parties before the ceremony, and the rabbi or his assistant filled in information from notes after the wedding or the next day. "Here, sign the book, I'll fill it in later." Or perhaps they didn't care—a holdover from "old country" paranoia. Then we thought back to the time of our own wedding. We signed the register, too. Did we read it? We vaguely remember glancing at it, but the room was full of people, the synagogue was full of guests, and, as Ruth commented, "my shoes already hurt," so checking the rabbi's entry was not high on her agenda, and she is the proof-reader in our family.

As genealogists, we are told to be suspicious of anything we hear or read. Intellectually, we realize the truth of that caution, but finding an original record and seeing how little of it can be trusted to record family history correctly is certainly upsetting. This is what we depend on. These records are the foundation and mainstay of our family trees. And we should be wary of "facts"—facts being the names, dates and places in the certificates we chase after.

Tens of thousands of records later, it becomes clear that certain old advice will always be valid: Read anything you are asked to sign. And don't be afraid to speak up if something is wrong.

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