

DATELINE: OUTREMONT A collision of cultures

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On a Friday morning at the Boulangerie Cachère faite à la maison, a kosher bakery on Bernard Avenue, black-clad Hasidim – ultra-orthodox Jews – banter in Yiddish and purchase *challah*, traditional egg bread, and other last-minute items for the evening Sabbath meal. Next door at fashionable Pierre-Olivier Décor, smartly-dressed francophone shoppers browse through expensive imported housewares. The scene in Outremont, one of Montreal's central residential communities, appears to be one of peaceful coexistence between tradition and urban chic. But in reality a gulf has opened between the two distinct cultures – and has reached the city council and the pages of the local newspaper. "There are some social tensions," said Arthur Hiess, co-president of the Montreal-based Canadian Institute of Minority Rights. "Both sides will have to continue to deal with the issues, because they aren't going to go away."

The Hasidim came from Europe to Montreal during and after the Second World War. the strictest observers of the faith, the Hasidim – known for their self-imposed isolation from non-Jews, their modest dress and their traditional family values – gravitated to central Montreal and then into the eastern tip of Outremont, where about 50 per cent of the city's 6,000-strong Hasidic community now live. Although mostly English-speaking, for years they coexisted peacefully with their working-class French-speaking neighbors. But since the 1970s the turn-of-the-century neighborhood, a 15-minute drive from downtown Montreal, has drawn wealthier francophone residents – including Quebec Premier Robert Bourassa. And some of the newcomers have increasingly complained that the close-knit Hasidim affect the upwardly mobile appearance of the neighborhood and ignore municipal bylaws.

Tensions in Outremont mounted slowly until August, 1985, when some Hasidim – who rarely involve themselves in politics – were among the strong supporters of the so-called bikini bylaw, which forbade the wearing of bathing suits in the district's 10 sprawling parks. Overturned as unconstitutional in November, 1985, in the Quebec Superior Court, the bylaw set the stage for further conflict. In November, 1986, the usually quiet tree-lined streets of Hasidic Outremont came alive with the visit of Rabbi Teitelbaum, a Hasidic leader from New York. A week-long celebration included parties, speeches and an influx of out-of-town Hasidic visitors. The result: complaints from non-Jewish residents about trespassing, noise and lights strung across trees.

The following week several francophone residents of Durocher Avenue, the heart of the festivities, sent a petition to the Outremont city council asking that they be consulted prior to such events. Then Jean-Jacques Bédard, editor of the monthly 15,000-copy tabloid *Le journal d'Outremont*, wrote an article in the January, 1987, issue criticizing the festivities. "Buses and cars were permanently parked without regard for regulations," wrote Bédard. "[Jewish residents] were up late, singing, making noise." Bédard concluded that city authorities often chose to be blind to legal infringements by the Hasidim. "They do not want to be considered racist," he said.

Hasidic reaction to the Bédard piece was swift. "When the Pope came, millions of dollars were spent, nobody complained," said David Stern, a kosher dairy distributor. "The article acted like we were second-class citizens." Spurred by the hostility, the insular Hasidim sought help from Montreal's League for Human Rights of B'nai B'rith Canada, which organized a meeting last March between Hasidic and non-Jewish community leaders and residents.

At the meeting, some non-Jews complained that the Hasidim had not taken the trouble to explain their lifestyle to outsiders. The Hasidim, in turn, complained that people misunderstood them. Recently there have been signs of reconciliation between the two groups. Last April, Bédard published a three-page article in *Le journal* discussing Hasidic ways. Explained police Const. Yvonne Opdam, then an officer with the community relations section of Montreal's police force: "The neighbors felt shut out. Not many people know what the Hasidic community is like."

Still, isolation from the outside world is one of the main tenets of Hasidism. Founded in the Ukraine in the 18th century, Hasidism teaches observers to show their love of God through daily actions. Hasidic Jews observe all 613 *mitzvot*, or laws, in the Torah, the main Jewish religious text. Many of those rituals – such as the shunning of physical work or artificial power (including automobiles or electric lights) during the Sabbath, and the use of separate dishes and cookware for meat and dairy products – are unfamiliar to most non-Jews. Many Hasidic men grow beards and long sideburns, formed into curls, known as *peyyot*; boys and girls are segregated year-round in Hasid-run schools; and strictures against birth control have resulted in a Hasidic birthrate several times higher than that of the Quebec average. And, explained Outremont Hasid and building contractor Alex Werzberger, the outside world holds few temptations. "What is our divorce rate, murder rate, drug-usage rate?" he said. "Next to nothing."

Clearly, the Hasidim and francophone residents of Outremont will have to continue the dialogue that began earlier this year in order to avoid future clashes. And although individual resentment toward the Hasidim on the part of some residents will be difficult to erase, many say that communication and openmindedness will work. According to francophone city councillor Jacqueline Clermont-Lasnier, small day-to-day gestures can go a long way toward helping erase misunderstandings. Once on a rainy day, she recalled, she saw a Hasidic boy and girl walking to synagogue. Knowing that they would not accept a ride in a car, she stopped and loaned the surprised children an umbrella. "With a bit of goodwill on both sides, everything can be settled," said Clermont-Lasnier. Indeed, the differences are less than meets the eye, noted Werzberger. Without his distinctive beard and clothes, he said, "I am like the next man."