Sharing and Unsharing Memories of Jews of Moroccan Origin in Montréal and Paris Compared

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Abstract

This text explores the memories of Moroccan Jews who left their country of origin to go to France and to Canada, through their life stories. By questioning the constitution of a shared memory and of a group memory, it stresses the interest to adopt a generational perspective to better understand the migration of this population. While some interviewees emphasize the rationalization of their departure, the younger ones, consider their leaving as a natural step in their many migrations. These distinctions are central to show how the memory of the departures and the depiction of the colonial society are shared by members of a group, and unshared with the larger Moroccan society.

Post-colonial migrations raise many questions regarding the conditions that have lead several millions of people to leave their countries of origin to construct new lives elsewhere. For the Jews who have left the colonial and national spaces of North Africa for Israel, for cities in metropolitan France and somewhat later for Canada, especially Montreal, Quebec, the question of their mass migration in a relatively short period of time gives rise to divergent interpretations. The emigration of Jews from Morocco to Israel, in particular, is the subject of intense debate amongst historians. For some, it signals a real displacement of populations achieved by Israeli Zionist organizations in need of a labor force to populate the new State. For others it is an exodus, encouraged by the international Zionist organizations, but which was rooted in the desire of these Jews to escape the humiliations and abuses committed against them in the name of the Dhimma. For our part, we consider these migrations as part of a period of mass movement, situated in a post-colonial and post-Holocaust era, that radically transformed the complex relationships

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between the different ethnic and religious communities of these countries. In these recent historiographical debates, the stakes, in terms of politics and of memory that this history represents to the different protagonists is essential. Because the parameters of this history are still largely shifting, and that the knowledge of the conditions in which these populations lived remain incomplete, we have attempted to fill a gap in this historiography by soliciting the memories of some of the individuals concerned.

The work of Maurice Halbwachs has enabled the distinction between the two notions of individual memory and group memory. For this sociologist, individual memory cannot be constructed without group memory. At the end of the twentieth century, the themes of memory and remembrance were again questioned by Paul Ricoeur, in the perspective of studying what could be a “true memory.” The foundation for his endeavor is marked by a political concern concerning memory.

The migration of North African Jews does not, to the best of our knowledge, appear to be the object of commemoration and does not seem to be invested with symbolic meaning or a particular tradition. If the story of the exodus from Egypt is the object of ritual commemoration during the Passover holiday, nothing similar exists for the actual migrations experienced by these individuals. Thus, it is difficult today to represent the different elements that nourish the memory of the Jewish populations originally from Morocco, the memories of their lives in their country of birth, and the motivations which have lead them to leave.

Through life stories, this text aims to explore these memories by questioning the constitution of a shared memory and of a group memory. Thus, the

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5 We were able to realize this during the Essaouira conference “Migrations, Identité et Modernité” which brought together many researchers active in this field, and where the debates between historians, Moroccan, Jewish and and Muslim, Israeli and from the rest of the world testified to the intensity of the issues. For more information regarding this conference: http://sites.google.com/site/migrationsidentitemodernite/ (accessed 7 November 2011).


delineations within the group will be explored through individual life stories. Is the common experience of migration enough to create a collective memory of the departure? In order to answer this question, we will explore the ways in which the different groups that compose the colonial world of the Protectorate are described. At the heart of this analysis, the depictions of the decision to leave by the participants provide us with much insight. Is it the subject of an exchange with people outside of the family group (neighbors, friends, acquaintances)? Is it with non-Jews and people who do not belong to the same religious group? By analyzing the mental map of the groups in Morocco and the conditions in which they made the decision to leave, we can bring forth the characteristics of their memories of departure.

Different groups can carry collective memory: the family, members of a religious group and social classes. The historian Yaron Tsur highlights the very strict segmentation that existed between the different sectors of the French colonial society in Morocco. Thus, the nature of the relationships between the different populations on the French colonial territory depends on multiple variables; gender, social, religious and national categories. The foremost factor is that of the affiliation to a sector: the Western sector composed of Europeans and colonists, the Native sector (the local Arab or Berber cultures) and the westernized sector. The latter group is composed of people that have adopted the Occidental culture.

We wish to add the generation variable, which seems complementary but is seldom taken into account. Indeed, the age at which they migrated and the period pre and post independence during which they were educated seems to have shaped their way of approaching the question of memory. For some of them, migration was part of an academic training strategy that must be analyzed specifically as it might show different visions of their future within different sectors. In this respect, the first wave of migration, mostly to Israel in 1948, is different with those which took place at the end of the 1950s and especially after the independence of Morocco.

Thus, to analyze more closely the decisions that have prompted these families to make choices regarding their children’s schooling illustrated the perceptions of danger of staying in Morocco, of the necessity of departure and the choices of migration. Schooling leads to the affiliation of these individuals within a particular sector in which shared memory is constructed.

The acute separation between members of different communities and their dire ethnicization is a definite character of the colonial regime, which is immediately present in the memories of the migrants. More than a stigma, the colonial division of Moroccan society into sectors based on ethnic, religious and gender lines is present in every aspect of the memories that we are now

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gathering. Their shared and unshared aspects also depended largely on the social position occupied by the interviewees.

We will distinguish two different ways to share and unshare those memories: in the westernized sector, the French speaking interviewees will share some memories with the people, who could be both of Muslim and Christian faith, at their school and in the sector they leave in and were raised. There are some slight differences between them whether they studied at the Jewish school (École de l’Alliance Israélite) or at the French school (École de la mission française). The persons raised in the Écoles de l’Alliance, who speak Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic, tend to remain within the Jewish community, albeit with a wish to access to the westernized middle class; whereas the more westernized (educated entirely in the French system) will tend to be illiterate in Arabic and Hebrew, and therefore feel that their fate/future depended entirely upon their belonging to the French culture and society. The cases of the students we have been interviewing in Montreal and Paris show a continuum between those two forms of westernized education albeit with a few differences that our research will outline.

A second group, which is represented in our interviews by the older generation, hardly speak French but rather Judeo-Arabic and share a lot with their Muslim neighbors, even if their religious separation implies that the sharing happens precisely during those periods of Jewish and Muslim high holidays. Certainly there is a paradox in sharing some very important dates in the religious calendar with their Muslim neighbors while not sharing more intimate decisions such as the departure of the whole family. But paradoxes are many in a colonial setting. And in order to understand the complexities of this web of relations, and the process of constructing a collective memory, we will try to unveil the ways in which the people we interviewed perceive it now. We will use the more neutral term of migration to characterize their departure from Morocco, and to let them explain how they saw it, then and now.\footnote{We find similar difficulties in caracterizing the departure of Jews from Morocco in other studies devoted to them: Bédard speaks of arrival and departure in a more neutral tone, Jean-Luc Bédard, Identité et transmission intergénérationnelle chez les Sépharades à Montréal, PhD thesis in anthropology, (Québec: Université Laval, 2005). Shmuel Trigano speaks of “exclusion” for the Moroccan Jews and of expulsion for the Algerian Jews, Shmuel Trigano, introduction to La fin du judaïsme en terres d’Islam (Paris: Denoël, 2009). Michael Elbaz speaks of uprooting and transplantation: Michael Elbaz, “Parias, parvenus et rebelles. Juifs marocains et Marocains juifs” in L’insoumis. Juifs, Marocains et rebelles, eds. Abraham Serfaty and Michael Elbaz (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2001), 23-65.}

This study draws on oral history interviews collected in Montreal and in Paris with individuals who are native of Morocco. Moreover, in the sample interviewed in France, it is relevant to compare the discourse of the natives of Morocco, to that of the natives of Tunisia. These two countries had, in fact, the same status of “French Protectorate” and the dates and the circumstances of the migration of these Tunisian and Moroccan participants are close enough to be compared.
Various samples were constituted in order to map the memories according to an axis that would take into consideration the generational issue. For the older generation, the interviews were conducted at two different moments in time. The first ones were done with six older migrants that arrived in Montreal in the 1970s and collected in the 1980s. The second group had been recently interviewed within the Montreal Life Story Project (*Life Stories of Montrealers Displaced by War, Genocide and other Human Rights Violations*, CURA-Concordia, 2007-2012).\(^{13}\) We will present the stories of six people, interviewed in the project in 2009 and 2010, born in Morocco and that arrived in Montreal at several moments of their lives: three women and three men born in the 1920, 1930 and 1940.\(^{14}\) In both cases, we wanted to better illustrate the different levels of explanations given for their departure from Morocco. Through the life stories they shared with us, they have told us their memories of the events that were the cause of their departure, thus signaling their representations of the inter-community relationships and of the relationships they had with their neighbors. In both cases, we see a very selective memory, often rehashing some of the more common clichés but yet indicating the difficulty of representing the Other, may he or she be French/Catholic or Moroccan/Muslim in a detached way. Regardless, the emotions that are presented in the interviews help us to understand the extent to which these relations were charged and often not made explicit for the interviewers themselves. Did they really share their preoccupations with their neighbors?

To study the memory of the younger populations, we rely on the analysis of 14 interviews conducted in France and in Quebec. The interviewees must have had left their country of birth when they were in high-school or when they were about to attend college after receiving the French bacalauréat. Nine interviews were conducted in France,\(^{15}\) with five men and four women, and five were conducted in Montreal with four men and one woman. All of the interviewees in Montreal were from Morocco, five of the interviewees in France were from Morocco, and the four others were born in Tunisia. The departures of these informants took place in the 1950s (three of them),\(^{16}\) the 1960s (seven of them),\(^{17}\) and the 1970s (four of them).\(^{18}\)

To consider these discourses in terms of sharing or not sharing memories implies articulating questions related to education, culture and language.

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\(^{13}\) For an overview of this vast project of collecting life stories: http://www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca

\(^{14}\) Henri (born in 1926), his sisters Annette (born in 1930) and Marguerite (born in 1934); Freha (born in 1940); Léon (born in 1942) and Jacques (born in 1937).

\(^{15}\) Seven in Paris and two in Lyon.

\(^{16}\) Sam (left Morocco in 1955), Yvette (left Morocco 1956), Pierre (left Tunisia in 1958).


1. A Truncated Memory: When Home is no more, the Rationalization of a Migration

We have found that their control of the French language (as opposed to Judeo-Arabic or Ladino) and their time and age of departure have been essential variables in the shaping of the particular memory of the individuals we interviewed. Nostalgia of a past (often mythologized) impregnated their narratives with both a sense of loss of that conviviality with their neighbors as well as a rationalization of their departure from the land of their ancestors. We noticed then that it was very difficult to get them to talk about particular historical events or the specific causes that precipitated their departure. For many, the previous departure of members of their family to Paris or Montreal determined their own. We were quite taken by their profound disengagement from their own life, as if their belonging to the Jewish community (which was an extension of their family, their clan or their sector) represented their connection to the outside world. In fact, we noted already how much their cultural capital was the principal determinant to their migration to the French speaking world.

None were too eager to emphasize this aspect of their migration, as they considered it as something quite “natural” for the generation that grew into the French colonial system. The younger generation (the baby boomers, who grew up when Morocco succeeded to get its independence from France) were the principal actors of the decision to migrate. In some cases, they were old enough to decide for themselves and the family followed suit; for others, their future (jobs, alliances etc.) were the reason their parents gave for moving their family away. In many cases, as was shown by Emanuela Trevisan Semi, and confirmed by our interviews, their departure took place most often in silence, hiding from their neighbors and friends whether Muslim or Christian. In one of the stories told to us, all the moving of the furniture was done at night, exclusively by the members of the family, during Ramadan, when everyone else (including the maid) was busy partying until late into the night. The furniture were brought to Casablanca into a container that was rented by a European family, while other cheaper furniture replaced the old one in the house, staging a normal life till the night of migration.

19 In a previous research, we have been able to outline that the generational as well as gender variables had a decisive impact in the way the interviewees recalled their recent departure from Morocco. The collection of oral histories of men and women that just arrived in Montreal showed how imbedded they still were in the Moroccan way of life and of thinking, Marie Berdugo-Cohen, Yolande Cohen et Joseph Lévy, Juifs marocains à Montréal: témoignages d’une immigration moderne (Montréal: VLB, 1987).

Defining the collectivity
To ask the question regarding the sharing of memories implies to question how the interviewees define the group to which they belong. Thus, the stories collected in this study highlight a complex geography of relations between the different groups within colonial society. The relationships between the French, the Arabs and the Jews during the colonization of Morocco left lasting traces in their memories. The answers are rather contrasted concerning everyday life in Morocco and the social relations between Jews, the French and Arabs. Were they considering them potentially as an incentive to leave? The conviviality of these relations is first emphasized.
Friendship between Jews and Arabs is often mentioned, in particular within work relations. Henri notes that the French were “dominant” which could explain according to him the proximity between Jews and Arabs. Freha notes that only the men were implicated in relationships with the Arabs; the women were often kept away from them, as their families feared that their daughters would get married to Muslims (marriages with Catholics being more tolerated). She considers that her parents actually left because an Arab was courting their daughter. Many interviewees mention the protection of Jews by the king of Morocco under the Vichy regime. This protection could explain a kind of gratitude towards Morocco expressed in the interviews, and as a result the story of this protection has been transmitted between the generations within Freha’s family for instance. The anti-Semitism of the French is often emphasized, in Morocco but also in France. Henri remembers the anti-Semitism of the French in Morocco, notably under the Vichy regime (*numerus clausus* in the educational institutions). Jacques notes that during the Second World War, the building where he lived with his family (which also housed other Jewish families) was marked with a cross. He was told that this was to target the families during an eventual raid. He also remembers that at school (in the European quarter), he sat in the back of the class because he was Jewish. Jacques notes that he never had any particular problem with the Arabs, unlike his brother. In fact it was after his brother’s fight with an Arab that his father, who had already taken all the steps towards emigration to Canada and whose hair salon business was in rapid decline decided to leave, six months after the independence of Morocco.

Class also played a role in the relations with the other groups (French and Arab) but also within the Jewish community. Léon evokes the bad memories that his father kept of Morocco, notably of being relegated, because of his poverty, to the back of the synagogue by the wealthier Jews. His father also had, according to Léon, the memory of having been mistreated by the Arabs and was rather happy of the French presence.
Several “small events” and “small things” are evoked concerning the relations with the French and the Arabs in the long term. The comparison is also often made with the other Jews of Europe during World War II, leading the interviewees to minimize what happened to them (stones being thrown, raids in the Mellah). Admittedly, the memory of the abuses suffered, whether small daily humiliations, rarely some major public events, are relegated to a hazy memory but are evoked spontaneously by the informants. In the midst of their interviews, these memories resurface. Thus, Marguerite remembers an attack, which took place the day of Kippur in Meknes, during the years immediately after the war. It is equally akin to an anti-Semitic attack against the Jews of the Mellah (forced to retreat on their terraces to protect themselves from the projectiles) to a petty strike of a gang of thugs who were seeking to cause them fright. The memory of this event apparently marks a notch in the process of detachment that they had to undertake with their neighbors. The indifference and even the non-intervention of the French during these moments of tension between Jews and Arabs are also mentioned. Henri suggests that this attitude was intentional, in order to “divide and rule.” However these relationships change with the independence of Morocco in 1956, since the French have no more direct authority over inter-community relations. Freha says that the Jews “were afraid to be in the middle” (between the French and the Arabs) and that they “were in the middle” during the independence of the country. She adds: “we never spoke politics” and mentions an “invisible repression.” She notes that her father, who owned an appliance store, saw the number of his clients plummet after independence, his clientele for the most part composed of the French. Thus, political change lead to an economic change that motivated their decision to leave. As for Jacques, he notes that after the independence of Morocco, the future seemed bleak for Jews, especially for those without much money. The struggle of Moroccans for independence strongly marked Jacques, who was very shocked by the explosions of bombs in Casablanca. These events disturbed him, troubled his “laid-back” life and prompted his departure. A rumor also reinforced his desire to leave: in 1957, it was said that the Jews would be enrolled in the Moroccan army and he did not see himself serving and was scared of being drafted to combat against Israel.

The awareness of international tensions stemming from the Arab-Israeli conflict reveals potential conflicts between neighbors. The Middle-Eastern conflict, which spans several decades, thus played an important part in the shifting of social relations between the Jewish and Arab communities in Morocco. Léon remembers that in the mid 1950s, then aged 13, he went to visit his uncle and was taking a stroll on the Jemaa El Fnaa square in Marrakesh. His panicked uncle came to fetch him for fear that something would happen to his nephew. Léon relates this fear to the events in the Middle-East. The Six Day War in 1967 is also mentioned by Henri: “The Six Day War fell on our heads overnight.” This had, according to him, troubled work relationships: “but in a few months, it was settled.” Henri and his family would leave seven
years later. After the independence, he mentions the fact that the Arabs suspected the Jews of sustaining, even financing Israel, which created certain tensions (surveillance, ransoms) and a “heavy atmosphere.” The memory of a divided society marked memories and complies with a rewriting of the past in a post-immigration period.

Leaving for Israel: Zionism and fragmented memory

It’s interesting to find out when and how our informants felt that they were no longer at home in their own country. This perception happened for most of them long before their actual departure. For Henri and his sister Anna, the family atmosphere was already filled with the Zionist ideal of going to Eretz Israel. Since the 1920s, their father, a very religious and observant Jew, had been trying to convince the British Consulate to give his large family a visa to enter Palestine. They have not only the memory of those discussions, but also a copy of the letter that he wrote in 1923 to that effect. As their father died, his dream became his family’s. It was his eldest son’s fate to carry it on, as he managed to depart with his own family of 7, plus his two youngest sisters in 1948. Like many of his brothers and sisters, Henri who was the youngest of them and just married, left Meknes also to join them in Israel, but stayed longer in a refugee camp near Marseille, before going back finally to Meknes where his wife still had relatives. So Zionism is certainly one of the most important official motivations of their departure to Israel; one that had been identified both by the historiography and by our informants to explain their decision to leave Morocco in that period. The realization of their Zionist ideal explains the breaking up with their own siblings, family and their own land. In this context, the rupture with their immediate environment is brutal: everyone in the family should keep the secret of a clandestine departure. The unsharing of this particular event becomes a secret that will haunt them later. For Anna and Marguerite, who were brought to Israel like “a package in their brother’s luggage,” by flight to Marseille and by ship to Haifa where they settled while only 13 and 15 years old, this story is all but a nice memory! They still resent this departure from their home, with little or nothing at all, and their harsh transplantation in a country totally unknown to them. Their memory of Morocco is therefore totally enshrined in a veil of fear, the only thing now that could have justified their sudden exile.

Family: unshared memory and common paths

For all six informants in this study, their departure took place in clandestinity. Each one remembers some element of the story. Freha recalls that her father had sold half of his property before leaving, but that he could not get his money safely out of the country. So he had a friend, a French colonel, do the transaction on his behalf, with all the risks related to that. Herself, when she departed the second time, she was hiding her money in her baby’s diapers! Henri remembers his mock departure “we left the house in order, as if we were leaving for the holidays!” Crossing the border into Spain, his car packed with all kinds of
stuff, with all the family in it, he considers himself lucky that the border officer let him go (even after wondering out loud why his son took his school bag, whereas they were leaving for a holiday).

Hiding from their neighbors that they were leaving for good was not easy, as it implied unsharing essential aspects of their lives. In many cases, they went to great lengths in order to hide it carefully. Who were they hiding from is interesting to ask? Were they equally frightened by the local authorities as their Muslim neighbors were? Were they suspicious of their neighbors, who might report them? They obviously were afraid, even in the 1970s when the administration was giving out the passports more easily (with some “bakchich” or intervention from well placed friends or business relations). None of them talked really about it. There is a sense of emergency in the packing of their things and in their departure. Even if their decision to leave took a long time to mature, as they say that they had been thinking about it for quite a while, the actual departure happened when there was an opportunity or when they thought that the situation had been deteriorating.

There is a striking difference between the individuals in the first wave who had to depart precipitously to an imposed destination, mostly in Israel in 1948, and those who participated in the second wave of migrations which took place in the 1950s. In their discourses, the rationalization of their departure seems to stem from an individual or family decision. Their memory of their parent’s continuous administrative hassle to seek the notorious papers (visa, administrative authorization, and sometimes passports) to depart is quite vivid.

Jacques evokes therefore his departure for Canada in January 1957, with his father and brother, who obtained their visa from the British Consulate in Casablanca, after a job offer in a newspaper advert. His mother and sisters, who stayed behind to liquidate their assets, joined them later. The unshared memory of the departure becomes here a job offer that necessitates the quick departure of the men of the family. Leaving the women behind could be interpreted as a way to signal to the others (the administration, the neighbors, the friends?) that it was not a definite departure, but only a (temporary?) job-motivated migration. For her part, Freha said that she first left Morocco to join her husband who was studying medicine in Paris in 1961. Her parents, who went also to France with two of her sisters, finally migrated to Montreal in 1964. She came back two years later, as her husband decided to do his residency in a Moroccan hospital in Casablanca where his parents lived; only to move back again to Paris, at the birth of her first son, and then to Canada in the 1970s and then to the US, in Arizona where her husband settled with their family of 4. Finally, when she divorced from her husband, she left the US to join the rest of her siblings who were established in Montreal.

It is striking to see the succession of departures and returns, alone, with or without her family during this period of Post-independence of Morocco. Many other interviewees explain these migrations as family-bound, or simply to study or work, as if it were a natural move. It seems as if there were no other causes for their departure, or at least they were erased from their memory. They also
insist that they had the choice of their destination and their going back and forth from Morocco, freely, is a witness of their ability to decide whether or not they will leave. Canada is the foremost choice, for it is far and away from colonial France and newly independent Morocco. In the midst of the fierce political battles that were conducted by international Jewish organizations to “save the Jewish community of Morocco,” many felt that they had to leave. Their itineraries are complex, as they move from one place to another (Israel, France, Canada, and USA); they stop for some time in one country and return to Casablanca, and finally leave Morocco completely. Their families are dispersed along the road in different destinations and eventually gathered in one place. As an example, in Henri’s family, amongst the 10 children, some went to Israel, others to France, some stayed longer in Morocco, or came back after a bad experience in Israel and Henri went finally to Canada. Leon’s parents left Morocco for Israel in 1946 (after 6 months spent in a camp in Marseille), came back to France in the 1950s and left again for Israel in 1965 with their younger children only to come back in the 1960s again in France and then to Montreal in the 1970s. Their migrations resemble a patchwork of the eternal migrant (or wandering Jew). Once they left their country of origin, they did not find a place to stay long enough to call it their home!

In these interviews, one gets a sense of loss, but it is not explicit. They are in a survival mode, so the relationships with the others are secondary, not important, not worth recalling. They do not even tell us if they discuss the decisions to leave within their own family. The overall impression is one of a quick departure, with no one really in charge of taking care of such details as the destination of the family migration and the explanation of the cause of their departure.

The essential role of the eldest son in those two family stories shows how much they are influential in the decision to move the family in one direction or another. In Henri’s family, the oldest son decides to bring with him his two younger sisters to Israel, after their parents died and just when the state of Israel is founded, in the summer of 1948. He even rented a house in Marseilles for all of them to wait for their papers. In Léon’s family, as the oldest son of a family of 9, he worries about the education of his younger brothers, and help them emigrate to Canada. Around him, the family will finally reunite in Montreal. So the preoccupation is inward, within the family unit, not with the outside world, which is perceived as malevolent, scary and not to be trusted.

After many more interviews, the same feeling of powerlessness pervades their memory of those hard times. Even if they identify a-posteriori one factor that triggered their own departure and their family’s, there is also a general atmosphere in the community that had played a major role in their decision to leave. Their segregation from the rest of the Moroccan people in the Mellah, and their subtle exclusion from the Western world, even when some of them moved away to live in the westernized city (“ville nouvelle”), brought on a strong feeling of alienation. They indeed did some business with the other communities, some even went to the same French schools, but the strict
separation between those different sectors was quite efficient to keep them at bay from mixing with each other. They quickly learned to keep their stories to themselves and not to share the more intimate questions about their lives with anyone else. Even within the Jewish community, the sharing of the information was not open and the rumors replaced it.

For instance, the clandestine work of the Zionist organizations was not acknowledged openly, but the rumors of the help they provided to people who wanted to leave was known. We saw that in cities like Meknes or Casablanca, where our informants lived, the Zionist ideology and organizations were the main rationalization given for their departure to Israel. For Henri’s family, we saw that it was their father’s dream that the son’s family realized. For Léon’s parents too, the Zionist’s network helped them make their first departure and leave. Even if his family had quit the Mellah for the Ville Nouvelle where his father was a hairdresser for the French, and that he does not assimilate his fate to the poor Jews of the Mellah, the Zionist organization was crucial to their being able to leave Morocco as a family.

These events are but a back-story behind the factor often cited as determining their departure, that is to say that their parents saw little future for their children in Morocco. Even if their economic situation is considered flourishing by Henri, the decision to leave “for the children” takes over. Some children, for that matter, left for Paris to study (the older girl in Henri’s family, Freha’s husband) before their parents’ departure. We can also notice that within families, there is a concern for the education of girls who can leave home (and change countries) for this reason.

As the issue of the children’s education is often cited as one of the reasons justifying the family’s departure, we wanted to focus more specifically on this aspect of student migration to see what echo this preoccupation may have had on their particular perspectives.

2. Student Memories: “Leaving is a word I always heard” (Solange)

In the narratives that recall life before migration, we find the dividing lines of the colonial world. Each one of these young people composed with the French, Jewish and Arab-Muslim cultures in unequal and different ways. The analysis of these narratives allows us to distinguish several different levels: that of the practices (schools and migration) and of the memory shaping a life story, of which several traits are shared in our sample. In this shared memory, the educational experience plays a central part in the acculturation process and especially in the way of considering migration.

**French education and Jewish education: a tension?**

The narratives shed light on the centrality of the French culture and education for the interviewees. Their educational pathways testify of this aspect. Indeed, the participants have received their education in two structures that existed in
North Africa: the French schools and the Jewish schools of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*. One of our informant, amongst the fourteen people interviewed, told us having received part of his schooling in Tunis in the Arab high school of Alaoui. He later joined the lycée Carnot where he finished high school and got his degree.21 The narratives highlight the importance of the schools of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*. In 1956, the institution enrolled nearly 33,000 students 22 in Morocco. It held a role in the transmission of Jewish and French educations. Present also in Tunisia, the Alliance occupied however a less important position. In addition, the Jews of North Africa attended French schools; this is the case in Morocco with the dense network of institutions of the French lay mission and in Tunisia, in particular the lycée Carnot of Tunis.23 Finally, we must indicate that our sample does not include people who received a religious education in the Talmud Torah schools, similar to those studied by Yaacov Loupo,24 whose officials objected to the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*.

If the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* is a Jewish institution, it was considered to be a vector of westernization and the life stories collected show an existing tension between traditionalist families and the institution. This is the case for Elsa’s mother, who, in the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, received her education in a school of the Alliance and “for these very observant Jews […] it was secular, it was practically secular, they were Jewish schools, but...” The distinction between the education received in the French schools and the education received in the schools of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* is not as clear-cut. The life stories of the participants from Morocco report several transfers from one school to the other and it is common to receive a part of one’s education in a school of the Alliance and to pursue it in a French lycée. The high quality of the French lycées seemed to have drawn the parents to enroll their children. Born in 1955, Elsa attended elementary school at the Alliance and then joined the lycée Victor Hugo in Marrakesh; it is also the case of Yvette who was born in 1938 and who joined the Mangin lycée. Both of their narratives present different modalities by which the traditional Jewish culture took the French school into consideration. In the case of Yvette, granddaughter of the Chief Rabbi of the town of Safi, her narrative highlights the tensions regarding her schooling in a French, non-Jewish institution: “This was, by the way, a great transgression that we were, the two granddaughters of the Chief Rabbi in the foreign school […] it was the great transgression, we began to stop eating Kosher. As it happens, it soured the relations with my father’s family.” Elsa’s arrival at the French lycée of Marrakesh could have been a

23 This lycée held an important place in the memories of the Jews of Tunisia, see Les lycées du Soleil.
problem for her family, which she defines as “very observant”; in fact, at the lycée Victor Hugo, classes are held on Saturdays, obstructing the practice of Shabbat. However, she indicates that “these were very observant circles, but very tolerant.” The way in which these stories play down the existing tension between Jewish and secular education give an indication of the attractiveness of French culture. Thus, David of Tangiers seems to resolve these difficulties of conciliating the practice of Judaism and French education: “[when I went] to the French lycée, I went to class on Saturdays, it was a problem for me at first but after that, I thought ‘well, it’s the price to pay to have a good education. But I’m paying it, right, that’s it.’”

One of the central aspects of this experience is the possibility given to these young people to navigate within several school systems. The study of David’s trajectory testifies to this. He began his education at a school of the Alliance Israélite Universelle then, due to his good grades, he was sent to the Lycée Français “and then I entered into a different world; I went from a sheltered Jewish environment where the majority of us were Jewish to a French lycée that was, let’s say, international, that belonged to the French government.” One year before completing his baccalauréat, he decides to go work as an assistant accountant in Tangiers. Seeing his high school friends leave for France to study at the university he thinks to himself: “Why should they know more than I?” But still, I didn’t have the degree to go to university yet.” Not wishing to return to the Lycée Français, he went back to school and was accepted at the École Normale Hébraique of Casablanca to complete his baccalauréat. The institution of the Alliance Israélite Universelle represented, in this case, more of a zone of passage than an exclusively religious training center.

“Our ancestors the Gauls”26

The narratives provide evidence of the importance that French culture held for the interviewees. The centrality of the French culture constitutes a shared experience for all the respondents, even if it is mentioned in a different way by each of them. This issue takes on a particular importance for Morocco, where the French presence was the most recent in North Africa and where the colonial society was still organized around the communities.27 Certain narratives on French culture reflect the idea of a possible emancipation and of a possible rupture with the traditional world. This may take a gendered dimension. Indeed, the women emphasize their mother’s or grandmother’s will for them to pursue their education.

Yvette and Elsa, of whom we mentioned the educational trajectories, belong to two different generations. They were both born Moroccan, the former in Safi in 1938 and the latter in Marrakesh in 1955. They arrived in Paris after their

baccaulauréat to attend medical school but one in 1956 and the other in 1973. In their life stories, the issue of education and schooling is associated with women. Yvette says: “our mother instilled in us well that we had to have independent professions, wow, that... she said ‘what I suffered’ she was a feminist before her time. No, no, she insisted that her children... that they would pursue a higher education, an independent education.” For that matter, it was because it didn’t seem possible for her to study in Israel that Yvette gave up her project of making aliya and opted for Paris. For her part, Elsa indicates that she had: “a mother who […] had understood right away when the French arrived that culture, schooling, education, were fundamental and she fought a bit, in inverted commas, with my father for […] her girls to go to school, that’s to say that her girls would go to the Alliance school that was there.” These narratives give us insight into the family and gender dynamics that were expressed during the confrontation with the French educational institutions. For the men we interviewed, attending school was not accompanied with the same militant character.

All of interviews emphasize the importance of the French culture; however, in the narratives of the people interviewed in Montreal, this issue is particularly stressed. The idea that “our ancestors [were] Gauls,” a recurring theme of the colonial educational project, is repeated by two of the participants. David, who left Morocco for France in 1966 and lives in Montreal since 1977, states: “I was educated under the French system from a tender age that our ancestors were the Gauls... to the principles of the Republic, ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.’ It’s important that I say it, because until now I feel very imbued by this French culture. I sucked the milk of the French secular schools very, very young.” It’s interesting to note that David makes a shortcut in his educational trajectory: he first attended a school of the Alliance before leaving for a secular French school. The theme of the “Gaulish ancestors” appears also in Sarah’s discourse. She received her education, as early as 1951, in the schools on the French mission in Casablanca: “I was at the schools of the French cultural mission and I would say that our ancestors were Gauls, right.”

For Harry, who left Morocco with his family directly for Montreal, his narrative reflects the centrality of the French culture. Talking about his father whose mother tongue “must have been” Arabic, he states “He went to the Universal Expo [sic] in Paris in the thirties and came back with a certain image of French grandeur.” Concerning the environment in which he lived, he states: “we always lived amongst the French. Myself, I don’t speak Arabic.” In the interviews collected in France, the impregnation with French culture seemed like a given fact and was not further detailed by the participants. When it was mentioned, it was in terms of a globalizing “we”, as exemplified by Paul’s narrative, “Nearly all of the Jews, it’s the Alliance Israélite, it’s evolution, It’s [...] the French culture which is completely inside of us.” Thus, the motives identified in the life stories of the Montreal interviewees seem to testify to the will of these people, who do not live in France but in Quebec with a high emphasis on the French language, to insist on their francization.

A shared memory of departure

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The French culture and the educational institutions shaped the stories of departure. Indeed, for these interviewees, the act of leaving the country signifies pursuing their education. Thus, their arrival in France or in Canada is described as a natural movement that is linked to the absence of a future in North Africa.

Two different modalities of departure are expressed: where the student leaves alone to study, this is the case of 10 of the 14 interviewees; and that where he or she leaves with members of his or her family. In the latter case, the life stories bring forth the fact that the parents waited for their child to complete the baccalauréat to leave the country. This is the case for Paul, from Tunis “My father had considered that we’d leave when it would be time [for me] to go to university in France.” Elsa’s mother leaves Morocco at the same time as her daughter is preparing to attend medical school in Paris.

If these experiences are different, the narratives conjure the idea that these departures are natural and are part of a “normal” course of things. Elsa states: “after high school, it was the normal route, it was the normal path, we’d finish high school and we’d come to France to study, and then stay there.” Sarah remembers her departure from Casablanca in 1963 in the following way: “but really, I left in June, it was ‘hurray, I graduated from high school, I’m going to Paris to study’ [...] it wasn’t a rift.” The absence of difficulties or suffering related to the departure is an aspect that is present in all the life stories of former students. Firstly, in the case of large families, the departure of siblings to France to pursue their education seems to have sensitized the interviewees to this emigration. Furthermore, the people interviewed do not justify their departure with a particular cause or phenomena. The life stories do not emphasize isolated difficulties that these individuals originally from Morocco and Tunisia may have faced as Jews or as young people suffering economic hardships: they highlight the absence of a future in their countries of birth. Margot, who had received and turned down a scholarship from the University of Casablanca, states: “Life in Morocco for young people… we had no future so all the young people were leaving Morocco as soon as they’d finish their studies. After high school, it was total emptiness.” Paul, who left Tunis in 1972, draws the following parallel between the departure of young Jewish students and that of young people living outside of French cities and who leave to pursue their studies: “I don’t want to compare, but just to give you an idea: you go to provincial France, they tell you ‘if I don’t go to the city, I have no future’. [...] We were in a province, we didn’t have a future, and in addition, the France that was our country was in a way gone. And what were we going to stay for, if they were gone?” While staying close to Tunisia, as we will see, Paul emphasizes the absence of a future “but obviously, for the Jews that leave, they are leaving a place where they have no economic future, they have no cultural, intellectual, social future, they leave.”

Once in France, these interviewees report of the economic hardships they faced, housing problems they had to struggle with or even the harshness of the studies, like Yvette in medical school. However, none of the interviewees reported culture shock; as Elsa states: “I don’t have the impression of having been integrated or not having been integrated, but I felt in my element, really... In fact, no... To not
say anything [sic] I had the impression that coming from Morocco, I came to France and it was where I belonged, that was where I was, that I was well and it was... it went really well.” Sarah adds: “it wasn’t a rift, I didn’t live it as an uprooting, I wasn’t particularly disoriented in France.”

The life stories collected from those Jews who left Tunisia and Morocco shed light on a shared memory within this population who left their countries of birth when they were teenagers, on a period spanning 15 years. In these stories, the French culture is central and the departure is perceived as the pursuing of one’s education and not a migration. More than isolated elements that would have led these young Jews to leave their countries, it is a sense of a lack of future that is at stake. The “horizon of expectation” is constituted of France, not of the life in the country of birth.28 But amongst these shared experiences, what is the place given by the interviewees to the Arab-Muslim society?

“I thought I was living in France”: ethnicization and social relations

The majority of the stories collected seem to follow the existing social and community separations of the colonial world. In these narratives, the Arab-Muslim world is absent and the interviewees focus on evocations of the family, or of the French culture, as we have seen. Even Gerard’s life story, who received part of his schooling at the Alaoui lycée of Tunis, does not emphasize the relations with the non-Jewish populations. His arrival at this institution is motivated by the fact that he was permitted, contrarily to the lycée Carnot of Tunis, to miss class on Saturdays, day of the Shabbat. So it should be noted that the permissiveness of the Tunisian (arab) lycée to accommodate the Jewish religious traditions is greater than in the French lycée, which took its secularism very seriously.

This distinction is accentuated by social considerations. The course taken by Sarah underlines this aspect: “We lived in neighborhoods where there were French people, Christians, Europeans, there were practically no Muslims in our environment […] I thought I was living in France.” It is in France that she befriends non-Jewish Moroccans and learns Arabic. “I discovered a bit more the Muslim community in Paris because I spent a lot of time at the Maison du Maroc,” where she lived during her student years.

The theme of fear emerges from Elsa’s life story. “In Morocco, I experienced the ’67 war… The Yom Kippur war [in 1973], I experienced the attacks against the King where we were particularly attacked... where we hid each time... every time we felt threatened”and keeps a “not so pleasant memory of those times.” However, fear is seldom present in the narratives of the people interviewed and who left their countries when they were younger, in contrast to the interviews conducted with older Moroccans Jews that had a professional activity and had children.29


29 This is the case for other interviews conducted in the course of the Montreal life stories project.
Due to the social stratification and the ethnicization of relations within colonial society, the Arab-Muslim society is a seldom-quoted motive in the narratives of the former students. David’s narrative is one of the only ones evoking this issue in a perspective of conviviality and he focuses on the specificity of the city of Tangiers, which seems to have been conducive to interactions between Jews and Muslims: “So, it was very normal that I would be invited to eat at the houses of Muslim friends, and that these friends would be invited at my house. And we would talk, we would argue, but they were children’s quarrels. It was... something... we didn’t feel... it was... I have to say that Tangiers was a pretty unique city. The international character of the city really helped this.” However, if the motive of the Muslim-Arab society is seldom present in the narratives, the evocation of the returns to the countries of birth bring forth the terms of a shared memory.

Returning to the country: a shared memory?
Considering the situations of the returns of the interviewees to the countries of birth implies the study of their migratory patterns and of the narratives justifying these. This perspective leads them to envision their first departure as a non-definitive departure. Indeed, the interviewees largely considered their departure as a natural movement to pursue their education; thus, some of them go on several back-and-forth journeys. This is the case for 8 people out of the 14 interviewed. Sam, who arrives in Paris in 1956, states: “I went back home [Casablanca] on vacation. Yes, I remember having spent a few summers at the beach.” This motive for the back-and-forth journeys depends on the presence of family in the country of birth. In the case of Sam, this summer migration ceases when his mother leaves Morocco in 1959.

Pierre’s case is unique amongst our sample. Born in 1938 in Tunis, he joined an engineering school in 1958 and lives in student housing until 1960. Contrary to the other people interviewed, he returns to Tunisia in 1960, where he works until 1963 before going back to France. How should this return be explained? Is it a desire to pursue a career in Tunisia after having received a French diploma? The analysis of Pierre’s narrative shows that his logic is relatively close to that which we have seen in the previous cases (back-and-forth). Indeed, his return wasn’t planned and can be explained, according to his narrative, by the recruiting process of the information technology company, IBM. “I really didn’t think I’d go back to Tunisia. It was when I had meetings with Human Relation managers from IBM […] they called me to say ‘listen, since you’re Tunisian, we have a position in Tunisia, would you be interested?’ I had family in Tunisia, so I said why not.” This is not a common experience, but it illustrates to the extreme, during the years that follow the (first) arrival in France, the existence of a migratory space in which these young people navigated. The occasion of a return to Tunisia does not seem to inscribe itself in a long-term project but is linked to an exceptional chain of events and of an open attitude of this young

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30 This question could not be posed to two of the interviewees.
31 And the death of his father.
graduate (“Why not?”). Finally, it is the presence of Pierre’s family that incites him to return to his country of birth.

In another category of life stories, the interviewees expressed their distance with their country of birth: they did not go there during their studies, which is generally linked to the fact that they left with their parents. This is the case for Elsa, who left Morocco with her mother and her two brothers and states only having returned ten years later. “I didn’t have a mad desire [to go back] to Morocco, I didn’t keep an untarnished memory of Morocco.” David returned to Morocco in 1989 “I wanted to see my city again, as a tourist, which was really hard. I was at the Club Med, it was... it was pretty funny.” This holiday village comes up in other interviews as if to remind of a certain distance between the interviewee and the country of birth, that he or she visits as a tourist in a French hotel structure. But the rest of David’s story brings up a duality between the denial of nostalgia and a practice that seems close to it: “I [...] tried to limit as much as possible this notion of nostalgia. [...] I went back to see the house where I was born. And... I found something magnificent. [...] And I went in and I knocked on the door of the house where I was born. And I said: ‘I was born in this house now, it’s Moroccans who live here. And the people opened their door to me, it was fabulous.’”

Finally, a small minority of the interviewees discussed their relationship with their country of birth: in two cases, with Tunisia, and one case with Morocco. These stories allow us to see how the interviewees formalize an active relationship with the country they left when they were students. Paul is a manager of an important Jewish institution in France. He left Tunis with his family in 1972, after having received his baccalauréat. After starting medical school in Paris, he studied Business Administration and opened up his own business. His narrative presents, as we have seen, the departure of the Jews from Tunisia as a natural movement and at the same time he states his proximity to Tunisia: “I go back often, it’s a country that I am very attached to, a country where I feel at home” and “I am happy to see that my children, who were born in France, have this same sensitivity.” This attitude leads him to take position in the debate on the Tunisian government’s attitude towards the departure of Jews from North Africa. Thus, Paul responds to the accusations made by some that the Tunisian government had hostile policies towards the Jews. “Were they forced out? No, wrong, completely untrue. So, you’ll meet someone who’ll tell you that he had some possessions, that he was despoiled, yeah, of course, you’ll find exceptions. In France, the conflicts with the French administration, you’ll find many people who consider that they were mistreated by the French administration. But there was no real policy. It’s not Egypt, it’s not Syria, and it’s not Iraq.”

As for Sarah, who left Casablanca in 1964 where she lived in a French and European environment, it is in Paris where she learned Arabic, and it is in Montreal where she lives and works as a CEO that has operations in Africa and the Middle-East: “I have a professional life which brings me back to Morocco every month, so finally, I really appreciate Morocco more than I ever did when I lived there, because I wasn’t looking. I didn’t know that there were Art Deco architectural treasures like those in
Casablanca. .” These two trajectories represent two modalities by which they have kept in contact with their countries of birth.

3. Conclusion

The life stories collected from the natives of Morocco and Tunisia who left their countries to pursue their education reveal the way in which a shared memory is constituted. The existence of an educational melting pot in which these young people were trained offers a common frame of reference. Moreover, the lack of perspectives for the future and the emigrational projects of the parents allow the departure from the country of birth to be a step that doesn’t appear to be a painful rift. The generational approach that covers the analysis recommended by Yaron Tsur on “sectors” shed light on the dynamics of group memory. The question of memory also allows us to map the relations between the different groups of the colonial world. Thus, the departures are inscribed both in the collective and family dynamics, but are organized in secret, away from the gaze of the others, particularly that of non-Jewish neighbors. It is the dimensions of these silences that we have attempted to analyze in a comparative perspective: in terms of countries of destination and of generation. The life stories studied, call for another comparative study of theses Jewish and non-Jewish memories.

As we have seen, our informants’ stories show several aspects of sharing and unsharing the memories of their lives before their migration. Their belonging to a sector of the colonial world, while still prevalent in most of their consciousness, seem to be blurred by another aspect of post-colonial life in Morocco mostly, that is the education question. It changes drastically the ways in which each one perceives his or her future life. We can thus see a common perception by the westernized sector: soon after the independence of Morocco or Tunisia, the future of those who consider themselves a part of it, appears suddenly blocked. The educational strategies of the parents that went through French or westernized schools of Morocco or Tunisia have to be transposed to the metropolis. Thus, after obtaining their baccalauréat, young men and women leave “naturally” to pursue their academic studies in France. As we have seen, this moment is a defining step in the migration process, not only for these young people, but for their somewhat extended families. Perceiving the acquisition of a higher education in the metropolis as a sure way to guarantee social mobility for oneself and for the siblings, these families bet on migration as a means of improving their lot. Paradoxically, these behaviors shared at first by people in the westernized sector rapidly spread within all of the Jewish community. Driven by a preoccupation regarding the younger generations, migrations rapidly become the norm. The destinations differ according to the sectors: Israel for the non-occidental majority sector; France and Canada for the francisized sector; Latin America for the Hispanic sector. Also noteworthy is the difference in the temporality of the migrations: after the migrations of
the mainly French and Christian colonial towards their country of nationality, the Jews migrate in the 1950s through the 1970s and more massively than their Muslim counterparts, who migrate in turn from 1980 to 2000. All of these migrations, which are in the millions of people, did not lead to a shared memory of migration, far from it. We have here attempted to better understand the cognitive and commemorative processes of some of the people who have experienced these migrations, mainly from the Westernized sector, as our interviews were conducted in Paris and Montreal. A vast project remains to better understand the memories of people of other sectors who have migrated elsewhere to get a more nuanced and complete picture of this moment.

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