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[Outremont makes history by electing Hasidic woman to council](#)

Posted by [Irwin Block](#)

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The election of Mindy Pollak to the Outremont borough council in November made headlines internationally because it was regarded as a first for a practicing Hasidic woman.

Pollak, 25, is a trilingual (English, Yiddish, French) beautician and community activist, and a member of the Vishnitz Hasidic court. It is one of seven Hasidic communities in Outremont and Mile End, the largest being Satmar, Belz and Skver.

Her election sets a precedent because, contrary to the expectations of her community for a young woman, she will be working regularly with non-Jews, male and female, and involving herself in secular issues.

Pollak was asked to run by Projet Montréal, the reform-oriented municipal party led by Richard Bergeron, because of her work with Leila Marshy, a neighbourhood resident of Palestinian origin, in founding Friends of Hutchison and seeking to improve relations between Hasidim and francophones.

Her candidacy and election were “unprecedented in North America,” says Steven Lapidus, a lecturer at Concordia University’s Institute for Canadian Jewish Studies who is researching a book on Hasidism in Quebec. Vizhnitz in Montreal have four synagogues, Pollak says, and her family follows Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vishnitz, Bnei Brak, in Israel.

Vishnitz, among the largest Hasidic communities in Israel, tends to be “anti-Zionist and reasonably conservative” in ideology, but less so than more extreme Satmar and Tish Hasidim, Lapidus observes.

For members of Hasidic and ultra-Orthodox communities, “having a woman in such a leadership position is very novel and difficult for some people to deal with,” he adds.

“More conservative elements of the community were not in favour of this kind of a position for a woman. They did run a candidate—Sheldon Goldberg—against her and she won.”

The community was concerned that Pierre Lacerte—a self-styled vigilante who carries a camera around the neighbourhood photographing renovations—was also running.

“The major issue in this riding was Pierre Lacerte or Mindy Pollak, and clearly the Hasidic community would do almost anything to keep him out,” Lapidus says.

It is also significant because Montreal’s Hasidic community, known as very conservative, is growing in proportions that resemble a geometric progression, thanks to large families where, according to community spokesperson Alex Werzberger, five or six children per family is the norm. Families with 10 children are not unheard of. This compares with the average fertility rate in Quebec of 1.68 children per woman.

According to a 2005 study commissioned by the Coalition of Hasidic Organizations of Outremont, an estimated 6,150 Hasidim lived in Outremont and Mile End, or one-third of the total 18,450 Hasidim and Ultra Orthodox Jews then living in Montreal and Boisbriand.

In Les Communautés Juive de Montréal, Ira Robinson and Pierre Ancil project that if trends continue, by 2030 those numbers will rise to 12,000 in Outremont and Mile End.

The Hasidic vote will become increasingly important, Lapidus notes, and they will continue to act independently of the larger Jewish community, which totals about 90,000.

“They generally vote as a bloc. You give concessions to the community and you get votes. They are in a position of power,” Lapidus says.

“There is an acknowledgement that the luxury of being entirely insular is not possible in Outremont. That’s what Friends of Hutchison is all about,” Lapidus says. His Hasidic friends in New York have never heard of a synagogue facing pressure to close because it didn’t have a permit, Lapidus adds.

“But ultimately, there has to be an understanding that Hasidim are not going to be friends with non-Hasidim. They will be friendly, say ‘hi.’ There is more interaction on the casual level. They want to co-operate when you have to fix the fence, but Hasidic kids are not going to go over to the non-Hasidic neighbour’s house to play. It’s not going to happen and there is a limit to how much socializing they will do.

“It’s not meant to reject the outside, it’s meant to enhance the inside.”

There are obstacles for the expanding community. “They don’t want to leave Outremont, but it’s difficult to buy homes.

“You need three bedrooms in a Hasidic household, that is it, and you put five children in one room and four in another. The living room is a dining room/hangout area, and usually there is no television.

“Having children is the greatest blessing, so whatever it costs financially is immaterial vis à vis the joy of having children and raising them.”

Lapidus advises the community that, “if they are not going to move, they are going to dominate. ... If you want to come to a peaceful resolution to the problems in Outremont, don’t wait until Hasidim are the majority.”

irblock@hotmail.com

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