MONTREAL DIARIST

L'Affaire Schwartz

MONTREAL IS unquestionably the best place in Canada to eat smoked meat. Much as Boston delis boast about their genuine New York pastrami, restaurateurs in Toronto often advertise "real Montreal smoked meat." The finest smoked meat in town is said to be found at Schwartz's Hebrew Delica-
tessen. In recent months, however, Schwartz's has become widely known for something other than its pastrami. It is the latest victim of Quebec Province's restrictive language charter, drafted by the Parti Québécois, the ruling separatist party, to establish irre-
vocably the supremacy of the French language and culture here. The original
legislation, passed in 1977, ruled that all public commercial signs in
Quebec must be in French only. The English and Hebrew signs advertising
Schwartz's delicious smoked meat would have to go. But subsequent changes
in the law established that "languages other than French" could be
used to advertise commercial establishments "specializing in foreign national
specialties of a particular ethnic group." Minority rights activists set out to prove
that Schwartz's qualified for exemption under the new ruling.

THE BURNING ISSUE now being debated in the halls of Quebec's Assemblée Na-
tionale is: How Jewish is smoked meat? Originally, Gerald Godin, Minister of
Community and Cultural Affairs, suggested that smoked meat is a Cana-
dian, not an ethnic, delicacy, and would therefore probably not qualify
for exemption under the new amendments. The opposition party, led by
indignant Jewish representative Herbert Marx, protested that smoked meat was
evry bit as Jewish as matzoh and gefil-
t fish. The Office de la Langue Fran
caise, which regulates and polices the
language laws, finally allowed that "smoked meat is Jewish. . . it's a typi-
cally ethnic dish." But the legal ramifications of that view remain unclear.
What is clear is that the English lan-
guage is not a Jewish dialect. After all,
what Schwartz's really wants is the
right to advertise in English. The only
right it is likely to get out of a parlia-
mentary decision proclaiming smoked
meat Jewish is the right to advertise in
Yiddish, or Hebrew—a privilege not likely to do much for business. The res-
taurant did in fact have a large Hebrew
sign, which was removed only recently.
But not because the Office de la Langue
Française required it. "A rabbi told me
that our food isn't kosher," explained
Johnny Haim, the restaurant manager,
"so I took the sign down."

LITERARY AND CULTURAL institutions
too have felt the effects of the language
bill. Take the story of Bibliophile, a
small English-language bookstore in
Montreal. To meet the requirements of
the language charter, its proprietors
chose a bilingual name. But "biblio-
ophile" is used much more commonly in
French than in English, and they soon
found that the name was discouraging
English-speaking customers. A small
paper sign which read "an English
Bookshop" was placed in a corner of
the store's front window. The trans-
gression did not escape the notice of
the Commission de Surveillance de la Langue Française, Quebec's language po-
lice. The commission reported the viola-
tion to the Office de la Langue Française, which sent a letter of warn-
ing to the store. In its French letter, the
Office gave the owners of Bibliophile
two weeks to remove the illegal sign,
"an English bookshop" (so much for the
other kind of sensitivity to language) or
face the full fury of the law. Bibli-
ophile's case received national attention
when Quebec Premier Réné Lévesque
said that the bureaucrat responsible for
harassing the little bookstore was a
"nincupapo." The Office de la Lan-
gue Française was embarrassed. The
sign in Bibliophile's window is still
there.

SINCE THE Parti Québécois came to
power in 1976, well over a hundred
thousand English speakers have left
Montreal, mostly for Toronto. Dozens
of banks and corporations, unwilling to
comply with the charter's mandatory
French tests for employees and French-
only business correspondence, have
moved their main offices out of the
city. The departure of so many compa-

cies has given way to an exodus of the
city's more educated citizens. A recent
poll indicated that over 50 percent of
Montreal's English-speaking high
school and junior college students
planned to continue their education
and establish careers outside of
Quebec. And American businesses,
students, and tourists have shown in-
creasing reluctance to invest, study, or
even tour in the province. Taxes and
unemployment have never been ligh-
ter, and there is a palpable pessimism
about the city's future among its non-
French minorities.

ALL THIS STANDS in sharp contrast to
the image of Montreal of not so long
ago. Between 1941 and 1971 the city
experienced phenomenal growth, more
than doubling its population to over
two million. With the tremendously
successful World's Fair, Expo '67, and
the 1976 Summer Olympics, Montreal
had established a reputation as one of
the great cities of the world. The city's
transformation and continued vitality
are largely due to the vision of its mayor
since 1958, Jean Drapeau, who has been
fighting the provincialism of the Parti
Québécois. Old Montreal has been con-
verted from a deserted wharf area to a
model of urban renewal, a center of
nightclubs, boutiques, cafés, and con-
donduminiums. The Metro is one of the
most efficient public transportation sys-
tems in the world. Foreign bookstores
abound. Downtown newsstands typi-
cally carry journals in ten different
languages, and restaurants serving every
imaginable kind of ethnic food can be
found throughout the city.

MONTREAL'S UNUSUAL physical beauty
and international character make it a
hard city to leave for very long. Notable
among its returned exiles are Canada's
most celebrated novelist, Mordechai
Richler and the country's finest poet,
Ivory Layton. Like many others, Layton
reluctantly left Montreal for Toronto be-
cause of financial problems. Upon his
return, he published a long article in
the local English press celebrating his
love for Montreal and his disdain for
Toronto, which he called "a city with-
out a soul" ruled by bankers and stock-
brokers. Though Montreal's losses have
been Toronto's gains, money alone
does not make a city great. As Mayor
Drapeau says, "language, religion, and
love cannot be imposed by law."

ALLAN NADLER

Allan Nadler teaches Hebrew literature
at McGill University in Montreal.