

Law firm celebrates 90 years with gift to law faculties

Janice Arnold
Staff Reporter

One of the oldest "Jewish" law firms still in business in Montreal might never have existed if not for the near impossibility that a Jewish law graduate would be hired elsewhere at the time.

Robinson Sheppard Shapiro (RSS) and its lawyers are celebrating the firm's 90th anniversary with a \$230,000 donation to the law faculties of McGill University and the Université de Montréal (U de M).

The founders, Benjamin Robinson and Joseph Shapiro, were McGill graduates. They worked initially for Popliger & Popliger, which may have been the only Jewish firm at the time, before striking out on their own, said Barry Shapiro, Joseph's son and, at 71, a senior RSS partner.

The other founder's son, Jon Robinson, 82, is also still practising with the firm. He

is well known as the Montreal Expos' first lawyer.

As far as Barry Shapiro knows, RSS is the oldest Jewish-founded firm in Montreal under the same successive management.

The elder Robinson, born in 1892 in either Russia or Portland, Maine, depending on the source, graduated from Harvard University before coming to Montreal. Shapiro, born in 1899 in Montreal, was just 22 when he partnered with Robinson.

From the 1930s, one of the firm's major clients was Steinberg's, the grocery that would grow into Quebec's largest supermarket chain. The irascible Sam Steinberg, Barry recalled, would call his father at precisely 6:45 p.m. every day for years, just as the family was sitting down to dinner.

The firm served businesses in which Jews were prominent, clothing and textiles, produce wholesalers, real estate developers, as well as mining companies.

In 1959, Robinson was appointed to Quebec Superior Court, only the second Jew to sit on that bench.

Claude-Armand Sheppard, a Belgian-born child survivor of the Holocaust, joined the firm in 1959 and is still practising, alongside his son Jean-Pierre. The firm specialized in commercial law, but Sheppard, a bit of renegade, was a criminal litigator, and his clients included FLQ militants and abortion advocate Dr. Henry Morgentaler.

From the outset, Robinson and Shapiro were prominent in Jewish communal life. Both served as president of Jewish Immigrant Aid Services (as did Barry decades later). They were active in the 1930s and '40s in trying to get Canada to let in more European refugees.

They were among the founders, and Robinson the first president, of the Lord Reading Law Society, established to promote the interests of Jewish lawyers, who continued to face prejudice.

In 1949, Robinson became the first Jewish member of the council of the Montreal bar, soon after followed by Shapiro.

RSS, which has been in the Stock Exchange Tower since it opened in 1964 (now occupying the top floors, the 46th and 47th), is today a multicultural, bilingual, mid-sized independent firm with a range of specialties.

Barry, the youngest of three sons, said his father never pressured him to go into law. "On the contrary, he insisted that if I did choose law, I should work in the summers for a chartered accountant and a land surveyor, which I did. My father's counsel proved to be invaluable in business law."

Many Jewish organizations and institutions, including Federation CJA, have benefited and continue to benefit from the involvement of RSS lawyers. But they are active in a wide variety of good causes in Quebec.

Only about 15 of RSS's 75 lawyers today are Jewish, said Barry, who joined in 1965, two years before his father's retirement. He

is proud that about half of the lawyers are women.

The Robinson and Shapiro presence will continue for some time to come, as RSS has no mandatory retirement age.

"I'm now representing the third generation of some families, some of whom started with my father," Barry said.

The gifts to McGill and U de M, from which most of its lawyers graduated, is in keeping with RSS's longstanding precept of "giving back to the community," said CEO and managing partner Charles Flam during the formal presentation to their respective law deans, Daniel Jutras and Gilles Trudeau.

"Our founders instilled in us the highest principles of community service," said Flam, who has been there since the '60s.

That principle is not expressed only through money, but also by the giving of time: lawyers are encouraged to maintain a balanced life between work and family and/or community service, he said.

Those who want to make fortunes are better off pursuing their careers elsewhere. The firm has resisted joining a national outfit, and its ~~rates~~ remain considerably below the profession's average, Barry Shapiro said.

The creation of the Robinson Sheppard Shapiro Endowment Fund will provide much-needed funds to enable law students to participate in mootings and other academic competitions nationally and internationally.



From left, Barry Shapiro and Charles Flam welcome Gilles Trudeau, dean of the law school at Université de Montréal, and Daniel Jutras, dean of the law school at McGill University, to the offices of Robinson Sheppard Shapiro.

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Brigitte, Raphael and Nathaniel
on the tragic loss of a beloved sister,
sister-in-law and aunt

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May the family be spared further sorrow.

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