The Failures of French Immigration in Quebec

A One-Way Ticket to Problems?

By FANNIE OLIVIER

PARIS -- To reach Virginie and Ronnie's apartment, located in a working-class district near Paris's Gare du Nord station, you need to climb a narrow, endless spiral staircase. At the very top, under the eaves, their tiny living area has peeling paint and rising dampness. Given the space, the visitor can hardly fail to notice the three posters the tenants have hung on the walls. A breath of fresh air in these dank surroundings, they portray the wide open spaces of Quebec through the seasons. The slogan "Faire sa vie au Québec" ("Make Your Life In Quebec") is splayed across the posters. It's a new mantra for this young French couple who long to escape their humdrum existence in Paris.

She is a business school graduate but can only find work as a receptionist. He has an English degree but dreams of becoming an illustrator. Next September they will both be flying out to Montreal, the economic capital of Quebec, to try their luck in French-speaking America, like so many of their compatriots before them. They have only bought one-way tickets: they intend to spend the rest of their lives in the Canadian province of their dreams - despite the fact that they have never even been there.

According to Quebec's Ministry of Immigration, every year 3,000 to 4,000 French people like Virginie and Ronnie decide to settle permanently in Quebec. 7,000 more come in on a temporary visa and over 5,000 as students. Montreal is the main non-European destination for French expatriates, where 40,000 of them are registered with the Maison des Français, twice as many as in New York or Los Angeles and nearly four times more than in Sydney. And this figure is increasing: between 2000 and 2004 it soared by 47%.

However the Quebec dream can sometimes turn into a nightmare. Every year hundreds of these immigrants return home to France with the bitter aftertaste of failure.

The exact number of returning immigrants is the object of fierce debate. The Delegation of Quebec in France, the organization in charge of recruiting immigrants, claims that 18% to 20% will be back within five years. The demographer Marc Termotte, however, argues that these figures are wide of the mark. "One out of every two French people who decide to settle in Quebec will go back to France within eight years of their immigration," says this professor from the University of Montreal, who based his study on census statistics.

Virginie and Ronnie know that the return rate is fairly high but this does not deter them from their immigration project. "Once we've left, we'll finally be able to shake off this depressing environment. Here in France, there's always someone to put a spoke in your wheel," sighs 24
year-old Virginie. And like all the others who hope to be leaving for good, she is certain that she and Ronnie will be in the half who succeed.

A website refuge for the disillusioned

So why do so many disappointed French immigrants return home without having made it? The Internet provides a wealth of clues. On www.immigrer-contact.com, a site with over 6,000 active members, accounts by French people who failed to find what they were looking for in Quebec are legion. Their bitterness is palpable. Quebec is described as a matriarchal society ("Feministan") with failing infrastructures ("Kebekistan"). The Quebeckers are described as "intolerant racists" who speak an outdated and incorrect language, bask in their own ignorance and suffer from an inferiority complex that results in a loathing of "maudits Français" ("damned French").

The almost racist tone of the comments, however, betrays the genuine hardships encountered by immigrants. Françoise, who is in her fifties, is an active member of immigrer.contact. In 2005, she moved to Quebec City with her husband. "We had always dreamed of living in Quebec. I had been there a few times and I saw Canada through rose-tinted glasses," she says.

Her problems began when she started looking for work. Although she had been a sales trainer and manager in France, in Quebec she could only find a job as a salesperson. "You absolutely need to have job experience in Quebec if you want to find an interesting position there. You have no idea how many qualified foreigners fail to get jobs in Quebec," says Françoise. And because she sees employment as the main battle, she and her husband decided to make their way back to their native Aquitaine after only 15 months in Quebec. "We sold everything before we left, the house, the car…and then we had to buy it all again in Quebec. When we moved back, we sold at a loss. We have lost so much money," she says.

The role of the Delegation: protection or promotion?

As far as the immigrer-contact members are concerned, it is up to the Delegation of Quebec in France, in their role as recruitment officers for future immigrants, to warn of the difficulties awaiting jobseekers in Quebec. Yann Takvorian, the site's founder, claims that the Delegation is actually guilty of misleading candidates: "We feel betrayed by the Delegation, which just doled out fallacious marketing spin. They really set out to defraud."

A Frenchman who has been living in Quebec for 11 years but now plans to leave, Yann complains among other things that he was not made aware of the appalling quality of health care. "Sometimes you have to wait a whole day to see a doctor. Patients even have to wait on stretchers in the corridors, resources are so limited," he explains.

Other bones of contention are the education system that he claims is run by incompetent teachers and a labor market that is hostile to immigrants. His main complaint, however, is the difficulty of achieving recognized professional status. The province has a large number of protected or regulated professions: doctors, engineers, dentists, accountants, architects etc. "In order to join their ranks, a number of professionals who were already practicing in France find themselves having to retake exams, attend classes or sometimes even retrain completely," Yann says.
The Quebec Immigration Office in Paris however categorically denies pulling the wool over the immigrants' eyes. In fact during their information sessions they specifically address the question of professional status. Ève Bettez, the Immigration Office's Head of Promotion, who hosts these information sessions, explains that immigrants whose profession is regulated in Quebec "must sign a rider certifying that they are aware that their current profession is regulated in Quebec and that a number of procedures will be required to practice there."

According to Ms. Bettez, employment is not a major factor for returning immigrants. They go back primarily because they miss their family, but also because their partners find it difficult to adapt and because they find that the legendary harsh winters are actually a real problem.

It was family that finally made Johanna decide to go home after nearly seven years in Quebec. Last year she completed her doctorate in a Quebec university, split up from her Canadian boyfriend and found herself at one of life's crossroads. "I missed my family terribly. Before making up my mind, though, I drew up a list with all the pros and cons -- and found that the pros tipped the balance," she says.

Johanna looks back on her time in Quebec as a life experience. She doesn't see her return as a failure but as just another step. "Many young French people decide to immigrate to Quebec for the experience but it's not necessarily a lifetime project," she says. She sees no reason for Quebec to be alarmed.

'An acre of France in America'

Another element plays a part in the return rate: the culture shock. Their common language means that the French are unprepared for this. Many expect to find "an acre of France in America" rather than "America in French." And even then, it's not the same French. Johanna admits she still uses typical Quebecker expressions months after her return to France.

Language is only one aspect of the cultural divide faced by the French immigrant. The basic cultural precepts are also unique. "I know I shouldn't say this but I find the Quebeckers very… Anglo-Saxon," admits Françoise, as though this was the worst kind of insult. With their more right-wing economic vision, a culinary approach that is a long way from its French origins and policies based on individual freedom, the Quebeckers are first and foremost North-Americans.

The French are taken aback by the lack of hierarchy in the workplace. Bosses are addressed by the familiar "tu" pronoun in French and no appointment is required to see them. Jobs are more insecure but the unemployment rate is lower. Even friendship has its special codes. "Socially the Quebeckers are less spontaneous than the French," says Johanna. "They invite you to 'supper' a week ahead and tell you to be there by 5 p.m.!" - three hours earlier than the normal French dinnertime.

Yann Rocq, a young computer specialist who recently moved to Montreal and launched the blog www.mauditfrancais.com, believes the French who decide to move to Quebec do not know enough about the province. Before settling in Quebec, he had already spent over a year in Montreal on a student exchange. "By the time I decided to settle here permanently, I had stopped idealizing Quebec and knew just what to expect. I had my feet firmly on the ground – I wasn't
here to hunt caribou!” Yann says. He believes the romantic clichés of the lumberjack's log cabin and the vast snow-covered panoramas are still very much part of the immigrant dream.

Yann is the brother-in-law of Virginie and Ronnie, the young couple from Paris who will be leaving for Montreal in September. Even though he agrees with their decision to immigrate, he thinks they are making the typical mistakes that lead so many French immigrants to turn back. They have never visited Quebec and are immigrating in order to flee a country they have grown to hate.

"We know this is a leap in the dark" admits Ronnie. "It's true that we've never been there but we're preparing ourselves as much as possible. We read books on Quebec and log on to the Radio-Canada website every day." He claims that he is aware of the culture shocks he will have to face at some stage in his new country but this doesn't put him off. Quite the reverse: "I long for the culture shocks. When they happen I'll know I really have left France. At long last.”