

# A PIECE OF CANADA'S CULTURAL MOSAIC

## The Lebanese-Canadian community adds much to our vibrant Francophone culture

**W**hen Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, Sheila Copps, Minister of Canadian Heritage, and Denis Paradis, Secretary of State for Latin America, Africa and La Francophonie, attended the ninth Francophonie Summit in Beirut, Lebanon, they were visiting the birthplace of thousands of their fellow citizens.

The long-standing connection between Canada and Lebanon stretches back over 100 years to when the first Arabic-speaking immigrants arrived in Canada—along with immigrants from other parts of the world, particularly eastern, central and southern Europe. All helped contribute to the rich cultural diversity that defines Canada.

### **From small beginnings**

The first four immigrants from Lebanon (then part of Syria) arrived in Montreal in 1882. These early immigrants usually made their living as peddlers: they sold their wares on streets in downtown Montreal or in rural communities near the Ontario towns of London and Stratford, or else they opened wholesale stores to resupply peddlers with merchandise.

Today many Lebanese-Canadians are university-educated, often speak both of Canada's official languages, and are professionals such as doctors, lawyers, engineers and professors. There are two Members of Parliament of Lebanese origin—Mark Assad (Gatineau) and Mac Harb (Ottawa Centre)—as well as Senator Pierre Debané and a former premier of Prince Edward Island, the late

Joe Ghiz. Lebanese-Canadians have also been active in the arts as writers (especially in French), painters and musicians. Currently on display at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Quebec, is *The Lands Within Me*—the first-ever exhibition of Arab-Canadian artists; running until March 2003, it includes several artists of Lebanese origin.

One of the most famous of the early Lebanese immigrants was a woman, Annie Midlige, who grew up in the mountains around Beirut and came to Ottawa in 1895. From her base in Ottawa, this 40-something widow paddled a canoe all the way up the Gatineau River, accompanied by an Indian guide, to the remote interior of Quebec, establishing stores and trading furs along the way. So adept was Annie that she gave the Hudson's Bay Company (Canada's oldest trading company and now one of our largest department store chains) tough competition in the fur trading business.

By 1901 there were about 2,000 Syrian-Lebanese in Canada. Between 1911 and 1951 an immigration policy restricting "Asiatics," which included immigrants of Arab origin, reduced the steady influx of new immigrants

from Lebanon and Syria. But from the mid-1950s onward, the Lebanese have continued to be the largest group of Arabs in Canada.

In the mid-1970s, during the Lebanese civil war, Canada was the only country to adopt special immigration measures to assist Lebanese fleeing the conflict; it even set up an emergency visa office in Nicosia, Cyprus, in 1989. Since so many Lebanese already had family in Canada, it was easier for them to adjust to their new home here. In addition, the French influence in Lebanon, where Arabic and French are the official languages, made Montreal a natural choice for the majority of the newcomers.

### **The Lebanese and Montreal**

Since the 1880s, Montreal has been a magnet for new Lebanese immigrants. The city has the largest Lebanese community in Canada, whose members have contributed greatly to Canada's vibrant Francophone culture. Like the Lebanese in Beirut, who pepper sentences with Arabic, French and English, the Lebanese-Canadians of Montreal move seamlessly between French and Arabic in one conversation.