In Sarcelles, the criticisms made of Jews are aimed at real and not imaginary Jews; they refer to a visible community; in other words they are undoubtedly less a product of the imagination than those which we heard in Roubaix. But to what extent do they distort reality? Do they give a distorted and inaccurate image of the Jews in the town? To further our analysis, we questioned families in the ‘Jewish area’ of Les Flanades, people in charge of Jewish associations, pupils in denominational schools and local Jewish figures; we also included people who, while being Jewish, do not claim to adhere to the community and do not even necessarily make a show of their Jewishness.

One fundamental point was immediately obvious; the descriptions of the Jewish community made by the rest of the population and the arguments advanced criticising them, which were a priori negative, were corroborated by the members of the community themselves. Not only did they adopt them, but they confirmed and justified them.

A United and Structured Community

The Jews in Sarcelles have developed considerably over the past 40 years or so and they have learnt to mix, but amongst themselves—not with the rest of the population. The following dialogue between a mother and her son is instructive here.

Mother:—Habits have changed—it used to be that the Sephardis and the Ashkenazis didn’t mix. The Algerians, the Moroccans and the Tunisians didn’t mix with each other either. I remember that at that time, when I was 18 or 19 years old, if I was silly enough to tell my father that I was going out with a Moroccan Jew, it was the end of the world. “You’re Tunisian,” he would say, “Stick to the Tunisian boys”. Whereas nowadays, what is important for us as parents is that he or she be Jewish. But for my father, there was no question either of a Moroccan Jew or an Algerian Jew, let alone an Ashkenazi.

Son:—We are a group of 10 friends. There are Moroccans, Algerians, Tunisians. There’s everything, even an Israeli.
Mother:—I have a friend who is a Moroccan Jew. I don’t call him by his real name. Just to tease him, I call him ‘the Moroccan’.

Being ‘Moroccan’, ‘Tunisian’ or ‘Algerian’ for these Jews from Les Flanades means being a Moroccan Jew, a Tunisian Jew, etc. It also means participating in a community culture which reproduces, in certain respects, the North African model. This is how Marc Djebali, president of the collective of Jewish associations in Sarcelles, describes his area:

The Jewish community in Sarcelles is highly concentrated in this area, Les Flanades. The result is that it’s really wonderful here. When you go out, you meet people of all ages, all the generations…My parents are here and they are very happy to go out, meet friends, sit at a table in a café, go and collect the grandchildren from school and give them their meal. There’s a reconstitution of what I would almost call life in a North African village, which means that we maintain a way of life very similar to what are traditional oriental Jewish customs.

The community here presents a rather harmonious way of life in a particular area.

The high density of Jews in the area also seems to offer an element of security: in the words of Jef, aged 18, “In this area, we know that there are a great many Jews and if anyone touches a car, everyone will go down. So it’s not worth even so much as going near a car. Everyone knows each other”. This sort of statement is typical of those which tend to make a comparison or identification of a sort with Israel. Another young man who had just come back from Israel added:

In Israel, there’s an army, the police, the people, everyone—the people are very supportive of each other. You won’t see a youth grabbing a mobile phone from a little old lady. Automatically, there would be 10 or 15 people who would run to return a mobile to an old lady.

Belonging to a community also means adopting a code of behaviour which may contrast with the laxness of other residents in the town. Salazar Benakoun, employed by the town hall in Sarcelles as head of security associates this rigour with cultural attributes as well as social ones:

Amongst the Jews, the parents don’t abdicate responsibility. If I were to see my son going out wearing jeans full of holes, even if he tells me it’s the fashion…I would tell him to go home at once, that he can wear them when he’s on the Côte d’Azur…I won’t let my son go out dirty…He knows that he won’t do that because he knows what his father