



## Friday Film: 150 Years of French Class

By Allen Ellenzweig

(March 11, 2011) And now, a different kind of Jewish film festival. “In the Beginning Was a School...,” a two-part documentary celebrating the 150th anniversary of the *Alliance Israelite Universelle*, has its American premiere March 13 at the **New York Sephardic Jewish Film Festival**. Traditional in its visual presentation — talking heads intercut with archival footage, animation, video montage, and old black and white clips of maps that look like out-takes from Casablanca — this television production tells a story little known on these shores, even if legendary among the francophone Sephardic diaspora. Its director, Josy Eisenberg, is a prominent figure in France, known as host — for over 40 years! — of a television program on Jewish life, history, and culture, and as the co-screenwriter of the 1970s cult film comedy, “The Mad Adventures of Rabbi Jacob.”

The Alliance, or AIU, was founded by six French Jewish eminences in 1860 on the heels of the Mortara Affair, which saw a six-year-old Jewish child in Bologna, Italy forcibly taken from his parents by the Church, on the rationale that Edgardo’s secret baptism by his nurse made him a Catholic. The Affair prompted international controversy; it also encouraged communitarian solidarity among assimilated French Jews.

From the start, AIU was Jewish in character and humanitarian in its aims: to educate the Jewish children of France’s North African colonies in their religion’s history and culture, but also to bring modern public health and hygiene, along with agricultural and secular education to the often cramped, poor, and observant Sephardic communities of in countries like Morocco, Syria, and Algeria. The AIU was taking on the traditional “civilizing” mission so prized by the French in their colonial ventures.

Indeed, the AIU worked hand-in-hand with various French ministries around the Mediterranean basin to bring Jewish practice to French-speaking Sephardic communities, while also assuring an enlightened education of “little Frenchmen” throughout France’s colonies. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of many schools was their integration of a minority of non-Jewish students — some from well-to-do Muslim backgrounds — whose parents saw the value of the francophone curriculum. We are assured that Muslim-Jewish relations from the period 1860-1940 were relatively good in the region. But the break produced by the Nazis and Vichy, tensions over the founding of Israel, and French decolonization, shrank Jewish communities in Arab lands and closed many Alliance schools.

The first part of the documentary impresses us with the scope of the AIU’s mission as successive generations of far-sighted French Jews aided their co-religionists in the Middle East and North Africa. In its 150 years, the AIU educated a million students in 210 schools in 16 countries, even including a school for the deaf in Jerusalem.

The second part of Eisenberg’s documentary reviews the Alliance’s current activities, taking pride in its succession of robust intellectual leaders after the war, like Nobel laureate René Cassin who was president from 1943-1976. The

documentary maintains a tone of advocacy — some might say cheerleading — as its narration, interviews, and visuals show the AIU's Paris-based mission in primary and adult education, cultural programming, teacher training, and a major update of its library as digitized archive of rare historic Jewish manuscripts, photography, periodicals and newspapers. In interviews that make us glad to hear beautifully spoken French, representatives across the board confirm that the AIU is moving with the temper of the times. Scenes of typical French teenagers in AIU classrooms, some at voluntary morning prayer services, paint a vivid picture of current Jewish life in France as dynamic, tolerant, and diverse.

The only element missing from the picture is a sense of the Alliance's greatest struggles. How did it react to the Dreyfus Affair? What role could it have been allowed under Vichy? How is it combating resurgent anti-Semitism today? Perhaps these are issues for a darker accounting of an agency which has every right to celebrate a laudable history in the fullness of sunshine.