

Jews in Europe Since 1989: Focus on Germany

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Fortuitously!

Fortuitously, I've just received a copy of the first issue of a new English-language Jewish newspaper *Jewish Voice from Germany*, founded by 64-year-old Rafael Seligmann, a prominent author and journalist, showcasing the revival of Jewish life in Germany. 'We can resume our common history'— a significant reference to the pre-Holocaust relationship between Jews and Germans. It dreams of a rebirth of German-Jewish life.

The Jewish Voice from Germany is intended as a bridge; it will connect Jews with Gentiles, Germany with the world. We want to communicate the long history that Jews and Germans share with each other. Our paper intends to make the dream of a new togetherness a reality.

Also fortuitously in same first issue, a counter-view from Moshe Zimmerman, a historian of German Jewish history whose parents, German Jews from Hamburg, went to Palestine in 1935:

There will be no re-birth of German Jews. Jews in Germany have no chance of becoming a decisive factor again in the development of the Jewish religion or history. They cannot compete either with the largest Jewish diaspora, in the United States, or with Israel.

What's amazing is that there can be this discussion at all given not only the destruction of German Jewry during the Holocaust, but the destruction of huge swathes of Jews in the rest of Europe. And there probably would be no such discussion without the migration of Jews from the former Soviet Union since 1989. The German Jewish community is the fastest-growing Jewish community in the world.

To understand the significance of what has happened, we need to go back to before 1939 and set the German situation in the wider context of Europe as a whole.

Statistics on the Scale of Destruction

Before 1939, more than half of Jews in the world lived in Europe (9.4 million out of some 17 million). Before 1933, there were 600,000 Jews in Germany. By 1945 the world Jewish population had shrunk by one-third; one in three Jews still lived in Europe; but in Germany, out of 214,000 Jews left on the eve of the Holocaust, only 22,000 were left in 1945. Of those, only about 8,000 were German Jewish survivors. 12,000 were 'displaced persons' from Eastern Europe, mostly from Poland. On the eve of reunification the community was ageing and dwindling. By 1990 there were fewer than 30,000 Jews in the FRG and the GDR combined.

1945-1989/90: European Jewry 'Facing Inevitable Decline'

By 1945 European Jewry was seen as having been dealt such a heavy blow that it would suffer inevitable decline. Although communities did revive and efforts were made to help them (by the American Joint Jewish Distribution Committee, amongst others), they were seen as shadows of their former selves, except in the UK. And although there were large numbers of Jews in some Eastern European countries, despite the Holocaust, with the fall of the Iron Curtain they were cut off from the rest of Europe. And although it wasn't uniform, they suffered suppression of Jewish religious and cultural expression, like all religious groups, and in some places active antisemitism. Jewish leaders in the largest, most significant communities—America and Israel—increasingly saw Europe as a graveyard, irredeemably antisemitic, not a place for Jews to live.

I remember at that time meetings of the European branch of the World Jewish Congress, the character of the Eastern European Jewish leaders and their first encounter with the leaders of the Jews in Germany. The Eastern European leaders only came to meetings with Communist Party clearance, mostly a rather sad and pathetic group. Talk of 'European Jewry' at that time was really a fiction, because more than half was not free.

Back to Germany

The destruction of Jews in Germany was not just numerical. There had been an incredibly rich cultural, intellectual, academic and religious life: major figures like Albert Einstein, Kurt Weill, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Leo Baeck; and the Haskala, the birth of the Reform movement, the Zionist movement. But more than that, the German-Jewish relationship was seen by many as unique and referred to as the 'German-Jewish symbiosis', as if there was something uniquely compatible between Jewish and German culture and the merging of elements of both created a unique new culture. The death of this idea was especially hard for German Jews to bear, especially those that stayed until the last minute or until it was too late to get out.

After the Holocaust and the war it became virtually taboo to speak of 'German Jews'. No longer *Verein der Deutschen Juden* (Union of German Jews) but *Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland* (Central Council of Jews in Germany). No longer 'German Jews', but 'Jews in Germany', even apart from the fact that there were so few left and most of the Jews who formed the postwar community were not from the established German-Jewish community but from Eastern Europe.

The German Jews themselves felt very conflicted: they felt guilt that they had survived; and they suffered the incomprehension of Jews elsewhere who could not understand how they could live in Germany again. And the phrase 'Jews in Germany' reinforced the idea that they were there only temporarily; they saw themselves as 'sitting on packed suitcases' (Heinz Galinski, the leader of German Jewry in the 1980s, epitomised this), waiting to leave for

Israel; and that their main role in staying was to commemorate the genocide, to act as a moral conscience for Germany, a constant reminder to Germans of what they had done.

Then as Jews became more settled, more prosperous, they faced a rise in far-right extremism of which there was a new assertiveness in the 1970s and 1980s.

The European Picture on the Eve of 1989/90

In 1989 there were about a million Jews in Western Europe; between two and two and half million in the USSR and communist Eastern Europe. The general view was that they were in decline and would never recover.

In fact, however, something of a revival of Jewish life was already under way in Western Europe. Then came the revolutions of 1989. In the East, Jews were suddenly free, and few had seen it coming. Although the initial impact appeared to be the surfacing of suppressed antisemitism (in Poland, Hungary, Romania, Russia), the real story was of Jewish revival: rediscovery of Jewish roots; reclamation of Jewish history and culture; the end of fear brought Jews out of the woodwork.

American and Western European Jewish organisations invested, first in welfare, but also in culture and education, and cross-continent Jewish cooperation to support the revival began. Lubavitch Hasidism had been active in the East well before the collapse of communism, and its now reaped its reward.

But with freedom of movement, a hugely significant Jewish migration began, especially from the former Soviet Union (FSU). A million Jews went to Israel, and 350,000 to the USA.

Back to Germany

Jews also went to Germany. Between 1991, when immigration rules were relaxed, with a quota refugee law which granted Jews special refugee status giving them residence and entitlement to work permits and social rights, and 2005, more than 200,000 Jews came from the FSU. Some reports now say 250,000. The result is that the Jewish population in Germany is now in the region of 250,000, with some places having a larger Jewish population than before the Holocaust. In many places FSU Jews make up more than 90 per cent of the Jewish population. The wave of immigration enabled the creation of new communities in a number of cities, like Rostock, Cottbus and Frankfurt an der Oder in former East Germany. The total also includes possibly up to 20,000 Jews from Israel now living in Germany: we don't know exactly how many because many enter with European passports. Most want to be treated as 'Israelis in Germany/Berlin', not as Jews in Germany.

There is a difference between the figure of 250,000 and the official figure, which is about 120,000. The difference arises because of definitions of who is

a Jew. The German authorities accepted as a Jew anyone who said they had Jewish father or mother. But to be formally a member of a Jewish community, a person must be 'halachically Jewish' (Jewish according to Jewish law: born of a Jewish mother). Local Jewish communities are public-law corporations with known membership. But not all Jews choose to join and not all communities accept everyone who says they are a Jew unless they can provide halachic proof. There are estimated to be about 50,000 halachic Jews who are not formally members of communities.

The status of the official communities was strengthened further in 2003 when Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder signed a ground-breaking agreement with the Central Council of Jews that granted Judaism the same legal status in Germany as the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches, for the first time adding the Jewish religion to the state-run 'church tax' or tithing system. The Federal Government pledged annual financial assistance to the Central Council especially for the integration of the newcomers.

Timeline of Revival: Selected Highlights

The pattern of renewal became more 'Jewish' over time: from academic Jewish studies, to cultural institutions and activities (museums, festivals), to educational (Jewish schools), to religious institutions (rabbinic seminaries).

1979 Heidelberg College of Jewish Studies.

1992 Moses-Mendelssohn Centre for European-Jewish Studies, Potsdam, near Berlin.

1995 Simon Dubnow Institute for Jewish History and Culture, Leipzig.

1996 Chabad-Lubavitch Berlin Centre opens.

1997 Union of Progressive Jews founded.

2001 Tarbut annual seminars for German-speaking Jews (Germany, Austria and Switzerland) begin.

2001 Daniel Libeskind extension to the Jewish Museum in Berlin opens.

2003 Chabad-Lubavitch ordain ten rabbis in Germany.

2005 German branch of Limmud founded (worldwide pluralist informal Jewish education movement).

2006, September: three Reform rabbis—from Germany, the Czech Republic and South Africa—ordained, graduates of Abraham Geiger Reform College in Dresden established 2002. First such event since the Holocaust. College recognised by the Central Council in 2005.

2006, November: new synagogue opens in Munich.

2007, March: new Jewish Museum opens in Munich, just a few months after the opening of the new synagogue.

2007, August: renovation and reopening of Rykestrasse Synagogue in the heart of East Berlin, Germany's largest.

2007 Institute for Jewish Studies, University of Potsdam.

2008 In Berlin, Jewish community now has 12,000 registered members, eight synagogues, schools, a kindergarten, a brand new cultural centre.

2008 Germany has 89 synagogues and more than 100 congregations.

2009, 3 June: two Orthodox rabbis ordained at Munich's Ohel Jakob Synagogue, the first such ceremony in over 70 years. The two new rabbis, Hungarian Zsolt Balla and Ukrainian Avraham Radbil, are the first to complete studies at the new Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin, reopened in 2005.

2010, November: Ukrainian-born Alina Treiger ordained as first female rabbi ordained since the Second World War.

Impact of the Newcomers: Issues, Problems, Conflicts

Obviously, these landmarks can't fully convey the nature of the revival of Jewish life. On the one hand it has been institutional, with significant help from the German government, which continues. On the other hand it has been an indigenous process resulting from the interaction between the de facto pluralist character of the new Jewish population and the growing assertiveness of both the younger generation of Jews growing up in Germany in the postwar period and the newcomers (and their children) who don't have the same hangups about being Jewish in Germany that the established, but very small, Jewish community had. What is emerging is a new pluralist form of Jewish identity.

The new assertiveness was symbolised by Ignatz Bubis, who was originally from German city of Breslau, now Wroclaw, Poland, Chairman and President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany 1992-1999. Previous leaders like Galinski embodied reminders of German guilt; this was their main function. Bubis was popular, active in the FDP, combative, more 'normal'. His premature death in 1999 was seen as a great loss to the Jewish community. He was also a very popular figure in German public life.

The new identity (what some call the 'new Jew') emerging can be seen in the work of the Jewish writers, filmmakers, artists, playwrights and comedians taking on taboo subjects, especially both German and Jewish attitudes to the Holocaust and to antisemitism. This is characterised by irreverence, challenging stereotypes, challenging the impossibility of there ever being a 'normal' state of being for Jews in Germany or a normal state of being for

Germany as a country, challenging the stiff attitudes about these issues which still prevail in Germany. It's said that 'Jews make jokes about the Holocaust and Germans laugh at them.' It's also said that Jews are now more secure in their identity, while Germans aren't.

The new identity can also be seen in the growing diversity of forms of religious congregation: Orthodoxy is the default position, but on one side there is the growing impact of Lubavitch Hasidim and on the other the Reform and Liberal movements, a Masorti congregation, egalitarian congregations, congregations of women, gay groups.

There is also increasing participation of Jews in public life: politics, think tanks, the media.

Although this revival of Jewish life in Germany over the last two decades is inconceivable without the migration from the FSU, the relationship of the newcomers to it is not entirely straightforward and it has thrown up some difficult problems and conflicts

It's important not to forget that far-right extremism is still a significant force in Germany, especially in the East, and some, like the former president of the Central Council Charlotte Knoblauch, see a hostile mood towards Jews, though linked to the politics of the Israel-Palestine conflict. High levels of security prevail for Jewish institutions (but is this necessitated by real security fears or by the understandable and commendable sensitivity on the part of the German authorities towards what may happen to the Jewish community if a security incident were to occur?) But Jews in Germany don't want to be defined by anti-Jewish hostility.

And controversies always seem to arise in relation to so-called 'relativisation of the Holocaust': how much attention should Germans give to the Holocaust? Back in the 1980s we had Ernst Nolte and the *Historikerstreit*: 'the past that will not pass'; Botho Strauss, an important writer, has noted that the way Germany dealt with its past paralysed society. Martin Walser in his speech accepting the Frankfurt Book Fair Peace Prize in 1998 condemned the 'Holocaust industry,' saying Auschwitz had been used as a 'routine threat, a tool of intimidation, a moral cudgel' against today's German (a view challenged by Bubis, and a huge row ensued). Steffen Heitman, former Chancellor Kohl's one-time choice for president, said Germany is now a normal country, and its special role has come to an end with end of communism. Thilo Sarrazin's book *Germany Does Away With Itself* is an attack on multiculturalism, especially the 'Muslim failure to integrate': a Social Democratic politician and a then member of the executive board of Germany's central bank, he could even comment that 'Jews shared a particular gene'—though this is also seen as a questionable form of philosemitism.

Let me highlight just three of the problems, challenges and questions thrown up by the changes.

1: the Uneasy Relationship between the Established Jews and the Newcomers

Established, pre-1991 Jews see the newcomers as very different. They think that they know little and don't practise much religion; that they are not preoccupied with the Holocaust, seeing Hitler more in terms of the Russian/Soviet patriotic struggle against him; and that they are coming purely for economic reasons: many have had difficulty finding jobs and some live on welfare.

As I noted above, most of the newcomers, possibly as many as 90 per cent, are not regarded as halachically Jewish. With the Orthodox denomination predominating, this means that only about half of the immigrants are formally members of the Jewish community.

However, the Lubavitch Hasidim are more open to even the less than fully halachic Jews—they see them as potential *baalei t'shuva*, returnees to the faith—and the Russians who want to learn more about their religion are attracted by this and find the Lubavitch, who are mostly of American or Israeli origin, far more welcoming than the established Jews.

Establishment Jews still dominate leadership of the communities. In Berlin, for example, the Jewish community is now troubled, not just by its cultural divide but also by mismanagement and corruption, involving both Russians and Germans, which have tainted its reputation. It has a huge yearly budget of €25m (\$37m), more than 80 per cent of which is paid by the city of Berlin. Most of the running costs of Jewish synagogues, schools, cemeteries, libraries, hospitals and nursing homes are met by the German state as an atonement for the past.

Some see the newcomers as being treated like second-class citizens. Larissa Syssojewa from the World Congress of Russian Jewry (WCRJ) is particularly upset with the Central Council of Jews in Germany for sitting back 'idly' and watching Berlin tighten the regulations on the immigration of Eastern European Jews in 2006. Now one of the preconditions for immigration to Germany is an invitation from a Jewish community in the country.

The new members' links to Judaism, however, are often tenuous at best. For this reason, the communities invest large amounts of energy and money not just in an expanded physical infrastructure but in Jewish education and fostering Jewish consciousness as well. This effort will continue for years to come.

2: the Conflict between the Religious Denominations

Orthodoxy remains formally dominant, but is not reflective of the beliefs and practices of the Jewish population. Resistance to progressive Judaism remains, though this is of course odd given that Germany was where Reform Judaism was born. How this plays out will clearly reflect on the extent to which

the newcomers will be able to find a Jewish religious niche for themselves if they want one.

3: the Meaning of the Developments

Is a new German Jewry arising, or will the vast majority of the newcomers not become Jews in any practising religious sense or even culturally? In the longer term, to what extent will the enlarged Jewish population ensure its continuity by establishing Jewish families and passing on Jewish tradition?

We have already seen differences on this in the opinions of Seligmann and Zimmerman I noted at the beginning. Opinions are divided. People like Professor Micha Brumlik, education expert at Frankfurt University who was very active in the Green Party, believe that a '*neues deutsche Judentum*' (new German Judaism) is developing; but others, who themselves are committed to renewing Jewish life, like Professor Michael Brenner, historian and head of Jewish studies at Munich University, doubt whether such a movement is emerging.

One of the questions thrown up by this is: How German can they become given that to embrace German ethnic identity requires taking on responsibility for the German past. So you have the anomalous position of Jews taking on responsibility for the Holocaust. . .

Those who doubt the Jewish revival or doubt that it will last often judge what's going on by the standards of German-Jewish life before Hitler and the Holocaust, when Germany produced Jewish cultural, intellectual and academic figures of international repute. But those who think something special is happening now judge matters more on the basis of the appalling situation since the Second World War and the Holocaust and argue that the very different Jewish community emerging has its own uniqueness and authenticity.

Perceptions of this question are affected by the often very negative view Jews elsewhere, particularly in Israel, America and the UK, take to the whole notion of Jews living in Germany.

Israeli Jews practically ignore the existence of German Jewry. A public opinion poll in 2006 showed that nearly half of Israeli Jews were unaware of an organised community of Jews in Germany and only 31 per cent related to this diaspora as a 'normal' diaspora. Some 8 per cent still believed that Jews were not allowed to live in Germany. Ezer Weizman, the former president of Israel said on a state visit in 1996 that he could not 'understand how 40,000 Jews could live' in Germany.

Wider European Implications

The German Jewish revival is part of a European-wide revival that continues to this day.

Jews from the FSU now dominate leadership of pan-European Jewish organisations and also philanthropic bodies. The centre of gravity of Jewish Europe has moved to Central Europe/Russia-Ukraine.

The religious conflict is a kind of test case as to whether a more fundamentalist or a more humanistic Judaism will prevail in the twenty-first century. This has relevance not only for Jews but for religion in Europe in general.

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