

Jerusalem Letter

# VIEWPOINTS

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

JERUSALEM INSTITUTE FOR FEDERAL STUDIES • CENTER FOR JEWISH COMMUNITY STUDIES

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher • David Clayman, Executive Editor

ISSN: 0334-4096

VP:35 21 Tishrei 5745 / 17 October 1984

## THE NEW AGENDA OF EUROPEAN JEWRY

Daniel J. Elazar

### *The Situation of the European Jewish Community / A New Role for European Jewry*

The Jewish people, along with the whole world, has entered into the second generation of a new epoch, the post-modern epoch. The modern epoch—which began with the great discoveries and transformations of the mid-seventeenth century and climaxed with the American and French revolutions toward the close of the eighteenth—came to an end in the Second World War and Holocaust of the mid-twentieth century. In the late 1940s, the post-modern epoch was born.

The post-modern epoch is epitomized for the Jewish people by the fact that the centers of Jewish life have moved away from Europe back to Western Asia on the one hand, and across the Atlantic to North America on the other.

For a thousand years, Europe had been the focal point of Jewish life, the heartland of Jewish dynamism. European Jewry was already losing that role in the latter part of the twentieth century as the Zionist impulse initiated the restoration of a serious Jewish center in the land of Israel and the impulse for survival led to a mass migration of European Jewry to new worlds, particularly the United States. The Holocaust only accelerated and completed that transfer. Nevertheless, European Jewry still represents the third largest concentration of Jews in the world.

### THE SITUATION OF THE EUROPEAN JEWISH COMMUNITY

There remain, according to our best figures, some 3.3 million Jews on the entire European continent, including the USSR. One million three hundred thousand are outside of the Soviet Union. Eighty percent

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**New Address: 21 Arlosoroff St., Jerusalem, 92181, Israel.**  
**Temporary Telephone: (02) 632017**

of these are in Western Europe. They are concentrated in twenty-eight cities or metropolitan areas with five thousand Jews or more. Forty percent of that 1.3 million are located in Paris and London combined, the two largest communities and the only ones in excess of 100,000 Jews. There are six other communities with twenty thousand Jews or more, which means that not only is the total population of European Jewry substantial, and even that population outside of the Soviet Union considerable, but there are at least eight local communities with Jewish populations sufficiently large to play a role on the world Jewish scene. While not what it once was, European Jewry still remains a factor of potential importance in Jewish life. The issue before European Jewry today is to show that it can play the role that it should.

One source of new energy which has come to European Jewry is the Sephardic migration into Europe. In the 1930s, Sephardic Jewry represented less than 9 percent of the total Jewish population of the world. In Europe, the percentage of Sephardim was even lower. As a result of the events of World War II and subsequently, not only has Sephardic Jewry come to represent nearly 20 percent of the world Jewish population but it is approximately one third of the Jews of Europe outside of the USSR; that is to say, where organized Jewish communities can function.

The Sephardim constitute a major new factor particularly in France, the largest Jewish community in Europe outside of the USSR and the fourth largest in the world. The weight of this new Sephardic presence is already being felt in that country, and changes are taking place right before our eyes as a result. It is characteristic of this new generation that those changes are taking place in Jewish institutions as well as in the streets.

The new Sephardic presence in Europe and the reestablishment of the State of Israel suggest a turn of world Jewry back toward the Mediterranean basin after 500 years in which there was a progressive shift away from that great sea. One look at where the Jewish population is located and where it is moving, and this turnback becomes evident. As such, it is part of one of those historical cyclical turns which have occurred periodically in Jewish history over the last four thousand years. Hence, it is a change with which we all must reckon.

On the other hand, European Jewry faces an especially serious problem of assimilation and the concomitant erosion of its population base. Unfortunately, European Jewry often demonstrates more unity in its demographic trends than in any of its other dimensions, and those trends are not positive. The entire Jewish diaspora suffers from assimilation and an eroding population base, but European Jewry, with its smaller communities and particular post-war situation, seems to be suffering more than some of the other communities. Intermarriage rates are always higher in smaller communities, and Europe today includes many smaller communities where the intermarriage rate is twice as high as in the United States. Even France and Britain, the two largest communities, have higher intermarriage rates.

TABLE

According to the projections of O. U. Schmelz of the Hebrew University Institute of Contemporary Jewry, between 1975 and the year 2000 the world Jewish population will decline by somewhere between 38,000 and 1,190,000 souls (based on his high and low projections). European Jewry, on the other hand, is projected to decline by no less than 1,468,000 and perhaps as many as 1,614,000. In other words, by his best projection, unless there are drastic changes, the number of Jews in Europe will be reduced by nearly half and will be rivaled only by Argentina and South Africa as loci of Jewish demographic decline. A look at the same figures in percentages sharpens the sad reality. In 1975, 25.2 percent of the Jews in the world lived in Europe, 8.8 percent in Western Europe and 16.4 percent in Eastern Europe. Regardless of which projection one uses, high, medium, or low, by the year 2000 European Jewry will comprise between 13.9 and 14.1 percent of world Jewry, with about half in Western Europe and about half in Eastern Europe.

Ironically, the assimilation trends reflect the fact that Jews finally have won acceptance in Europe. Even more ironically, after a generation in which anti-Semitism was beyond the pale as the Western World recoiled from the Holocaust, a new anti-Semitism has emerged, expressed via "anti-Zionism" and the effort to delegitimize Israel. This new anti-Semitism (more often an anti-Semitism of the Left than the old anti-Semitism which found its most fertile ground among the Right) does not go by that term. Instead, anti-Zionism has become the code word, but the wolf is the same wolf, no matter what costume it wears. While the effort to delegitimize Israel strikes at Jews everywhere, Europe has suffered even more from the new anti-Semitism than any other part of the Jewish world, perhaps excepting Latin America. It is a serious problem for European Jewry and will continue to be in the coming years.

At the same time, we are witnessing the emergence of new forms of Jewish identity and a new Jewish politics. A century ago the Russian Jewish Haskalah poet, J. L. Gordon, proclaimed as the slogan of modern Jews, "Be a Jew in your tents and a man on the street." Today, in the post-modern epoch, many Jews who do not know how to be Jews in their "tents" have taken to demonstrating their Jewishness in the streets in support of Jewish political interests—whether Israel-related, connected with the rescue of Soviet or Syrian or Ethiopian Jewry, or any one of the several other transcendent Jewish political issues of our time.

This development suggests that Jewish identity is no longer based upon the premise of modernism which claimed that the Jews are merely a religious group. Nor is it based upon the kind of ethnicity that came into fashion in the latter stages of the first post-war generation. Rather, Jewishness is perceived as an identity that is increasingly political in character. That will have implications for all Jews, and especially for European Jewry where that kind of identity was deliberately rejected as the price of emancipation and where efforts to restore it have led to internal conflicts within the Jewish communities.

Finally, the question of the relationship between Israel and world Jewry remains a perennial one. On one level there seems to be some measure of estrangement between Israel and at least certain segments of diaspora Jewry, all the more noticeable after the wonderful period which followed the Six-Day War, during which Israel and the diaspora seemed to be coming together in ever-increasing ways. Talk of this estrangement is greatly exaggerated. It is a subject that is attractive to media people who are themselves disenchanted with Israel.

The studies that have been conducted on this subject in the United States consistently show that over 90 percent or more of American Jewry remain as firm in their commitment toward Israel as ever, making commitment to the Jewish state one of the major elements of the contemporary Jewish consensus, similar to the response regarding holding a Pesach seder. Even during the height of the Peace for Galilee operation in Lebanon, some 75 percent of American Jewry firmly backed Israeli policies, a third of whom supported even more aggressive Israeli action in Lebanon. There is some evidence that the American Jewish leadership is a bit more opposed to recent Israeli policies than the rank and file of American Jewry. The preliminary results of a survey which we at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs undertook in the aftermath of the Lebanon war suggest that this is probably true in Europe as well.

What is most encouraging is the transformation which is now taking place in the character of Israel-diaspora relations, a transformation which will have to involve European Jewry as fully as any other. During the previous generation, the relationship between Israel and the diaspora could be seen as two pyramids coming together at their tips. That is to say, the top leadership of Israel talked with the top leadership of the Jewish diaspora, usually the Keren Hayesod leadership from Europe and the rest of the world outside the United States, and the UJA leadership from the United States. There was little in the

way of a network of relationships beyond that contact between the tips of the two pyramids.

Now there is such a network and it is growing in strength and intensity. We have gone from the two-pyramid situation to one in which there are multiple inter-connections, personal and familial. Aliya, which even though it has been small from the West has not been insignificant, has meant that many families in the diaspora have immediate family members in Israel.

Beyond the personal, public connections have been formed partly because of changes in the scope of Israel-diaspora relationships through such devices as Project Renewal, which has twinned local diaspora communities with neighborhoods and towns in Israel to undertake concrete tasks of rehabilitation and reconstruction. While Project Renewal has not involved the multi-country European Council of Jewish Community Services—it has been a Zionist enterprise in Europe channeled through Keren Hayesod, whereas in the United States the local community federations and even the Council of Jewish Federations have been involved—it has nevertheless been an important bridge builder within Europe as well as in the United States. The Project Renewal model is touted as one that needs to be replicated in other spheres as well and likely will be.

Last, there are formal changes, like the reconstitution of the Jewish Agency which has given diaspora communities more active and important roles in that major instrumentality of world Jewry. All in all, what is emerging is a matrix of relationships tying people and communities together in a variety of arenas to replace the old two-pyramid system. It is one of the tasks of the new generation to strengthen and improve that matrix. European Jewry's part in this task can be of major importance.

#### A NEW ROLE FOR EUROPEAN JEWRY

During the first post-war generation, European Jewry was a bystander or at best a way station in the growing relationship between Israel and American Jewry. It is quite understandable why that was the case then: two young, vigorous communities which had just burst forth to great strength and were actively engaged in constructing their respective futures found much to say to one another and had the energy and vigor to say it, while the third great concentration of Jews was engaged in painful reconstruction which could not possibly regenerate more than a distant shadow of what had once been. Sapped and weak in the wake of the Holocaust, it had to take a back seat. Indeed, it had to rely on the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) to make possible much of that reconstruction in a historic demonstration of new-style Jewish nationalism.

In the first post-war generation, Europe was, in many respects, a protectorate of American Jewry and Israel. Now, as the third largest concentration of Jews in the world, it must become a full partner, not a recipient of assistance, not a peripheral participant in meetings which ratify decisions made elsewhere, but it must make a full impact as a Jewish concentration in its own right. That can only be done if there is sufficient unity in European Jewry to make its combined Jewish weight felt.

Fragmented, no single European Jewish community, even France, can carry the weight that can be carried by the whole, since the whole, when organized, is far greater than the sum of its parts. To the extent that European Jewry is fragmented, it does not play its proper role on the world Jewish scene and cannot do so. Moreover, European Jewry can only do so if it makes its contribution—in funds, in professional and voluntary leadership, and in initiative—to the total effort of world Jewry, both by properly serving its local needs and by making an appropriate contribution to the common Jewish cause. This point cannot be overemphasized. The other two major centers of Jewish life, the State of Israel and North American

Jewry, have long since done both. Indeed, to no little extent, through the JDC and the Jewish Agency, they continue to support elements of European Jewish life at a time when the European Jewish community as a whole has grown beyond the need for such outside support, except insofar as it is part and parcel of the common efforts of the Jewish people worldwide to improve the quality of Jewish life.

The principal vehicle available for the task of unification is the European Council of Jewish Community Services. The European Council now consists of nineteen member countries, speaking fifteen different languages. The European Council is a product of the initiative of North American Jewry in the first post-war generation, when the JDC recognized that a reconstituted European Jewry could only move ahead if it had appropriate frameworks that stretched beyond the limits of the continent's individual states. From the time of its founding until the late 1970s, the European Council was almost totally dependent on the JDC for its funds and its dynamism. Only with the beginning of the second post-war generation has it begun to move to develop an independent capability. While it still has a considerable way to go in that direction, it now offers the promise of travelling that road.

In order to create the basis for playing a proper role on the world Jewish scene, European Jewry must strengthen the European Council of Jewish Community Services as a major vehicle. It must strengthen its structure as a confederation, if not a federation, of European Jewish communities—today it is little more than a league. It must expand and deepen the Council's functions. It must provide the European Council with the requisite financial support to undertake those functions. It must consider expanding the scope of the Council's work. It must confront the new agenda of world Jewry in its European variant.

It would also do well to strengthen its ties with American Jewry and to develop a continuing presence in Israel so as to be part of the action in Jerusalem on a regular basis. The European Council needs a continuing presence in Israel. Today, no Jewish body in the world is fully part of the action of the Jewish people until it has appropriate presence in Israel. North American Jewry has discovered this and has acted accordingly. European Jewry has not. An office for European Jewry, preferably sponsored by the European Council of Jewish Community Services, located in Israel, would be a great asset to improving cooperation between the European Jewish community, the Jewish state, and the rest of the Jewish world.

In addition, the European Council needs to strengthen the relationship between its professional and its elected leadership. There have been considerable strides in the direction of the professionalization of the permanent staff of the European Council over the past several years and it seems certain that there will be further strides. A serious cadre of high caliber Jewish civil servants is a *sine qua non* of every major Jewish community today and is a major key to the successful functioning of Jewish life. This means new relationships will have to be developed between a professionalized permanent staff and those volunteers who give of their time as the elected leaders of the Council.

To summarize, European Jewry must play its role through an appropriate organizational framework so that its whole and the whole of world Jewry can be greater than the sum of their parts. It can only play that role if it is united, not fragmented, so that it can pay the ante necessary to be in on the game. The full actualization of the European Jewish community's proper role will make this, the second generation of the post-modern era, an important one in our efforts to move forward to develop a post-modern Jewish people.

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*Daniel J. Elazar is president of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and Senator N. M. Paterson Professor of Intergovernmental Relations at Bar-Ilan University.*