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Swiss Jewry: Between Continuity and Decline

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INTRODUCTION

In 2010,¹ after 146 years² of continuous existence, the Jewish community of Lucerne seemed to be on the verge of disappearance.³ There were only sixty, mostly elderly members. Hugo Benjamin, head of Lucerne's Jewish community, announced to the media: "I do not know how to go on. In the whole of the canton of Lucerne and central Switzerland, there are only 300 active Jews." He suggested turning the synagogue—built in 1912 on the model of the neo-Orthodox Frankfurt synagogue, Friedberger-Anlage, into a museum.⁴

Four years later, in 2014, the Lucerne Jewish community hardly exists. It conducts regular services with great difficulty, assembling a minyan (religious quorum of ten men) mostly with the support from the Jeschiwa Luzern (the Lucerne yeshivah) in nearby Kriens, whose students are ultra-Orthodox Jews from all over Europe and Israel.⁵ While there has been a Chabad presence in Lucerne for several years, the movement recently relocated most of its activities to the nearby town of Zug, a tax-free haven which attracts Jewish businessmen from all over the world, for whom Chabad now provides religious services.⁶ The fate of the venerable Lucerne community is an open question.

COMMUNITIES ON PAPER

The decline of the Jewish community in Lucerne is mirrored in many places throughout Switzerland. There are empty synagogues which have been turned into national monuments and museums in the villages of Endingen⁷ and Lengnau,⁸ the cradle of Swiss Jewry, and in western Switzerland in the Jura region, in small towns such as Délémont.⁹ In places such as Yverdon, Solothurn and Liestal, *minyanim*, small places of worship and rural synagogues have vanished together with their small Jewish communities almost without leaving a trace.¹⁰ In early 2014, only three Jews, all members of the same family remained in the town of Bremgarten. Regarded as a community, they send an official representation of one delegate to the annual assembly of the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities (Schweizerisch-Israelitischer Gemeindebund or SIG).

Of the seventeen member communities of the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities today, only three have over one thousand members.¹¹ Nine are small or extremely small.¹² Some exist only on paper, with a few remaining families or persons acting as communities and thus wielding disproportionate voting power within the Federation. The SIG repeatedly has tried to change its organizational structure and count only communities that are still fully functioning with an active and

organized Jewish life as members.¹³ The last attempt at organizational reform failed during the 2014 SIG-assembly held in Bienne in May 2014, thereby preserving most of its present makeup for the future.

DEMOGRAPHIC DECLINE

Drastic demographic decline has been a reality for some years.¹⁴ Ever since the 1970s small Jewish communities in Switzerland have vanished, medium-sized communities have become small, and large communities have become medium-sized. Jewish life now centers in Geneva, and mainly in Zurich, whose Jewish communities are fairly stable and even seem to have experienced some modest growth through an influx of people from smaller communities, joined by expatriates who are living in Switzerland for professional reasons.¹⁵ Demographic growth in Zurich derives mainly from the presence of the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox communities. Most of the approximately 3,000 Swiss Orthodox Jews live in Zurich.¹⁶

Nevertheless, there is a ubiquitous sense of deterioration. The overall decline may best be observed in the case of the Basel Jewish community, the Israelitische Gemeinde Basel (IGB). Founded in 1805, it is the second oldest Jewish community in Switzerland—the rural community of Endingen-Lengnau, the cradle of modern Swiss Jewry is older—making Basel one of the oldest continuous Jewish communities in Europe. The modern community is the third known Jewish community in Basel. Two previous communities were destroyed in 1349 and in 1397.¹⁷ Jews, however, managed to survive in the surrounding villages for four centuries allowing a modicum of continuity.

The present community follows Alsatian and South German traditions, some of which date back to the Jewish communities of the Rhineland before the Crusades and may be based upon the ancient customs of the Land of Israel. Nothing exemplifies the continuity of the Basel community better than the *parochet*—the curtain in front of the Torah shrine. The women of the Basel community created and donated it in 1868 on the occasion of the dedication of the new and imposing Grosse Synagoge, the Great Basel Synagogue.¹⁸ During the same year, the Swiss Confederation finally bowed to American and French diplomatic and economic pressure and granted Jews equal rights. Emancipation was granted officially by the new Swiss Constitution of 1874.¹⁹

In 1868, the synagogue of Basel, built on the model of the earlier Stuttgart Synagogue, was one of many of its type all over the cities, small towns and villages of neighboring southern Germany and Alsace.²⁰ Before and during the Holocaust, most of these houses of prayer were destroyed or abandoned, as these communities ceased to exist. Therefore, a 208-year-old community with a synagogue and a Torah shrine curtain in continuous use for 145 years is unique. In 2013, the curtain was restored so that it could be used in the coming years, thus reflecting optimism as to the long-term survival of the Basel community. Ever since it was founded during the Napoleonic era, the Israelitische Gemeinde Basel (IGB) (Jewish Community of Basel) has been an uninterrupted presence in the city and canton of Basel, contributing to its economy, social and cultural life. The relatively good relations between the Jewish community and the general population and the liberal governments since the 1850s were one of the reasons that Theodor Herzl convened the first Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897.²¹ Even during the 1930s and 1940s Jewish refugees were treated better there than elsewhere in Switzerland.²² In 1972, the IGB was granted the same official status as the Christian churches and Basel became the first Jewish community in Switzerland to be recognized by the government. In 1990, Fribourg was the second; followed by the Jüdische Gemeinde Bern in 1997 and by the Zurich Jewish communities: the Israelitische Cultusgemeinde Zürich (the largest Jewish community in Switzerland) and Or Chadasch (the second Reform community in Switzerland), in 2007.²³

While the story of the IGB may be considered a great success, its recent rapid demographic decline is a cause for concern. In 1945, more than 3,000 Jews lived in Basel. By 1980 they numbered 2,000;

of these, 1,515 were affiliated with the IGB. By 2004, there were only 1,218 members of the IGB. At present, the number of Jews in Basel is estimated at some 1,400. As of May 2014, 1,038 members were affiliated with the IGB.²⁴ Thus, the community has lost over one-third of its members in nearly a generation, due mainly to emigration and assimilation. For several decades, younger Jews have immigrated to Israel in large numbers and those who were less committed either were not actively involved in the community or tended to assimilate into Gentile society.²⁵

Numbers, however, do not tell the whole story. The demographic composition of the community has changed as well. In 1980 it was still relatively young, with many children. Today it is elderly with relatively few younger people. The upkeep of institutions such as the Ganon preschool, the kindergarten and the primary school remains a constant financial struggle. While the infrastructure of the community is still intact and can serve a much larger Jewish population, the future of its institutions is not certain. The burden of running and funding these institutions falls upon a dwindling number of members.

ORTHODOX, ULTRA-ORTHODOX AND GENERAL STAGNATION

At present, Jewish life in Switzerland is concentrated primarily in Zurich and in Geneva. But only in Zurich is there a slight increase in population, partly because of the strong presence of several ultra-Orthodox communities with high birth rates and of Chabad-Lubavitch. There are three Chabad centers in and around Zurich that have been successful at outreach and have attracted many individuals on the margins of Jewish life.²⁶ However, while the ultra-Orthodox communities are flourishing, with a new school building, dedicated in 2013, and a new *beth midrash* (study hall) which opened recently, their members tend to be less affluent and less integrated into Swiss society and the workforce. Therefore, their socioeconomic level is lower than the more secular Jews, who make up the majority of the members in the Orthodox-affiliated *Einheitsgemeinden*, where secular and Orthodox Jews coexist in Orthodox congregations.²⁷ There are increasing numbers of secular Swiss Jews who intermarry or live with non-Jewish partners and opt out of organized Jewish life.²⁸ On a smaller scale, this development resembles the findings of the recent Pew Study on American Jewry.

With local communities shrinking or even disappearing, it appears that the Swiss Jewish community is stagnating. In 1910, there were officially some 18,000 Jews in Switzerland; a hundred years later, in 2010, demographers recorded the same number—18,000 Jews, while the general population of Switzerland has increased from 3.3 million in 1910 to more than eight million in 2013.²⁹ This means that while the number of Jews in Switzerland has stayed more or less the same, the percentage of Jews in proportion to the general population has decreased substantially.

A HISTORY OF EXCLUSION

One may argue that Jewish demographic decline is an old story, rooted in history. Despite its central geographical location in Europe, Switzerland never had a large Jewish population. While there were Jewish communities in many Swiss towns during the thirteenth century,³⁰ most were destroyed during the Black Death in 1348–1349. By the early fifteenth century, however, several communities were re-established, but Jews were persecuted and expelled from most places. Switzerland was closed to Jewish settlement for centuries.³¹ Jews continued to live only in the northwestern corner of the Swiss Federation and in the Alsatian territories across the border, which were not under Swiss jurisdiction. Jewish settlement began anew in the early seventeenth century in the two villages of Endingen and Lengnau, where small communities were permitted, with two rural synagogues and a graveyard.

The general climate in the old Swiss Confederation was never favorable to Jewish immigration and settlement. Even after 1798, when Jews entered the country as French citizens following the occupying French armies, the Swiss tried to restrict or ban immigration. Although the Jewish

presence increased during the nineteenth century due to liberal economic and social conditions, the authorities postponed full emancipation until 1874 in response to American and French pressure.³² Following official emancipation, Jewish communities in Switzerland expanded greatly and rapidly. New communities were established in the towns and Jews joined the middle class.

In 1881 when, in the wake of the pogroms, Jews fled Russia and Poland, thousands reached Switzerland where they found well-established communities.³³ Thus, the Jewish population rose from 7,373 in 1880 to 18,462 in 1910. Although Jews constituted only some 0.37 percent of Switzerland's total population in 1900, many Swiss regarded Jewish immigration as a threat to the country's character. In order to stop Jewish immigration, *shechita* (Jewish ritual slaughter) was prohibited by a popular vote in 1893.³⁴ Despite several revisions, the prohibition still remains in force. It was assumed that Jews neither would settle nor remain in the country if kosher meat were not available. In fact, the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities was founded in 1904 in order to fight against this prohibition.³⁵ While its attempts to abolish the prohibition have not met with success, it has managed to secure the import of kosher meat in strictly limited quantities.

Despite the backlash and the increase in anti-Semitism since the 1890s, which reflected developments in neighboring France, Germany and Austria, the Swiss Jewish community continued to flourish. By 1920, it peaked at 20,979 persons, 0.54 percent of the Swiss population. The community had largely become middle-class and urban. Although the Jews were integrated, many Swiss, especially local and national bodies, regarded them as incapable of assimilating into society at large, and therefore, as a threat to Swiss identity, with the potential of "judaizing" the country. During the Great Depression, workers, unionists and leftist parties viewed the Jews as undesirable competitors in the labor market. By the 1930s, these perceived threats led to a strong anti-Jewish immigration policy on the part of the Swiss authorities.³⁶

The efforts to prevent Jewish immigration and residence had become a major point of Swiss policy long before the Holocaust. The 1931 Residence Law made it increasingly difficult for Jews to settle in Switzerland. Until 1954, the unquestioned precondition of Swiss refugee policy remained "transmigration," meaning that permanent asylum was not an option.³⁷ This policy proved to be disastrous for many Jews during the Holocaust. The Swiss border was closed in 1938 and Jewish refugees were turned back at the border. In order to identify Jews from Germany and Austria, Swiss authorities saw to it that the Germans mark Jewish passports with a "J" for "*Jude*." The closure was renewed and intensified during the deportations of French, Dutch and Belgian Jewry in 1942–1943, as waves of Jewish refugees tried to enter Switzerland. An estimated 24,000 Jewish refugees were refused entry, while most of the 22,500 Jewish refugees who managed to enter Switzerland were interned for varying periods in dozens of internment and labor camps. Most of them had to leave Switzerland after 1945. By the time this policy ended in 1954, only 1,600 Jewish refugees were allowed to stay in Switzerland. Hence, the Jewish population had fallen to below 20,000.

Nevertheless, the Swiss Jewish community was one of the few European Jewish communities that emerged intact after the Holocaust. Subsequently, it flourished.³⁸ During the postwar years, Jewish institutions greatly expanded because of the relatively low average age of the members of the community. New community centers were built and Jewish schools were established in Zurich, Basel, Geneva and Lausanne. Events such as the annual Maccabi Ball attracted hundreds of Jews in the major cities. Identification with the new state of Israel was very strong.³⁹ Zionist youth movements such as the socialist Hashomer Hatzair and the national-religious Bnei Akiva became prominent in all the major communities, preparing their hundreds of members for immigration to Israel, and, indeed, many left for Israel. Jewish immigrants and refugees from Hungary in 1956, North Africa in the 1960s, Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Iran in the 1970s replaced those who had left.⁴⁰ Furthermore, many Israelis came to Switzerland for purposes of study, business and work. This influx also helped replace the demographic loss. There was no net population growth, however, and the numbers stayed the same as in 1910. In addition to the emigration of the young adults, from the

1970s on, intermarriage and assimilation also contributed to the state of stagnation.⁴¹ Some Jews left the community and others distanced themselves from it, leaving their children with a minimal sense of Jewish identity.

DECREASING RELEVANCE

Demographic decline or stagnation means that Jews have less political and cultural influence. Never politically strong at the best of times, the organized Swiss Jewish community is rapidly losing its influence. At the same time, the Muslim community is growing. It numbered some 16,300 in 1970⁴² and is an estimated 433,000 at present.⁴³ Demographers predict that within the next twenty years the young and ascendant Swiss Muslim population will number some 660,000, comprising 8.1 percent of the population.⁴⁴ Therefore, Muslim voting patterns and sensibilities will become more important in domestic and foreign politics and policy-making than the shrinking influence of an aging Jewish community with an uncertain future. The actual consequences of this development for the short- and medium-term are not yet clear. Such trends, however, indicate that the Jewish community will be less capable of defending itself against the old-new challenges such as antisemitism, which has spread with alarming speed and vigor throughout Europe. Since the early 1990s, Switzerland has seen an unprecedented upsurge of antisemitism both in its more traditional forms and in its newer disguises as “anti-Israelism” and “anti-Zionism.”⁴⁵ Like elsewhere in Europe, the presentation of Israel and the Middle East in the Swiss media has contributed substantially to the increase in antisemitism.

This has been a matter of concern for the Swiss Jewish community. In fact, a recent poll shows that 29 percent of European Jews are considering emigration because of rampant anti-Semitism.⁴⁶ No new data are available, as the last survey was conducted several years ago. A recent poll on Swiss antisemitism was canceled.⁴⁷ While the number of violent hate crimes actually declined slightly in 2012 and in 2013,⁴⁸ most of them were committed against Jews.⁴⁹ Public discourse has changed for the worse and anti-Israelism is now common at all levels of Swiss society. There are no signs that this might change soon, as indicated by the many antisemitic episodes.

CONCLUSION

Jewish life in Switzerland was never as comfortable as economic conditions and the liberal political ethos of one of the most prosperous countries in the world would suggest. While the Jewish community prospered after World War II, its numbers always were small and the politics of exclusion always were felt. The difference today is that the ongoing demographic decline seems to be approaching a point of no return. There are fewer than 18,000 Jews in Switzerland, while the number of Swiss Jews in Israel is estimated at some 14,000, with many younger and more committed Jews relocating there. The Swiss Jewish community is shrinking at an alarming rate and has far less influence than in previous years. Therefore, it may not be capable of meeting the challenges that it will face in the immediate future.

Unlike the German Jewish community, which was on a similar downward trajectory until 1989, and was revived, perhaps temporarily, by Jewish immigration from the Former Soviet Union and Israel, nothing similar is likely to occur in Switzerland. The hope that the flourishing Swiss economy, with its enormous influx of international firms, would attract new Jewish immigrants has not been realized. The financial and human resources of the community are increasingly limited and have become more strained. While Jews will continue to live in Switzerland, and the community will continue to exist, it will be much smaller, and will be concentrated in Zurich and Geneva. Many of the other communities will shrink in size or vanish altogether. Thus, in many places in Switzerland thriving Jewish life will become a thing of the past.

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Notes

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