

Westbury Research Unit

Director Simon Caplan

caplan@netvision.net.il

Background data and analysis for Jewish political organizations belonging to the Westbury group.

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Sustaining Small, Vulnerable Jewish Communities

Reflections on the Warsaw Jewish Community based on Michael Schneider's list of desirable ingredients for community viability

Simon Caplan: February 2003

Here are some reflections on the contemporary inner dynamics, problems, challenges and opportunities of the Jewish community in Warsaw, viewed through the prism of Michael Schneider's list of desirable ingredients for community viability.

This paper is the third part of a three part series on the future of this small but unique Jewish community, based on secondary research and two short visits to Poland in October and November 2002. During those two visits all major sites of Jewish interest in the community were visited and interviews held with more than forty respondents including local community lay and professional leaders, workers and volunteers, in religion, education, research, welfare, and social and cultural activities, heads of external organizations, students and young adults, elderly community members, journalists and other Jewish and non-Jewish commentators on the local situation.

The original intention was to conduct a case study presentation on Warsaw as part of the January 2003 Westbury group meeting to be held in Warsaw itself. With the postponement of that meeting, it was felt right to begin to share research findings on the small communities project and to encourage a dialogue within the group by email and telephone rather than waiting until the next meeting in May or June this year.

Background papers on Warsaw have already been circulated, including a portrait of a visit to the community and an analysis of the broader societal and Jewish context. While these contain important data, any real discussion about the nature and the future of this community can only be held in earnest based on a more intimate critique of the current situation. To do this in writing, however, creates a hostage to fortune in the formal presentation of much soft data, opinion and subjective evaluation gathered in good faith and trust from community leaders and members. In order to provide material for discussion, on the one hand, but resist the danger of putting out a highly sensitive written paper, I decided to make comments as an addendum to Michael Schneider's thoughts. As such, I trust that these remarks will be treated as strictly private and confidential and for Westbury members only.

Warsaw today

(MS) Critical Mass. This is the biggest problem of small communities. It could possibly be mitigated by clustering communities in close proximity to one another for beneficial mutuality

The contemporary community has not yet accrued the critical mass necessary to give rise to confidence that it has a long-term future. I have argued elsewhere that what constitutes the critical threshold for community viability in terms of numbers, has to be seen in the context of many other factors. A community that has low numbers, but strong bonds of connectedness and belonging may be as viable as a larger center of Jewish life without some of the other components.

But Warsaw is very problematic from the numbers point of view from the perspective of a snapshot in time taken at the end of 2002.

Guesstimates of the population size of the Jewish community vary enormously, dependent, as they are on the ideological stance one takes on defining Jewish status, whether one counts affiliation, participation or basic identification and who one chooses to believe in the absence of properly conducted census research. There are could be anywhere between one and five thousand Jews in Warsaw and between four and twenty thousand Jews in the whole of Poland today.

Another issue here is that, psychologically, a community that once numbered hundreds of thousands inevitably feels its smallness by comparison today even though it may still constitute a viable population in absolute terms of critical mass.

On the other hand, given the unique history of the community, there is a sense among active members and leaders of the community that there is an imperative to revive and restore Jewish community life to this former world center for the Jewish people and cradle of much of what today is the shape and character of Judaism. This creates a dynamic of mission and purpose that belies small numbers.

Warsaw is the capital city, and the major center of Jewish life in contemporary Poland and thus does function, to an extent, as a collecting point or as a hub for a cluster of other pockets of Jewish population. This works in the sense that the national and international organizations are based in Warsaw, that welfare and educational support services go out to the periphery from Warsaw and so on. But one does not get the sense that the point made by MS in his essay about the combined impact of clustering communities together from the perspective of social and cultural benefits to members is a significant factor here.

On the contrary, one of the difficult issues facing the Jewish community is a very fundamental lack of some of the most basic components of the kind of social glue that is normally associated with 'community'. Warsaw Jews are very much disconnected in a sociological sense one from another. Many are recently discovered as Jews, few indeed grew up together or associated together as friends, relatively speaking almost no ties of family and connectedness are to be found, as would be normal in a community of this type. So the social glue that goes with critical mass is very prominently missing from the situation.

The prospect for the future in respect of the critical mass issue is in the balance. The demographics are not favorable (see below). However, Warsaw does have some rather special characteristics or opportunities here. The recently accelerating phenomenon of 'hidden children of the holocaust' (individual Poles surfacing as Jews) has spawned an organization by the same name that today has nine hundred members, including two hundred and fifty six in Warsaw alone. And these people have families. So Warsaw is one of the few places in the Jewish world that has a potential internal source of new members beyond births and marriages. Moreover, with the impending entry of Poland into the EU, set for 2004, there are small but not insignificant numbers of Argentinean and Israeli Jews, especially, seeking Polish citizenship today as a 'passport to Europe'. Israeli business interest in property acquisition and development in Warsaw is already noted in Polish society. Furthermore, given these developments, it is not unreasonable to suppose that a certain amount of Russian immigration may find its way in Poland, especially if and when the German route narrows.

All this tends towards a conclusion similar to that of MS in his essay about the prospects for Jewish community life in small communities in general that what seems to be the twilight of a community today may be seen as the dawn tomorrow. In the case of Warsaw, some problematic issues of critical mass have to be judged in the context of a very unique, transitional and developing situation. If there were a commitment within the Jewish people in favor of regenerating organized Jewish life in this place, one suspects that the critical mass issue would not be a major fault line.

(MS) Adequate Birthrate. This is another huge problem. It can be partly mitigated if mixed marriage couples were accepted, converted, and welcomed into the community to make up the numbers.....

Some of the issues here have been dealt with above. Unquestionably the current demographics are working against the contemporary Jewish community. One informed source claimed that some ninety per cent of affiliated Jews are over retirement age. The Welfare commission has close to one thousand 'assistees' on its books throughout Poland (almost entirely old and very severely disadvantaged people) in an estimated national population of less than ten thousand. Whether or not more cynical views about motivations for coming forward and identifying with the Jewish community today are accepted (and this is undoubtedly at least one factor behind the appearance of newcomers – seeking the economic benefits of an outstandingly charitable tradition), it is clear that the essential make-up of the local Jewish population can be typified as ageing and declining rather than reproducing and growing.

Discussions with young people active in the Jewish students organization PUSZ (in reality the main organization for young adults from sixteen to thirty five) revealed mixed views about personal intentions to leave or stay in Poland. For most, being Jewish is something that happened to them later in life and not from birth. Many have a strong sense of loyalty to the country and belief in its medium to long-term

economic prosperity. There are normal ties of affiliation and attachment to place – to climate, scenery, language, culture, sport and so on – that hold young people. Israel and Aliya does not exercise a strong pull today (the Jewish agency closed down its operation in Warsaw on the assumption that no further large scale Aliya would be likely), although for a minority of young people the natural conclusion of their personal Jewish journey would be a future in Israel. Family ties between young people in Poland and relatives in Israel are fairly extensive. It is clear, therefore that some young people will definitely stay and make their lives in Warsaw. Whether or not the Jewish community has the capacity to attract them into ongoing membership and leadership is another story that is addressed in the appropriate section below. One interesting positive phenomenon that should be noted is that the Welfare commission has over one hundred volunteer workers and, of these, the vast majority are young people in their twenties.

The status issue is as unclear in Warsaw as it is throughout Eastern Europe and the FSU. Here, the community cannot be viewed as a single entity but as a set of overlapping components with differing approaches and perspectives. On the whole the policy appears to be fairly liberal. For welfare purposes, as in most places, the Law of Return (one Jewish grandparent) is the normal standard. For membership purposes it is the Law of Return that is also cited – but in this context that would normally mean the Jewish Status clause that is a normative ‘halakhic’ approach (Jewish mother or conversion), but with a flexible application of the standard. In other words, most self-defining Jews are accepted into the community for the purposes of activities, while an informal system is applied by which the religious authorities are aware, more or less, of who is and who is not a ‘halakhic’ Jew. So the community (and in this context I refer to the JRCP, synagogue based national organization which is the central representative body and the most connected to the traditional issues) does have the potential, as MS argues, for a wider circle of participants and members, while not, formally, relinquishing traditional standards.

(MS) A Pluralistic Religious Base Catering for different shades of Judaism keeps Jews within the fold. If they feel welcome, Jews on the periphery can be brought in to participate in communal endeavors. Exclude them and they will drift away.....

There is a gap between theory and practice here. As noted by MS, Poland, in common with other central and eastern European countries where a strong (often Chabad) rabbi dominates the local community scene, has adopted a de-facto position in which Orthodox Judaism is the accepted standard. However, the situation is somewhat more complicated than that.

The Jewish Religious Communities of Poland (JRCP), and its local Warsaw branch of the Warsaw ‘kehilla’, is the conceptual heir of the organizational infrastructure of pre-war Poland and Warsaw. In this “Gemeine” system, a roof organization was recognized as the representative leadership of the entire community, combining all ideological preferences and institutions under one umbrella authority. As such, the Warsaw Kehilla is technically speaking pluralist in its approach. In practice, the one community synagogue is Orthodox in nature, the rabbi is Orthodox, some recent controversial incidents over the conversion issue have underlined the monotone

coloration of the establishment and a breakaway independent Reform congregation has been recently formed. The leadership of the 'Kehilla' claim that they would embrace the Reform congregation within their roof organization but that does not appear to be the genuine will either of the Kehilla leadership or that of the Reform community. The overall impact of this, added to the fact that the one synagogue is a fairly dour, drab affair both architecturally and in terms of the conduct of services, combines to create the effect described by MS of a marginalized official religious life that is unlikely to attract young adherents. This having been said, it should be noted that the communal rabbi and former director of the Lauder Foundation in Poland, is a colorful, charismatic individual who has certainly made an impression and been a formative influence in the lives of many young community members.

The JRCP, of course, does not, in practice, occupy the position it claims for itself in theory as the one roof organization for the Jews of Poland. The TSKZ, the social and cultural body that 'represented' Jewry throughout the communist era makes counter claims for itself as the true central community body and even established a national forum for organizations, deliberately excluding the JRCP. JRCP acts as an administrative base for a number of community bodies including the Welfare commission and the students' organization PUSZ, but cannot be said to represent a true effective central community board for the Warsaw community.

Bet Warshava, the nascent Reform congregation is also interesting in that it represents a different approach, a more Western approach, as it were, to the development of Jewish community life on a free market, demand based basis. The leadership of the new congregation is largely independent of central control and of reliance on external funding. This, rather than the option of pluralistic central authority, may be the more likely development pattern for the future – especially if economic growth within Poland allow for local philanthropy to grow.

In this context another recent experimental project funded by a private foundation should be noted. The Atara learning project runs Shabbatonim to which scholars in residence are invited. This is becoming an alternative spiritual framework for a number of younger community members – parents of children at the day school and others – which again illustrates that, in face of a drab, cold establishment community, the life and color tends to surface on the periphery. The weakness, of course, is that such non-establishment alternatives tend to detract rather than add to the available pool of younger more committed leadership.

Whether Warsaw is moving naturally into a period of necessary fragmentation leading to diversity and choice, or whether the community is in the act of depleting its energies and resources by multiplying and duplicating where concentrating and rationalizing would be more effective is very much in the eye of the beholder. Not surprisingly many more active community members fear for the future. But the prospect, viewed from the perspective of an outside observer seems to hold promise for the future as well as some potential danger of disintegration of the already fragile bonds of community.

(MS) A Tolerant Host Government *This does not exclude totalitarian regimes. Under East European Communist regimes the entire population was suppressed. But, unlike the Soviet Union, Jewish religious institutional life, while not encouraged, was tolerated.....*

The history of Poland's relationship with Jews is well known but not necessarily well understood, because it is complex and full of contrary indications. Poland hosted Jews and served as the cradle for much of what we know as Judaism today over a period of nearly a thousand years. Poland also 'hosted' the most extreme episode of destruction in the history of the Jewish people. That local Poles were complicit in what happened is nowhere better illustrated than in Jan Gross's book "Neighbors" detailing the massacre at Jedwabne in 1941, but there is a Polish record of risking life to rescue Jews too. The Polish character and the (Ashkenazi) Jewish character are interwoven – it is a familial rather than a societal kind of connection. Poland is central to the story of the Jewish people and Jews are central to the story of Poland.

Today, at the official level, the policy - at least for reasons of political correctness if not on more fundamental grounds – is one of pursuing good relations with the local Jewish community, Israel and the Jewish people world-wide. The role of Israel Ambassador Shevach Weiss in this is strongly positive. Both within the office of the Prime Minister and of the President there are officials specializing in Jewish affairs and maintaining connections between government and the community. Poland is one of only two nations in the world with an official ambassadorial post reaching out to its 'Jewish Diaspora'. A cooperative atmosphere exists in dealing with restitution issues although the outcome of that story is not yet clear. There is both government and city sponsorship for certain components of Jewish community life including maintenance of the community's Polish / Yiddish bi-weekly newspaper / journal, majority sponsorship of the impressive Jewish Historical Institute employing sixty three researchers and administrative staff, and minor project grants for aspects of the work of the Welfare commission and the Jewish Religious Communities of Poland.

If, on the streets, attitudes are ambivalent towards Jews – especially in face of some public awareness of restitution issues and the return of properties to Jews – the public face of Polish society today, especially as expressed through government, and especially in light of preparations for entry into the EU in 2004, is clearly not antipathetic to the revival, presence and ongoing development of organized Jewish community life in Warsaw. Jews, today, officially at least, are welcomed more than tolerated. One of the potential opportunities for the future of the community that may not have been fully exploited to date is further financial support at either city or governmental level for a number of significant projects. There is room for discussion on a variety of themes including the establishment of a Holocaust museum in Warsaw (discussions already well under way), government support for teachers of Jewish subjects in secular schools and some elements of welfare support. These possibilities have yet to be fully explored by local community leadership.

Given the history here it would be foolhardy to make solid predictions about the future, but the prognosis for the community, in terms of its maintaining a high level of acceptance in society and solidifying meaningful links with government is good. During the period of my visits, two separate 'scandals' involving the Jewish community were reported in various ways in the national media. Neither stimulated any significant expression of anti-Jewish sentiment although both caused ruffles of discomfort internally within the community. No local community figure supported the notion that an outbreak of anti-Semitism in Poland in the near future is a realistic

bodies including the Claims Conference, was a framework eventually and belatedly established to deal with this pressing issue. That framework is now in operation, deadlines extended and the business of submitting claims to the government being brought to a conclusion. The framework, which puts the power over the submission of claims within the greater Warsaw district in the hands of the JRCP, nevertheless leaves room for ongoing argument.

Perhaps exacerbated by the fundamental fault line described above, there is little confidence within the community in the capacity of the leadership to deliver. Some obvious candidates for leadership of the community have conspicuously avoided taking up positions of leadership at the center. Other talented individuals who have tried have struggled. There is a sense that the restitution issue is being mishandled and this is exacerbated by a lack of transparency and accountability that the responsible leadership is, only now, making some effort to rectify.

For a numerically small community, Warsaw is more than averagely endowed with its problems in terms of community cohesiveness and would require lengthy processes to create a more rational structure and more cooperative atmosphere among organizations. There are areas of light. The Welfare commission, for example, is a body that embraces representation from across the entire community and yet manages, by good leadership and clear focus on function rather than turf, to supervise a well run, professional service in an atmosphere of collaboration. This could be a model to be adapted in other sectors of the community such as education. However, in the current state of the community as viewed from the perspective of its establishment bodies, planning is problematic, leadership is lacking and coherence is not evident.

(MS) Community Property And Physical Infrastructure One cannot have community without adequate infrastructure – synagogue, Jewish school, a Jewish "town hall," or a center for Jewish youth, etc.....

In Warsaw it is impossible not to be conscious of what was and therefore what is today seems minute by comparison. The former ghetto dominates the consciousness of the community and the landscape even though it is almost totally gone with almost no physical remains.

Nevertheless, purely in terms of the contemporary needs of what is today a small Jewish community, Warsaw is reasonably well served for community property and physical infrastructure. The main hub of community life is a campus on the site of the one remaining functioning synagogue in the city. It is also the site of the headquarters of TSKZ and the State Yiddish theater. Most of the community's offices are situated within this campus which also houses some social, cultural and leisure facilities such as a bar for young adults, kosher kitchens, small gymnasium and so on. There is also a small and rather inadequate kosher deli on location.

Since there is no identifiable geographical center of Jewish settlement – with Jews spread residentially completely throughout the environs of Warsaw, this campus is a well situated as any to serve community needs. It is close to the center of town, reasonably well situated for public transport and has room for expansion (especially if

scenario, even though a variety of lower level incidents were reported in the arena of student affairs and elsewhere. Most of the indicators on this issue are fair to positive.

(MS) Cohesion At The Top. Sadly we Jews are a quarrelsome tribe. Even in the smallest, most vulnerable communities, there are parochial disputes between individual leaders and between local communities and their national umbrella organizations.....

This is probably one of the weakest aspects of Jewish community life in Poland in general and is particularly evident in Warsaw as the main center for organized Jewish life. There are a number of fault lines in this community that are the product of the coincidence of some fundamental conceptual rifts and some personality clashes and territorial issues that remain unresolved.

Most prominent, at the center, is the unstated battle for 'ownership' of Jewish community life between the TSKZ – the social and cultural 'secular' body established under the communists and still headed today by an eighty year old survivor of that regime – and the JRCP, the religious based umbrella / roof organization recreated as an inheritor to the pre-war Kehilla structure of Warsaw and Polish Jewry. This fault line is particularly problematic because it is spread over all the various potential areas of dispute. It reflects differing conceptions of what it is to be Jewish and a member of a Jewish community, it involves competing claims for affiliation and loyalty, it involves competing for the attention and affections of government and local authority, it has spawned personality clashes and a history of incidents that become further barriers to future resolution, it involves direct competing on at least one major restitution issue in Warsaw (a building that completes the central community 'campus'). Both organizations are national with headquarters in Warsaw. Both have memberships and branches and activities and little, if any coordination and cooperation is possible between them, although outside bodies such as the Joint play a certain role in minimizing conflict by supporting both organizations for specific projects.

To a certain extent these two central bodies occupy different territory on the map of communal activity and responsibility. The TSKZ runs the Yiddish theater, cultural activities and houses the Yiddish newspaper and so on. The JRCP functions from synagogue based activity, promoting religious life and providing basic functions. However, areas of conflict are often sought rather than avoided and there is always an underlying sense of conflict that impacts negatively on the atmosphere within the community, may well discourage young and not so young outstanding individuals from taking up positions of leadership, reduces the potential for strategic planning and rational use of community resources and nurtures an atmosphere of mistrust and argument which is a constant dampening force. An outside body wishing to invest in Warsaw may well have to make a choice between two competing community bodies rather than being able to forge a partnership with 'the community' in meeting long term needs.

This problem was very much in evidence and to the fore over the issue of the restitution of communal property. Only after a prolonged period of communal infighting and subsequent failure to create an effective partnership with international