Is There a Future for Jews in Switzerland?

Dr. Simon Erlanger, March 15, 2007
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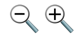

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- Swiss Jewry seems to be set for steady decline. There are today some eighteen thousand Jews in Switzerland-the same number as in 1900, whereas the general population has doubled since then. Assimilation and emigration, mainly to Israel, have reduced the Jewish population.
- Jewish numbers were never high in Switzerland although many Jewish communities existed there in the Middle Ages. A pattern began in 1348 when many cities in the territories of what was to become the Swiss Confederacy murdered their Jews and expelled the survivors.
- Jews were denied entry and residence for many centuries. By the seventeenth century a small Jewish population had been established in Swiss-conquered areas. The French occupation of 1798 bolstered the Jewish presence. Discrimination, however, continued until outside pressure led to emancipation in 1868-1874.
- After World War I Jewish immigration was made impossible, culminating in the anti-Jewish refugee policy during World War II. In the postwar period Swiss Jews experienced a new acceptance and prosperity despite demographic weakness. More recently a largely homemade anti-Semitism has arisen that gained momentum with the restitution debate of the 1990s.

There have been Jews in Switzerland since the Middle Ages, when many towns in the territories that were to form the Swiss Confederacy included Jewish communities.[1] There seems to have been a Jewish presence even centuries earlier.[2] In 2001, in a dig on the site of the Roman town of Augusta Raurica near the modern city of Basel, a small ring bearing a menorah was unearthed. The menorah is clearly visible on the bronze item, which was dated to the third century CE. Augusta Raurica was a bridgehead on the main Roman road to Cologne, where a Jewish community is known to have existed at the beginning of the fourth century CE. There is, however, no proof of a continuous Jewish presence in what was to become Switzerland.

The twelfth- and thirteenth-century Jewish communities in Swiss territory were part of the wider Ashkenazi settlement, which appears in written Jewish and non-Jewish sources since the ninth century and expanded along the Rhine, the Moselle, the Rhone, and later the Danube river valleys.[3] The Jewish presence in Switzerland was confined to the western and northwestern parts of the country, which geographically and culturally form part of those river valleys. The Jewish communities were urban, and the treatment of Jews in these towns followed the same pattern as elsewhere in Europe north of the Alps: a steady deterioration in legal, economic, and social status since the First Crusade of 1096 and the Lateran Council of 1215.

Exclusion: A Pattern Is Set

Switzerland began to differ from the rest of Central and Western Europe after the Plague of 1348-1349, for which the Jews were blamed. In the Savoyan Castle of Chillon on Lake Geneva in what is today Switzerland, local Jews were tortured until they confessed to the existence of a Jewish conspiracy to poison the wells all over Christian Europe. The false confessions were disseminated and finally reached the cities on the Rhine where angry mobs attacked the Jewish communities, often encouraged by merchants and noblemen who wanted to get rid of Jews to whom they owed money or whom they considered unwanted competition. In the territories of southern Germany, Alsace, and Switzerland, Jews were burned at the stake and their children taken away and forcibly baptized. Centuries-old communities were destroyed.

In the aftermath of these events, towns and territories swore never to admit Jews again. It was on Swiss territory, however, that this ban was most strictly enforced from the beginning of the fifteenth century. Whereas elsewhere Jews again managed to gain residence for longer or shorter periods, in Switzerland they were strictly denied entry and residence. In the Alsatian and southern German territories bordering on Switzerland, a strong Jewish rural presence had developed by the seventeenth century.[4] No Jews were allowed into the now consolidated Swiss Confederacy, however, except the occasional doctor, craftsman, or book printer.[5]

Only in conquered and occupied areas-the Gemeine Herrschaften or Commonly Ruled Territories, which were not considered Swiss territory-were Jews allowed from the seventeenth century on. Thus in the formerly Habsburg county of Baden, the two Jewish villages of Endingen and Lengnau came into existence. By 1798, when France invaded Switzerland, these two villages had a combined population of 1,700 Jews-the entire Jewish population of the country.

The Jewish population in the two villages always consisted mainly of peddlers and cattle dealers. It was poor and barely tolerated under a charter in exchange for fees and heavy taxation. Residence could always be rescinded. Nevertheless,

the small Jewish minority was perceived as an economic and religious threat. This continued well after Switzerland officially gained independence from the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. There was occasional violence against the Jews of Endingen and Lengnau, and up to 1769 the authorities were asked by the local populace at least six times to expel them.

The authorities, however, did not comply. Protestant cantons did not want to drive out the Jews from the two villages because keeping them there annoyed the Catholic cantons of the interior, which urgently wanted to expel the Jews. Jews thus had become pawns in the confessional strife that threatened to tear apart the Swiss Confederacy for most of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The Jewish presence in the two villages continued but remained precarious. What worked in the Jews' favor was being a convenient source of regular tax revenues to be collected without much effort. After 1712, when following yet another Protestant-Catholic civil war the Protestant cantons gained sole control of the County of Baden, the charter that granted residence to Jews in return for heavy taxation was renewed every sixteen years.[6]

Emancipation Denied

Whereas the Jewish population grew almost everywhere in Europe and Jews were readmitted into many territories under new mercantilist politics, nothing similar happened in Switzerland. The idea of tolerance did not take hold here. It was the French invasion and occupation of 1798 that brought change. But even then equality was granted only to French, mostly Alsatian Jews who as French citizens had come with the occupiers. Alsatian Jews thus started new communities in cities such as Berne, Geneva, and Basel where Jewish residence had been forbidden since the fourteenth century.

Under French occupation Swiss revolutionaries and reformers tried to achieve the emancipation of Swiss Jews through the newly formed central parliament, but failed. Emancipation was seen as being imposed by foreign rulers who already had imposed a centralized state that subverted ancient Swiss liberties. Despite the very small number of Jews in the country, Jewish emancipation therefore became the central issue in the political struggle between pro- and anti-French factions in the French- inspired Helvetic Republic.

Finally in 1802 the population revolted, their anger directed against the Jews. A mob invaded and plundered the two Jewish villages of Endingen and Lengnau. Some were injured and much property was destroyed or looted. The French soon gave in to mob violence. Unable to spare troops to put down the nascent uprising and needing Swiss regiments for his campaigns, in 1803 Napoleon concluded a political agreement that introduced a system of indirect French rule and reinstated much of the old decentralized Swiss system. Jewish emancipation thus fell from the agenda.

After Napoleon's final fall in 1815, Swiss conservatives tried to expel the French Jews who had settled in the country since 1798. Although the numbers of "foreign" Jews dwindled considerably from 1815 to 1847, the mostly French Jews persevered, at times even enjoying French diplomatic protection as French citizens. Meanwhile, the United States for the first time intervened and took diplomatic action to protect American Jewish citizens who had come to Switzerland to trade and were now subject to discrimination.[7]

The new communities continued to exist against all odds. In 1847 a brief civil war between the modernizing, liberal, and largely Protestant cities and the conservative Catholic cantons of the rural interior brought the liberal forces to power. Their main party, the FDP, created modern federal Switzerland in 1848 and dominated national politics for more than a century until the 1950s. It thus laid the foundation of modern, urban Switzerland as a major industrial, trading, and banking power.

Although the victory of the modernizers put an end to the efforts to expel the Jews, it did not bring them automatic equality.

Foreign Pressure

For Jews the new liberal state of 1848 proved to be a disappointment. Under its first constitution it granted equal rights to Christians only. For Jews there still was no freedom of religion, trade, or residency, although rules were loosened and Jews from Endingen and Lengnau enjoyed a new, limited freedom of movement and managed to settle in Baden and Zurich. Still, Jews were not granted citizenship and did not have the right to vote. Emancipation was postponed time and again because of popular resistance. This sensitivity to the general will reflected the democratic character of the state and its specific hierarchy from quasi-autonomous communities up to the half-sovereign cantons run by a relatively weak central authority.

It was outside intervention that brought change when in 1868 the United States followed by France, Holland, and England pressured Switzerland to grant the Jews equal rights. Switzerland, fearing for its close commercial ties with the United States, gave in. Nevertheless, a complicated political process was required before emancipation was finally stipulated by a new amended constitution in 1874. This document granted Jews full citizenship, freedom of religion and residency.

Backlash

Again it was precisely the democratic character of the Swiss federal state that in 1893 put the question of Jewish emancipation on the agenda. Following formal emancipation, Jewish communities in Switzerland had greatly expanded. After 1881 there began a substantial influx of Jews fleeing Russia and Poland.[8] The Jewish population rose from 7,373 in 1880 to 8,069 in 1890 and 12,264 ten years later.[9] Yet, although in 1900 Jews constituted only 0.37 percent of Switzerland's total population, many regarded Jewish immigration as threatening the country's character.

Because of the prevailing European norms, the liberal Swiss immigration policies of this period could not be changed. However, a different approach was taken. It involved stopping Jewish immigration by prohibiting shechita (Jewish ritual slaughter), since it was thought that Jews would not settle or remain in the country if kosher meat could not be produced.[10] In 1893, the first referendum in Swiss history was held on this issue. Against the will of the government and

most political parties, 60 percent of the (exclusively male) voters said yes to banning shechita, and this was added to the constitution.

Only in 1978 was the ban finally removed from the constitution and made part of a new Law for the Protection of Animals. Despite several revisions the prohibition is still part of that law today. It was to combat the prohibition that the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities was founded in 1904. It managed to secure the import of kosher meat in strictly limited quantities.

Despite the backlash and rising anti-Semitism since the 1890s, which reflected developments in neighboring France, Germany, and Austria, the Jewish community continued to flourish. By 1910 it numbered 18,462 and in 1920 it reached 20,979 (0.54 percent of the Swiss population). It had largely become middle-class and urban.

The prohibition of shechita was, however, the first step in what by the 1920s had become a discreet but firm anti-Jewish immigration policy.[11] It was institutionalized with the founding of the Fremdenpolizei (Foreigners Police) after World War I. This policy derived its legitimacy from a discourse on "overforeignization" (Überfremdung) that increasingly targeted Jews from Eastern Europe. Although few in number, Jews were regarded as a threat to Swiss culture and as unwanted competition in the labor market. They were also considered impossible to assimilate and a threat to "Judaize" the country.

Many Swiss intellectuals, civil servants, politicians, and even supposedly integrated Swiss Jewish officials warned that Jewish immigration would lead to violent anti-Semitism in the country. One who made such admonitions, for instance, was Heinrich Rothmund. As head of the Foreigners Police he was one of the chief architects of the anti-Jewish immigration policy of the 1920s, and as head of the Department of Police in the Federal Department of Justice he was one of the main persons responsible for the Swiss refugee policy during World War II. The authorities, therefore, regarded the policy of limiting Jewish immigration as a preventive measure against violent anti-Semitism, which was considered un-Swiss.

Again, Exclusion

The effort to prevent Jewish immigration and residency was thus central to the agenda of the Swiss authorities long before the rise of Nazism in Germany and the resulting waves of refugees in the 1930s and 1940s. To prevent Switzerland's "overforeignization," a special regulation was enacted. The 1931-1933 Law on Foreigner Stay and Settlement made it increasingly difficult for Jews to immigrate into Switzerland. Until 1954, the unquestioned precondition of Swiss refugee policy remained "transmigration," meaning that permanent asylum was not an option.

After 1938 the border was effectively closed. With the deportations of French, Dutch, and Belgian Jewry in 1942-1943 and the resulting waves of Jewish refugees trying to reach Switzerland, the closure was intensified. At least 24,000 Jewish refugees were turned away by the authorities during these years. Most of the 22,500 Jewish refugees who managed to get into Switzerland were interned for longer and shorter periods in a variety of reception and labor camps and so-called "homes."[12] The aim was to prevent them from establishing any kind of permanent residence in the country, and after the war ended in 1945 they were required to "transmigrate."

By 1953, most had left. Only 1,600 Jewish refugees were allowed to stay in Switzerland including 896 "hardship cases." The Jewish population had again fallen below twenty thousand. Swiss postwar refugee policy was thus a direct continuation of the anti-Jewish immigration policy of the 1920s and 1930s, which, in turn, can be seen as rooted in trends of exclusion going back to the fourteenth century.

Acceptance at Last?

The Swiss Jewish community was one of the very few Jewish communities in Europe not to be assaulted by the Nazis, and in 1945 it emerged intact with a well-developed communal and religious infrastructure.[13] But with most Jewish refugees having to leave by 1953 and many young Swiss Jews emigrating to Israel after its founding in 1948, numbers stagnated and the percentage of Jews in the fast-growing general population shrank.

Nevertheless, in the decades after 1945 Jewish institutions greatly expanded. New community centers were built and Jewish schools were founded in Zurich, Basel, Geneva, and Lausanne. Communal events such as the annual Maccabee Ball or the yearly opening of the Magbit (United Jewish Appeal) attracted hundreds of Jews in various cities. Because Swiss Jewry had not been hit by the Holocaust, it emerged as an important player on the European Jewish scene. Swiss Jewish organizations as well as international Jewish relief organizations saw Switzerland as a nucleus from which organized Jewish life in Europe could be rebuilt. As early as 1944, a rabbinical seminary was opened in Basel.[14] Most such initiatives, however, were short-lived, reflecting the limited financial and human resources of a small community.

Although anti-Semitism did not vanish in Switzerland after 1945, as in other European societies it became less socially and politically acceptable. Under the impact of the Shoah and because of a parliamentary inquiry into the Swiss refugee policy, in the 1950s official Swiss anti-Semitism became a public issue. However, the ensuing controversy, during which the question of dormant Jewish bank accounts was raised, soon abated inconclusively. Admiration for Israel seemed to trump traditional anti-Semitism, though occasional incidents showed that it was still extant.

Overall, Jews enjoyed a new acceptance. Jews immigrated in small numbers from Hungary in 1956, North Africa in the 1960s, and Iran and Israel in 1968 without it becoming an issue. This was, of course, overshadowed by the influx of hundreds of thousands of foreign workers after 1950. Despite the friendlier atmosphere, the Jewish population has not grown since the 1950s. By 2000 there were 17,914 Jews out of a Swiss population of 7,288,010.[15] The two main reasons for the lack of growth were aliyah (emigration to Israel) and intermarriage. The relative demographic decline led to the vanishing of many small communities by the 1990s and the concentration of the Jewish population in centers such as Zurich, Basel, Geneva, and Lausanne.

Nevertheless, in retrospect the period of 1950-1982 was a favorable one in which Swiss Jews finally became middle- and upper-middle-class and mostly could feel safe and accepted in Swiss society.

Old or New Anti-Semitism?

This was not to last. Following the Six Day War, the anti-Zionism of the New Left became a political factor in Switzerland as well.[16] But it was not until the Lebanon War of 1982 that its full force was felt. Anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic graffiti appeared, and anti-Semitic incidents began to multiply. Cemeteries were desecrated almost on a regular basis.[17] For the first time since the 1940s, a militant extreme Right emerged. Holocaust deniers and revisionists used Switzerland with its liberal laws as a base.

Beginning at that time, Jewish communities had to take security precautions. By 1987 when the First Intifada broke out, most of the Swiss mainstream media had become hostile and the general atmosphere had considerably deteriorated. But worse was to come.

From the early 1990s Switzerland has seen an unprecedented upsurge of anti-Semitism both in its more traditional forms and in its newer disguises as "anti-Israelism" and "anti-Zionism." In 1994, rising right-wing activism and Holocaust revisionism prompted the passing of the Antiracism Law. Nevertheless, a 1998 report by the Federal Commission against Racism demonstrated that anti-Semitism was on the advance. As elsewhere in Europe, the Swiss media's portrayal of Israel and the Middle East has been a major factor.

All this has concerned the Swiss Jewish community, which, as mentioned, now numbers only about eighteen thousand. A recent poll found that over 86 percent of Swiss Jews deplore media bias and distortions and think they have contributed to a major decrease in personal and communal security. Verbal and sometimes physical attacks have become common but still are rarely recorded or reported. Only recently the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities set up an institution to collect data and provide reliable statistics, and its first report stated that anti-Semitic incidents are on the rise.[18] Swiss Jewish communities have been forced to enhance security measures.

Anti-Israelism is now common at all levels of Swiss society, and so is anti-Semitism though it is expressed less openly. A March 2000 poll by the gfs Research Institute in Berne found that 16 percent of the Swiss population harbored intense anti-Semitic feelings.[19] Although this result was similar to the European average, it was double the percentage that earlier polls had found in Switzerland. A 2006 study by the University of Geneva's Department of Sociology found that 20 percent of the Swiss are "affected by anti-Semitism"-in other words, openly anti-Semitic.[20] The methodology of this study was questioned, and the gfs Research Institute is preparing a new study to be published later in 2007.

Moreover, a poll published in January 2003 by the research institute Isopublic for the weekly Weltwoche found that Switzerland was then one of the most anti-American countries in Europe with 57 percent of the population being explicitly hostile to the United States.[21] This represents a drastic change after a long history of friendship, cultural affinity, and economic cooperation since the nineteenth century.

A Special Case?

In all this Switzerland is hardly unique in Europe. What is special to Switzerland is that the current anti-Semitic trend did not start with the Second Intifada as it did elsewhere. It also is not connected to a large Muslim minority as in France. Although the Muslim population of Switzerland has risen to 350,000, it so far has not played a major role in the anti-Semitic upsurge.

Instead, the present trend seems intrinsically linked to specific Swiss developments. It was triggered in the first place by the affair of the dormant Jewish bank accounts during 1992-1998. This episode started when descendants of Holocaust victims reclaimed accounts that their murdered relatives had held in Swiss banks, and that had never been restored because documentation had been lost. The issue had first arisen immediately after the war and again, as noted, in the 1950s. After payment of small sums to Jewish organizations and the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities, the matter had been considered settled.

Restitution issues were reopened, however, in Europe in the 1990s. In the Swiss case, the affair developed into a controversy about the overall Swiss record during World War II including economic collaboration with the Nazis, the laundering of stolen gold, and the anti-Jewish refugee policy. With the government at first refusing to cooperate with Jewish claimants and actively protecting the banks, the dispute rapidly turned into a crisis. When major Jewish organizations and the U.S. government got involved, the Swiss began to see it as their worst foreign policy crisis in decades.

The affair ended with a financial settlement between the Swiss banks and Jewish claimants. The Swiss government together with the parliament also set up the Bergier Commission to research the country's wartime record. A Holocaust Foundation was established that paid small sums to survivors mainly from Eastern Europe.

In this affair and the subsequent debate on the war years, the Swiss confronted a past that did not correspond to the heroic image they had cherished for generations. The popular myth of their wartime resistance collapsed. Moreover, the debate was felt to be imposed by a hostile outside world-mainly Jews and Americans-seeking to damage Switzerland's self-image for political purposes. As a result the Swiss closed ranks from Left to Right and turned increasingly aggressive.

The allegations were not seen as directed against actual culprits or their respective heirs and legal successors but, instead, against the Swiss nation as a whole. Some politicians made hay of this. In 1996, then President Pascal Delamuraz referred to the abovementioned Holocaust Foundation as "ransom" and to the restitution debate as "blackmail," and asked whether Auschwitz was located in Switzerland. This opened the floodgates and gave anti-Semitism a new respectability. What so far had only been expressed privately or subtly was now in the open.

Nevertheless, the findings of the Bergier Commission, which established a certain amount of Swiss guilt, were accepted in 2001 and became the authorized history without much public controversy.[22] Although there still is talk of Jewish extortion, the atmosphere has cooled.

The Jewish community thought the worst was over, but turned out to be mistaken. The debate on the Swiss wartime record relegitimized anti-Semitism in all parts of society. In 2001 the then Economic Minister, Federal Counselor Pascale Couchepin suggested, along with the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities, abolishing the prohibition of shechita. Not

only militant animal rights groups but much of the public was outraged. Articles and letters to the editor used open, traditional anti-Semitic language that would have been unacceptable a decade earlier. By the end of that year the government voted to drop the proposal. The animal rights groups have now also launched an initiative to forbid the import of kosher meat, so far unsuccessful.

The End?

When the Second Intifada sparked the "new anti-Semitism" in Europe, it found fertile ground in Switzerland. Among the Swiss Jewish community, responses vary from ignoring the problem to a newfound activism.

Besides the hostility, the major issue facing the community is demographic. Both intermarriage[23] and aliyah remain high. Over eleven thousand Swiss Jews now live in Israel.[24] With those remaining in Switzerland tending to be older and less involved in the community, communal life has weakened in most places. Only in Zurich, despite large-scale aliyah, is there demographic resilience. Chabad-Lubavitch has helped energize Jewish life in the city.

In Basel, for instance, the community has shrunk from 2,600 Jews in 1950 to 1,515 in 1980 to less than 1,250 today.[25] The Jewish school currently has less than fifteen pupils. It is not clear how long the community can sustain its many institutions.

Jewish life is centered mostly in Zurich and to lesser extents in Geneva and Basel. Most or all of the smaller communities outside of those cities will likely vanish within a generation. Traditional communal bonds are fraying, with ongoing political and religious strife threatening the survival even of the three larger communities.

Whereas the German Jewish community was revived by Russian Jewish immigration, nothing similar has happened in Switzerland. Many hope that the flourishing Swiss economy, with its influx of international firms, will attract a new Jewish immigration, but this seems improbable.

Summary

The Swiss Jewish population has been steadily diminishing, with assimilation and emigration leading to an elderly community. Jewish numbers were never high in Switzerland; the pattern was already set in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when Jews were denied entry and residence there. Nevertheless, by the seventeenth century a small Jewish presence had been established, which was swelled by immigration following the French occupation of the country. Exclusion, however, continued until outside intervention impelled Jewish emancipation in 1868-1874.

But exclusion returned, culminating in the blocking of Jewish immigration during World War II. Although conditions improved after the war and the Jewish community enjoyed greater acceptance, intermarriage and aliyah took their toll on its numbers. Recently an old-new anti-Semitism has arisen, and the future of the community, however well established and affluent, is cause for concern.

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Notes

1. See Augusta Welder-Steinberg, Geschichte der Juden in der Schweiz, 2 vols. (Zurich: Schweizerischer Israelitischer Gemeindebund, 1966). [German]

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8. Patrick Kury, "Man Akzeptierte uns nicht, man tolerierte uns!" Ostjudenmigration nach Basel (Basel and Frankfurt: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1998). [German]

9. The figures are from Hans Guth, "Die Juden in der Schweiz im Spiegel der Bevölkerungsstatistik," in Schweizerisch Israelitischer Gemeindebund, 1904-1954, Festschrift zum 50jährigen Bestehen (Basel: SIG, 1954). [German]

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16. Christina Späti, Die schweizerische Linke und Israel: Israelbegeisterung, Anti-Zionismus und Anti-Semitismus zwischen 1967 und 1991 (Berlin: Klartext Verlagsgesellschaft, 2006). [German]

17. Cf. Hans Stutz, Rassistische Vorfälle in der Schweiz (Zurich: GRA-Stiftung gegen Rassismus und Antisemitismus, 1992 [published yearly]). [German]

18. Sonntagszeitung, 14 January 2007, 7. [German]

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20. Sandro Cattacin, Brigitta Gerber, Massimo Sardi, and Robert Wegener, Monitoring Misanthropy and Rightwing Extremist Attitudes in Switzerland: An Explorative Study, Department of Sociology, University of Geneva, 2006, 70.

21. Weltwoche, No. 6 (2003), www.weltwoche.ch/artikel/default.asp?AssetID=4261&CategoryID=66. [German]

22. Jacques Picard, "Über den Gebrauch der Geschichte: Die UEK im Kontext Schweizerischer Vergangenheitspolitik," in Gabrielle Rosenstein, ed., Jüdische Lebenswelt Schweiz: 100 Jahre Schweizerischer Israelitischer Gemeindebund. [German]

23. Although statistics for intermarriage are hard to come by, estimates vary from 30 percent to 50 percent of all Jewish marriages.

24.www.swissemigration.ch/themen/laenderinfos/auslands schweizer/index.html?lang=den. [German]

25. Figures were supplied to the author by the office of the secretary of the Israelitische Gemeinde Basel (www.igb.ch). [German]

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