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## Perspectives on European Jewry

**By Sandra Lustig, Ian Leveson**

*Turning the Kaleidoscope – Perspectives on European Jewry* is based on the premise that the history, current situation, and development of Jewry in Europe are distinctive enough to characterise European Jewry as a collective entity. This view is not at all commonplace; on the contrary. Especially from outside Europe, the continent is often seen as a place basically devoid of Jews; many assume that European Jews all emigrated or perished in the Shoah. However, the approximately two million Jews in Europe today form a meaningful fraction of world Jewry, compared with five million in Israel, 5.5 million in the United States, and smaller Jewish populations elsewhere. In terms of Jewish culture, Europe is sometimes termed a void, overlooking the fact that Jews have been keeping Jewish culture alive here, even in the difficult years following the Shoah. At times, the Jewish view from outside Europe even seems to be that Europe is a place to be avoided because of its bloody history. This applies especially to countries like Germany and Austria because of their active roles in the Shoah. Europe thus seems to be alternately a blank space on the map, or a black hole.

Such a negative stance towards Europe ignores the fact that Judaism is to a considerable extent a European religion; much of Judaism and Jewish culture was developed in Europe. Haskalah, Ladino, klezmer, Reform Judaism, Yiddish, Bundism, Hasidism, gefilte fish, and the Frankfurt School were all created in Europe. Indeed, two of the largest cultural groups of Jews – Sephardim and Ashkenazim – are both of European origin. Jewish culture blossomed in various places across Europe through the centuries: medieval Spain, nineteenth-century Salonika, and the great centres of learning in Germany, Poland, and Lithuania, to name just a few examples.

In fact, a substantial percentage of the world's Jewry actually is European or of European descent. Going back just a very few generations, many Jews have European ancestors. Of course, there was migration and emigration, and Jews left Europe for good reason. They took their European heritage with them, and handed down more or less of it to the following generations, in the form of language, forms of religious practice, humour, cuisine, ethics, artefacts, and so on. But Jews have continued to live in Europe; not all of them are gone. Some parts of Europe house the fractured remnants of a sometimes glorious Jewish past, still struggling more or less successfully to rebuild Jewish life. Other places in Europe were spared the destruction wrought in the Shoah, and Jewish life there could continue with less difficulty. And Jews have migrated across Europe and to and from other parts of the world.

The discussions in *Turning the Kaleidoscope – Perspectives on European Jewry* are founded on the premise that European Jewry can and indeed should form a third pillar of Jewry alongside the pillars of Israel and North America. For this, the combined Jewish population is large enough and shares a common European heritage and culture. Yet, if European Jewry is to form a third pillar of Jewry next to Israeli and North American Jewry, it will have to be a pillar of a different nature. Diversity is and must be the defining feature of European Jewry, to a far greater extent than elsewhere: after all, Europe itself is home to a host of different cultures, each rooted deep in time. The Jewries in each of those cultures embody unique combinations of Jewish culture and the culture around them. Diversity among Jews, too, can be found in even the smallest communities in Europe. Viewed close up, the diversity may seem so great that it obscures commonalities. But from a bird's-eye view, European Jews' Europeanness becomes visible, and the quality of being European does set them apart from Jews in other places in the world. Therefore, Europe should be regarded as a meaningful entity for Jewry.

Of course, Israel's Jewish population is diverse, too, but Israel is a largely Jewish society, unlike any society in Europe. In North America there are many places with substantial numbers of Jews, and there are no fewer than nine cities with a Jewish population greater than all of Germany's, which is Europe's fifth largest, at more than a hundred thousand. With large numbers of Jews present, like-minded Jews can form and run congregations and other organisations of their own that can coexist with each other (on better or worse terms). In places with fewer Jews, like most places in Europe, that is far more difficult, if not impossible. Both

in Israel and in North America there are unifying cultures: Jews may be Reform or Orthodox, for example, but they are all Israelis or Canadians or U.S. Americans. In Europe they may be Conservative and French, or Orthodox and Greek, or secular and Russian, and so on, and many more combinations do exist. In Israel, Jews speak Hebrew as their everyday language; in North America they speak English (or French, in Francophone Canada). But in Europe a unifying language is lacking. Neither Hebrew nor Ladino nor Yiddish are commonly spoken. English is often the lingua franca, but for most it is a foreign language, and many Europeans do not speak English fluently. Even simple communication between Jews in Europe is not easy.

Since the early 1990s, Judaism and Jewishness seem to have become fashionable, with a plethora of books, conferences, films, TV series, festivals, and other events on some sort of Jewish theme. This has given rise to another misperception of the state of Jewry in Europe, namely that Jewish life is blossoming, that the tense relations between Jews and non-Jews in the aftermath of the Shoah have relaxed into a state of mutual goodwill, and that anti-Semitism has been overcome. Unfortunately, this view is too rosy. The complex relations between Jewry and our non-Jewish surroundings in Europe today deserve detailed analysis.

Many of Europe's Jewish communities face a common issue: continuity. This is partly an issue of sheer numbers: the birth rate is often far lower than the death rate in communities small and large. That the number of Jews living in Europe today is much, much lower than before the Shoah cannot be disputed, and that their numbers are dropping appears to be a reality as well. But continuity is not just a matter of numbers. It is also a question of keeping Jews interested in Judaism – or engaging their interest in the first place. It is a matter of the Jewish communities and other Jewish organisations recognising the realities of today's Jews' lives and adapting to their needs. Jewry cannot afford to close out Jews; we need each and every Jewish person if Jewry is to prosper. Jewish organisations should consider whether their programmes to reach out to unaffiliated Jews – insofar as such efforts exist at all – are attractive to their target group. A particularly contentious issue in this context is intermarriage, especially in those parts of Europe where intermarriage tends to mean that Shoah victims' descendants marry Shoah perpetrators' descendants. Compared to the situation in the U.S., for example, where many Jewish families were not directly affected by the Shoah and many non-Jewish families have no connection to it whatsoever,

this situation can make intermarriage much more contentious for the families and communities on both sides. At the same time, some Jews feel they have no alternative to intermarriage, given the paucity of Jewish potential marriage partners. Furthermore, whether or not a person is Jewish is but one criterion among many – albeit an important one – when choosing a partner. Love certainly can flower across religious, ethnic, and/or cultural boundaries; intermarried couples need to find ways to deal with the issues that arise. How the Jewish communities respond is critical for Jewish continuity. Are the non-Jewish spouses required to convert? Are they welcomed into the Jewish community in some way, whether or not they convert? Are their children welcomed? Or are they not recognised as proper Jews and discriminated against for that reason? Even when the mother is Jewish and the children are thus halachically Jewish, the answers to these questions are not at all clear. These are tricky issues for everyone involved, and if they are not handled very carefully, they will result in some Jews feeling alienated and even turning away from involvement in things Jewish. That cannot be the desired result. Finally, at issue in Europe today is not only continuity of population or continuity of Judaism as a whole, but continuity of the kaleidoscope of European Jewish traditions. When conceiving efforts to maintain continuity, for example Jewish education for children, youth, and adults, it is essential to keep in mind the large variety of traditions of the Jews in most places.

European Jewry today bears little resemblance to what it was before the Shoah. With just a few exceptions, it is still in a state of recovery from the destruction wrought in the Shoah and/or the suppression by the state socialist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. Rebuilding Jewish life in all its variety and vitality, and with all its religious and secular institutions, will remain a major task for some generations to come. The rebuilding of Jewish communities and institutions in Central and Eastern Europe will change the orientation of Jewry in Europe from Western European to pan-European, whereby the enlargement of the European Union may foster this process.

Continuity of Jewry in Europe is thus also a question of the development of the institutional structure of organised Jewry. How to effect development in Jewish institutions in such a way that they adapt to the totality of Jews' needs, interests, and traditions is a major challenge for the coming years. Fighting against anti-Semitism is the one thing all Jews seem to agree on – at least in principle. But Jews need to harmonise their efforts far beyond this lowest common denominator – we have much more on our common agenda, like it or not. European Jewry

may well diverge from the established coordinates of the Jewish world (on less or more friendly terms), finding its own path, kaleidoscopically turning further to generate new patterns. Some kernels will remain distinct as they tumble, some will be mirrored, and others will be overlaid, creating new patterns. It is up to us to keep the kaleidoscope turning.

### **About the Authors**

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