

ISSUES CONFRONTING JEWISH COMMUNAL PROFESSIONALS IN FRANCE

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French Jewry has undergone dramatic changes since World War II. The first decade following the liberation of the country from Nazi Germany was devoted to providing for the basic needs of the thousands of Holocaust survivors. With the help of such American organizations as the Claims Conference and the JDC, a policy of reconstruction was pursued by the Fonds Social Juif Unifié (FSJU), an umbrella organization that today encompasses more than 200 agencies in the fields of welfare, culture, education, and youth. The professional expertise provided by the JDC enabled the FSJU to better tackle the next main challenge: the massive immigration from North African countries in the 1960s. This major event dramatically transformed both the demographic and social configuration of French Jewry. Priorities then were developing schools, as well as informal education activities. Yet, some ten years later during the 1970s, the recession jeopardized the economic well-being of those who emigrated with a poor educational or professional background. A series of appropriate social services were created to support working people living in near poverty, teenagers who dropped out from school, as well as the unemployed.

Today, one may observe three main trends. First, there is a growing desire for Jewish life. However, although there are an increasing number of people attending religious services, the central religious body, the "Consistoire," has been weakened. Philanthropy is focused on other institutions or programs, and the Consistoire struggles to recruit qualified professionals in charge of administrative services. According to the sociologist Erik Cohen, there are also growing numbers of revivalists in search of spiritual meaning. Instead of attending institutionalized synagogues, they choose smaller places, closer to home and tailored to their spiritual expectations.

This Jewish revival may also be observed in the increasing number of families who send their children to Jewish schools instead of public ones, which is the second trend. Some 5,000 people are actually employed as administrative or educational personnel by the networks of Jewish schools, in which more than 30,000 pupils are enrolled around the country. One reason for this growing enrollment is the French political and social situation: The impact of the second Intidafa and an increase in the number of violent acts against Jewish children motivated many families to seek a safer, more secure environment for their children.

The impressive development of the Jewish school system is partially due to the Ministry of Education's financing of salaries of general studies teachers. Every year, the FSJU negotiates new state contracts with the Ministry of Education.

Although from the 1970s through the late 1990s, the focus was on developing school infrastructures, today's priority is on enhancing educational programs and teacher quality. The FSJU has established a training center, the Institut André Neher, that offers a variety of educational and managerial training programs. To prevent the isolation of Jewish children from French society, the Alliance Israelite Universelle plans cultural exchange activities with Catholic pupils and even with survivors of the genocide in Rwanda.

Although the Jewish community is perceived generally as well-to-do and benefiting from government programs, Jews living in the poor suburbs of Paris share many social characteristics with the large Muslim population living there. According to Guy Benloulou, a psychologist working in an agency for at-risk teenagers,

Considering unemployment and economic precariousness, weakening of familial links, and dangerous neighborhoods, Jewish families are not better off than non-Jewish ones. On a daily basis, both communities face indecent living conditions, absence of professional perspectives, a large number of drop-outs from schools, and familial violence. Juvenile delinquency concerns both populations, with a common rejection of authority, be it the school or the police. When it comes to transgression, one observes a solidarity within gangs of teenagers of both origins.

G rard Fredj, head of the FSJU Youth Department, explained,

Youth agencies, as well as the French Union of Jewish students, have recently observed a reduction in anti-Semitic violence, probably due to the Israeli decision to withdraw from Gaza. Yet, the image of the Jew and of Israel is definitely degraded, including within universities. In poor neighborhoods, as well as in the subway or public spaces, many youth hide any kind of apparent Jewish identification that may be interpreted as a provocation.

Among the elderly, these antagonistic relations awaken past traumas. Those who emigrated from North Africa remember when they had to leave all their property and familiar cultural environment. They are reminded of times when they were vulnerable because of their Jewish identity.

The third major trend within the Jewish community is the ongoing development of its social agencies and programs. Hundreds of professionals work in social services, home care services, elderly homes, institutions and specialized classes for the disabled, and psychological support centers for children and teenagers, as well as children's homes. The Jewish community faces a lack of candidates for these positions. This is why the FSJU's training center launched a vast recruitment campaign among teenagers involving encounters with professionals and offering training and education grants. In addition to the problem of finding qualified professionals, Jewish

agencies employ a growing number of non-Jewish personnel and thus, confront the fundamental question of how to provide services respectful of Jewish identity and expectations.

Very few community centers are run by qualified directors. Many are managed by volunteers, and even though some are deeply engaged in their centers' activities, they are unable to assure their long-term development. "In this regard," observed Xavier Nataf, past director of the Center Edmond Fleg of Marseille and a regional delegate of the FSJU, "we have to be aware of the growing gap between our cultural offerings and those that can be found through city festivals, theatres, or bookstores. Indeed, there is a real interest in French society in Jewish subjects and artists, and we cannot match their offerings. This raises the questions of what do we seek to achieve and what can we offer that cannot be found elsewhere?" Nataf suggests that Jewish centers should focus on partnerships with universities and theaters on programs to which they can bring some Jewish perspective.

His colleague in Lyon, Viviane Eskenazi, noted, "The quality of cultural programs should indeed be enhanced but not at the expense of Jewish life within our centers. What needs to be thought of is the sort of activity that could attract all Jews, in an environment where everybody would just feel welcome. French Jewry is plural, and our role is also to include as many teenagers and children, as well as adults that don't necessary attend religious services."

However, this ambitious goal cannot be realized without qualified Jewish professionals. As David Saada put it, "Whereas in the United States a Jewish professional may expect career and salary improvement and can easily switch from jobs within the community to other ones, this is not the case in France. There is a lack of community recognition of Jewish professionals and the lack of financial means prevents us from recruiting enough qualified people among well-educated young people."

However, the picture is not all bleak. The community centers in several large French cities are undergoing large-scale development.