

Jewish life in Europe: Impending catastrophe, or imminent renaissance?

Jonathan Boyd

There is much debate over the future of Jewish life in Europe. Some Jewish commentators, observing rising levels of antisemitism and Islamic extremism, maintain that Europe is becoming an increasingly treacherous place for Jews to live. Others, witnessing changing modes of Jewish identity and the emergence of innovative forms of Jewish communal activity, argue that Europe offers a fertile environment in which Jewish life can thrive. And, in the midst of this debate, demographers bring data about Europe which demonstrate that the nature of both the Jewish and wider populations is undergoing significant change.

This policy paper examines these hypotheses and assesses their veracity. In doing so, it brings new data into the discussion. In 2012, after winning a competitive tender from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), JPR, working in partnership with its multi-national team of Associate Fellows and the global research agency Ipsos MORI, undertook a pan-European survey of Jewish perceptions and experiences of antisemitism. The findings have now been published by the FRA. The data comprise arguably the largest dataset ever gathered on Jews in Europe, and shed new light on our understanding of contemporary reality.

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Introduction

Europe holds a unique status in Jewish history. For centuries, it played host to the intellectual heart of Jewish life, and provided the backdrop for many of the greatest Jewish cultural developments in the realms of Jewish art, music and literature. It was the cradle of the Enlightenment, the continent which produced the philosophies of Voltaire, Rousseau, Kant, Descartes and Locke, and the region that, over the course of a century, emancipated the vast majority of Jews in its midst, thereby allowing them legal and political access to mainstream society. It witnessed the emergence of Hassidut, and gave birth to denominational Judaism – modern Orthodoxy, the Reform, Conservative, Liberal and Neolog movements – as well as a *haredi* reaction against all of these. And it provided the setting and

motivation for Zionism, which set in motion one of the most significant developments in all of Jewish history – the establishment of the State of Israel.

In Jewish consciousness, however, much of this history has been overshadowed by Europe's greatest atrocity and shame – the mass annihilation of its Jewish population by the Nazis and their collaborators in the Holocaust. Jewish visitors to Europe today, whilst drawn to the majesty and grandeur of its great cities and cultural monuments, often cannot fail to be overwhelmed by the remnants of Jewish destruction that seem to litter the landscape. Synagogues deserted and demolished, cemeteries left derelict and in decay, entire communities devastated and destroyed. Jewish history is ubiquitous in Europe, but its horrifying chapter in the twentieth century has left an indelible mark on the Jewish mind. Many Jews in the world today appear to see

and experience Europe as the great Yiddish poet Avraham Sutzkever once imagined we would: like “the dark scream of your past, where skulls of days congeal in a bottomless pit”, that leaves us with a memory resembling “an old buried city” and where our “eternal gaze will crawl, like a mole, like a mole.”¹ Seventy years have passed since his words were penned in the Vilna Ghetto, but they still resonate, and in any assessment of European Jewish life today, we should be cognisant of the extent to which our perspective is clouded by the shadow of this relatively recent history.

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The case for such cognisance is not simply because of the Holocaust. The demise of European Jewry can be traced back to several decades before the Nazis even came to power. From the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, Jews began to flee Europe. While economic factors certainly informed these waves of migration, antisemitism was a major factor. Confronted with violence and pogroms, destined to live under the swathe of nationalist and fascist governments that swept across the continent prior to the Second World War, not to mention the communist governments that overlapped and followed, increasing numbers of Jews felt compelled to leave. Europe was simply too dangerous a place in which to live. Where they migrated to was informed by other pull factors – economic prosperity above all, and Zionist fervour certainly played its part. Yet, irrespective of where they ended up and why, the push factor was always significant: Europe was the site of prejudice and persecution; somewhere to flee from in the face of pogrom, discrimination and genocide.

The impending catastrophe hypothesis

Of the 13.8 million Jews in the world today, as many as two-thirds trace their ancestral origins back to Europe and the Russian Empire.² Thus, for the vast majority of Jews in the world today, the accounts of their ancestors surviving or fleeing persecution in Europe constitute part of their family story, and therefore an important component of their personal historical narrative. With

- 1 See: Avraham Sutzkever (1943) “How?” in: Sutkever, A. (1991). *Selected Poetry and Prose*. Translated from the Yiddish by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav. Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press.
- 2 Most of the remainder trace their origins back to Arab lands, where the history and culture are very different, but the trope and experience of discrimination also resonate for many of them, and thus reinforce the narrative of persecution.

the tremendous weight of the Holocaust to reinforce that narrative, not to mention the tendency within Zionism to negate the Diaspora as a whole,³ we should probably not be surprised that much of what is written today about the future of European Jewish life is cast in negative or even apocalyptic terms. As the historian and political scientist Diana Pinto has argued, “After the near extermination of European Jewry, most Jews in the world were convinced that Europe had become, after Auschwitz, the equivalent of post-1492 Spain: a continent with a spent Jewish past no longer harbouring significant Jewish life.” Furthermore, Pinto argues “the very term ‘European Jews’ was associated in Zionist minds with Jews who had all but forfeited their identity through the folly of assimilation, or with curbed, at times sycophantic, ultra-religious Jews who had gone to the gas chambers as sheep to slaughter. For Zionists, Europe and the Jewish people were incompatible.” As for American Jews, they “shared, along with so many immigrants to the New World, a similar reading of Europe as a continent of intolerance and injustice.”⁴

Reading popular articles about European Jewry today, many authors appear to be drawn to contemporary or historical incidents and research findings that reinforce these positions. Time may have moved on, and the memories become more remote, but the trauma of that history still seems to reverberate in ways that are both conscious and unconscious. In the past few months alone, headlines include “The bleak prospects for Europe’s

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Jews”,⁵ “Antisemitism hits new record in Europe”,⁶ “Jewish religion is under attack in Europe”,⁷ “Jewish life in Europe ‘dying a slow death’”⁸ and “Are 150 million Europeans antisemites or dangerous idiots?”⁹ Each of these assesses European Jewry’s future through the lens of antisemitism

- 3 The concept of “*sblilat ha-golah*” (negation of the Diaspora) was a central part of classical Zionism, and whilst considerably weaker today than in the past, continues to inform contemporary Zionist thought.
- 4 Diana Pinto, “A Third Pillar? Toward a European Jewish Identity.” Text of a lecture given at the Central European University, Budapest, Jewish Studies Lecture Series, March 1999.
- 5 P. David Hornik, “The Bleak Prospects for Europe’s Jews”, *Frontpage*, June 26, 2013. See: <http://frontpagemag.com>.
- 6 Itamar Eichner, “Antisemitism hits new record in Europe”, *YNet*, June 24, 2013. See: <http://www.ynetnews.com>.
- 7 Sam Sokol, “Jewish religion is under attack in Europe”, *Jerusalem Post*, May 8, 2013. See: <http://www.jpost.com>.
- 8 Raphael Ahren, “Jewish life in Europe ‘dying a slow death’”. *Times of Israel*, July 8, 2013. See: <http://www.timesofisrael.com>.
- 9 Manfred Gerstenfeld, “Are 150 Million European Antisemites, or Dangerous Idiots?” *Times of Israel*, July 10, 2013 (blog entry). See: <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com>.

and confirms, with differing degrees of severity, a theory of impending catastrophe. The overarching impression one receives is dire: “It’s time to get out,” urges the *Times of Israel* article by Raphael Ahren; “the end of the Jewish

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community” in Germany hangs in the balance, argues the *Jerusalem Post* piece; “the expiration date looms nearer” concludes an article in *Mosaic*.¹⁰ In each case, the authors back up their hypotheses with different amounts of data, drawn from various sources with varying degrees of reliability. In each instance a powerful, compelling and deeply disturbing portrait is presented. Yet in reading each one, two questions inevitably emerge: to what extent is it possible to back up the hypothesis with solid empirical evidence that is not selective in the data it chooses to highlight? And to what extent is the hypothesis driven by a meta-narrative of European antisemitism that clouds our perspective?

Consider the example of how a 2011 study of intolerance, prejudice and discrimination in eight European countries was reported and discussed among certain specialists in antisemitism.¹¹ One commentator notes the study found that 40 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement ‘Israel is conducting a war of extermination against the Palestinians.’ On the basis of this finding, he argues that “in the entire EU, the average percentage of those holding demonic beliefs about Israel is at least 40 per cent,” and concludes that there are therefore “150 million adult antisemites in the European Union, if we apply the EU’s own working definition of antisemitism.”¹² Putting aside the leaps he makes from the statistic to his conclusions, when one examines the survey findings fully, it becomes clear that he has been rather selective in utilising its findings. For example, the same study, based on the same data from the same respondents, also finds that 61 per cent agree with the statement “Jews enrich our culture”, 65 per cent disagree with the statement “Jews in general do not care about anything or anyone but their own kind”, and almost 70 per cent disagree with the statement “Jews have too much influence” in each of the eight countries surveyed. In the case of each statement, the proportion ticking the box that may indicate they hold what might be construed as the antisemitic view on the

response scale stands at around 11-12 per cent, and once the Hungarian and Polish results are removed (where the problem of antisemitism is clearly most acute among the eight countries surveyed), the figures drop to between 5 per cent and 9 per cent. Without in any way wishing to minimise the particular finding highlighted – it is indeed disturbing to see the proportion of respondents holding that view about Israel and it is absolutely right that it should be flagged up – the stronger sense one receives from a more holistic and impartial reading of the data is that, on the whole, Europeans seem to exhibit fairly moderate views towards the Jews in their midst. The situation is far from perfect, and it clearly varies from one country to another, but no independent analyst of the data would instantly draw the conclusion that 150 million Europeans are antisemites. All of which leads to my second question – to what extent is this type of hypothesis driven by a meta-narrative about European antisemitism that clouds our perspective? – because something appears to be at play which causes some, at least, to take a particularly grim view of the data.

My intention here is not to belittle or reject the hypothesis about rising antisemitism. On the contrary, there are credible data to support it. The Pew Global Attitudes Project has published clear evidence to demonstrate that unfavourable views of Jews have increased in certain parts of Europe in recent years – notably Spain, Poland, Russia, France, and, to a lesser extent, Germany.¹³ JPR’s recent study of Jewish perceptions and experiences of antisemitism in Europe (conducted for the European Union and discussed in detail below) contains much within it to support the position. However, we must pursue a more

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nuanced and sophisticated reading of existing data, as well as seek to generate more of it, so that we can understand the situation in all of its complexity. This will allow us to make credible assessments of reality and sound judgement calls about policy based on a rounded understanding of all of the empirical evidence, rather than an emotional reaction to parts of it. Analysts and commentators must also resist the temptation of being drawn into the power of one individual’s harrowing story – as many are apt to do – and assume that one such account reflects the reality of

10 Michel Gurfinkiel, “You Only Live Twice”, *Mosaic*, August 2013. Downloaded from: mosaicmagazine.com.

11 Zick, A., Küpper, B., and Hövermann, A. (2011). *Intolerance, Prejudice and Discrimination. A European Report*. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Forum Berlin. The countries studied were Germany, France, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Poland and Portugal.

12 Gerstenfeld, “150 Million Europeans”.

13 Kohut, A. et. al. (2008). *Unfavorable Views of Jews and Muslims on the Increase in Europe*. Washington DC: The Pew Global Attitudes Project. The Member States of the European Union included in the research were Britain, France, Germany, Poland and Spain. Data for Russia and Turkey were also collected, as well as seventeen other countries around the world.

the whole. So many of the articles written about European Jewry fall into this trap – even those written by the more thoughtful and insightful analysts – and whilst probably winning over those inclined to accept their hypothesis before reading a word, they simultaneously damage their case among the more sceptical. Additionally, it is vital to ensure that our understanding of antisemitism in Europe is appropriately contextualised. When it is located in the broader context of racism and xenophobia against other groups,¹⁴ or when we assess people’s anxiety levels about it in the context of their anxiety levels about other more general issues,¹⁵ or when we ask about the extent to which Jewish leaders in Europe regard combating antisemitism to be a priority,¹⁶ the data often reveal interesting and surprising insights which allow us to understand some of the realities of contemporary antisemitism in new and important ways.

The imminent renaissance hypothesis

Moreover, in striking contrast to the narrative about the rising tide of antisemitism, there exists another narrative that offers an entirely divergent picture of European Jewish life. It speaks of a renaissance of activity, an entrepreneurial spirit, and the activation of newly-energised Jews in Europe, notably those among the first generation to have grown up in parts of the continent that only relatively recently emerged from the shackles of communist repression. Unlike many of the proponents of the former narrative, this argument tends to come from people who have actively engaged in the more vibrant components of contemporary European Jewish life. They are inevitably shaped and influenced by what they

see, and, in certain cases, utilise or generate data that support their view. Among the recent literature stands Jumpstart’s “2010 Survey of New Jewish Initiatives in Europe”, which argues that in the previous fifteen years “a revival of Jewish life has spread across Europe” that reflects “the diversity of contemporary Jewish thought” and “the hope for a promising future”.¹⁷ Indeed, in the study, the authors count between 220 and 260 European Jewish start-up organisations which were established between 2000 and 2010. In contrast to the more commonly encountered theories of despair and demise, the report maintains that “the perception that Jewish life in Europe is largely about memorialising the past, or futilely shoring up shrinking population centres of increasingly assimilated and disinterested Jews is not what we found.” On the contrary, claim the authors, “it is clear that a grass-roots communal infrastructure for Jewish life is taking shape for its own sake” and European Jewry “is confident, vibrant, and growing.” This is extraordinary commentary, particularly bearing in mind

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another commentator’s claim that only in France does European Jewish life have any cultural dynamism, and that is only due to the influx of hundreds of thousands of North African Jews.¹⁸ The narrative is further supported by a publication issued by the Westbury Group, an informal association of twenty-two Jewish philanthropic organisations and individual funders operating in Europe, which highlighted the work of thirty-six organisations that together constituted “but a sample of the remarkable rebirth of Jewish life in Europe.”¹⁹

This idea of a renaissance has also been championed by Diana Pinto, who has argued that the collapse of communism “set the ground for an emerging European Jewish identity.” She notes that, from 1989, Jews from former communist countries “were coming back to the fold out of forced or voluntary assimilation, precisely at the same time as Jews in Western Europe were also dissimilating and taking on a more confrontational attitude towards their countries’ respective parts during the Holocaust. They could pursue such an internal distancing with impunity because they were fully-fledged

14 The aforementioned Pew study, for example, found that negative views of Muslims outweighed negative views of Jews among all age groups, all educational levels, and across all parts of the political spectrum.

15 For example, in JPR’s 2011 survey of Jewish students in Britain, we found that whilst almost 40 per cent were at least “somewhat concerned” about anti-Israel activity on campus, the proportions reporting concern about “passing exams”, “finding a job”, “living up to the expectations of their parents” and “relationship issues”, were considerably higher. The FRA survey (discussed in detail later in this paper) also found evidence of the same phenomenon: when the extent to which Jews perceive antisemitism to be a problem was measured against the extent to which they perceive other issues to be a problem (e.g. unemployment, the state of the economy, crime, etc.), antisemitism rarely featured in the top half of the list.

16 For example, a recent American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee survey noted “Antisemitism was not considered to be a major threat to Europe’s Jewish leaders (only 26 per cent considered it as a *very serious threat*). Furthermore, the same study reported that “only 9 per cent felt *rather unsafe* and a mere 3 per cent *not safe at all* “to live and practise as Jews in their countries. See: Kosmin, B. (2012). *Second Survey of European Jewish Leaders and Opinion Formers, 2011*. Paris: JDC-ICCD.

17 Shawn Landres with Joshua Avedon, “The 2010 Survey of New Jewish Initiatives in Europe: Key Findings”, Fall 2010. See: “http://jewishecosystem.org/euro2010/documents/JumpstartReport3_EuropeanKeyFindings2010.pdf”

18 Hillel Halkin, “Cause for Grief”, *Mosaic*, August 2013. See: <http://mosaicmagazine.com>.

19 See: “Compass”, downloaded from: <http://www.compasseurope.org>.

citizens of their respective countries and endowed with a self-confidence which their parents had lacked.”²⁰ Whilst Pinto’s optimism has been tempered in more recent years, varying degrees of evidence for a revival can be found in a range of studies based on analysis of

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the situations in France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Hungary, Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark, Ukraine, Poland, Italy and other countries conducted over the past two decades.²¹ Many of the studies in European countries which did not experience communism argue that Jewishness is in the process of being redefined there: in increasingly multicultural environments, people are finding new ways – and newfound confidence – to express their Jewish identities in ways that are meaningful to them. Alongside a religious revival (also found among other minority religious groups), an ethno-cultural revival is taking place in which Judaism is being developed in ways that are inspired both by traditional practice and wider cultural influences. Arguably the best example of this is ‘Limmud’, a multi-denominational, multi-generational festival of Jewish life that began in the United Kingdom and has been replicated all over

the world, that manages to balance an intense focus on traditional ideas of Jewish learning and community with an exuberant freshness more commonly associated with major arts or music festivals. In countries that experienced communist rule, studies also point to a renewal of Jewish life, albeit based primarily on a process of identity construction following years of oppression. Empirical evidence exists to indicate that a considerable proportion of Jews in eastern Europe is becoming more involved in Jewish life or would like to do so given the right opportunity.²² Indeed, in these contexts, it is possible to witness a burgeoning interest in Jewish history, culture and tradition that one commentator argues is akin to the Jewish population having “come out of the closet.”²³ This phenomenon may have declined in more recent years as Jewish life has normalised over time, but it continues nevertheless, both within and beyond the Jewish community.²⁴

Furthermore, in the more scholarly literature, it is possible to find mainstream voices arguing that Europe is indeed becoming fertile ground for the development and enhancement of Jewish life. For example, in one sharp and insightful article, Barbara Lerner Spectre – the Jewish educator and founder of Paideia, the European Institute for Jewish Studies in Sweden – argues that, in

“In contrast to the past, contemporary Europe is transforming previously homogeneous nation states into heterogeneous multicultural societies where diversity is celebrated and it is possible to harbour multiple identities.”

20 Diana Pinto, “A Third Pillar? Toward a European Jewish Identity.”

21 See, for examples: Cohen, E. H. (2011). *The Jews of France Today: Identity and Values*. Brill; Bensimon, D. (2003). “Jews in Today’s Germany.” *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 45, Nos 1 and 2, pp.20-33; Axelrod, T. (2013, forthcoming) *Jewish life in Germany: Achievement, challenges and priorities since the collapse of communism*. London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research; Kovács, A. and Forrás-Biró, A. (2011). *Jewish Life in Hungary: Achievements, challenges and priorities since the collapse of communism*. London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research; Dencik, L. (2003). “Jewishness in Postmodernity: The Case of Sweden”, in: Gitelman, Z., Kosmin, B. and Kovács, A. (eds.). *New Jewish Identities: Contemporary Europe and Beyond*. New York: CEU Press; Buckser, A. (2000). “Jewish identity and the meaning of community in contemporary Denmark”, in: *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23, pp.712-734; Privalko, D. (2013, forthcoming) *Jewish life in Ukraine: Achievement, challenges and priorities since the collapse of communism*. London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research; Rosenson C. (2003). “Polish Jewish Institutions in Transition: Personalities over Process”, in: Gitelman, Z., Kosmin, B. and Kovács, A. (eds.). *New Jewish Identities: Contemporary Europe and Beyond*. New York: CEU Press; DellaPergola, S. (1997). “La popolazione ebraica in Italia nel contest ebraico globale” in: Corrado Vivanti (ed.) *Storia d’Italia, Ebrei in Italia* (Torino), Vol. 2., pp.895-936; Kovács, A. (2011). *Identity à la Carte. Research on Jewish identities, participation and affiliation in five Eastern European countries*. Paris: JDC International Centre for Community Development.

contrast to the past, contemporary Europe is transforming previously homogeneous nation states into heterogeneous multicultural societies where diversity is celebrated and it is possible to harbour multiple identities. She argues: “In the twentieth century it was the characteristic of Jews as bearers of hyphenated identities that stigmatised them with the suspicion of disloyalty. Ironically, it is presently just this characteristic, the ability to live with divided loyalty, that puts the Jew in a unique position now assuming the role of paradigm for European societies, rather than the

22 See: Kovács, A. (2011). *Identity à la Carte..*

23 See: Mars, L. (2000). “Cultural Aid and Jewish Identity in Post-Communist Hungary.” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 15:1 pp.85-96.

24 The phenomenon of non-Jewish interest and engagement in Jewish culture and history is also an important part of contemporary Europe, particularly in places where Jewish communities were decimated in the Holocaust. In many respects, this curiosity is part of a more general desire to understand and reclaim the history of the country, the place of the Jewish story within that, and how all of that should be located within contemporary national identity. Part of any serious assessment of the position of Jews in contemporary Europe has to include an examination of this factor.

pariah.”²⁵ She draws on no less a scholar than Zygmunt Bauman, one of the world’s leading sociologists, to make her case. He writes about Europe: “Unlike in the modern era with its ambitions of homogeneity, differences are no longer seen as temporary nuisances bound to get rid of tomorrow; variety and plurality of forms of life are here to stay ...”²⁶ Whilst the most ardent advocates of the impending antisemitic catastrophe hypothesis would undoubtedly challenge this view of Europe, no doubt pointing to the rising tensions all this diversity causes, it

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should not be idly dismissed. In some parts of Europe at least, Jews are commonly held up by mainstream political leaders as the example *par excellence* of a minority group that has managed to maintain its particularity whilst contributing fully to wider society.

Arguably the most interesting component of this argument is that it challenges a foundational tenet of Zionism – that Jewish life is untenable in Europe. Zionism took the position that Jews had no place in the homogeneous nation states of Europe. After decades spent trying to integrate into various European host societies during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was clear to the classical Zionists of all ideological stripes that this was not only implausible, but existentially dangerous. Part of that danger concerned antisemitism: Moshe Leib Lilienblum maintained in 1883 that “our situation is today more precarious than ever before”;²⁷ Theodor Herzl argued in 1896 that “everything tends to one and the same conclusion, which is expressed in the classic Berlin cry: *Juden raus*”;²⁸ and Ze’ev Jabotinsky borrowed the language of a *New York Times* article to describe the situation of world Jewry in 1937, especially in eastern Europe, as “a disaster of historic magnitude.”²⁹ But the other part of the danger was that life in *galut* – or exile – damaged or scarred the character and dignity of the Jewish people. For example, Ahad Ha’am wrote that “we have no longer any defence against the ocean of foreign culture, which threatens to obliterate our

25 See: Barbara Lerner Spectre (2011). “Education of Adult Leaders in a Pan-European Perspective”, in: Miller, H., Grant, L. D., and Pomson, A. (Eds.) (2011). *International Handbook of Jewish Education*. Springer.

26 Bauman, Z. “Allosemitism: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern” in: Cheyette, B. and Marcus, L. (eds.) *Modernity, Culture and ‘the Jew’*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.

27 Moshe Leib Lilienblum (1883) “The Future of our People”, in: Hertzberg, A (1986), *The Zionist Idea*, p.175.

28 Theodor Herzl (1896), *Der Judenstaat*, in Hertzberg, p.216.

29 Vladimir Jabotinsky (1937), “Evidence submitted to the Palestine Royal Commission”, in Hertzberg, p.559

national characteristics and traditions, and thus gradually to put an end to our existence as a people”;³⁰ Jacob Klatzkin argued around the time of the First World War that the *galut* can only “sustain the existence of a people disfigured in both body and soul”;³¹ and Rav Kook, writing at a similar time, maintained that “Jewish original creativity ... is impossible except in *Eretz Yisrael*”, adding that outside of it, “revelations of the Holy ... are mixed with dross and much impurity.”³² Whilst most of these texts are a century old and Zionism has certainly moved on from its classical roots, it is possible that these foundational beliefs continue to inform – consciously or subconsciously – the more apocalyptic projections about European Jewish life described above. Again, that is not to suggest that these projections are necessarily wrong, but rather to point to evidence of an alternative hypothesis that ought to be fully explored in order to ascertain its veracity.

Nonetheless, whilst it is not difficult to find good examples of a Jewish cultural revival in Europe, the reality is that the literature on the topic, even when taken as a whole, is rather thin. The Jumpstart report makes the claim that “More than 200 organisations have been founded in the past decade alone, and they represent a €21 million annual economy engaging around 250,000 people”, and adds that the “European Jewish innovation ecosystem and its leaders ... are the vanguard of Jewish life in Europe, and will be contributing to the global revitalization of Jewish culture that the twenty-first century promises, both in Europe and around the world.” This is bold language that finds occasional support among the more passionate advocates of European Jewish life, but it has yet to be substantiated by anything else empirical, and thus must remain consigned to the realm of hypothesis for the time being. Moreover, half of the start-ups identified by the

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report were located in “Former Russia” and “Former Socialist Europe” – i.e. regions that only emerged from communism in the decade prior to the period under study. In these areas, the very concept of a start-up has to be understood differently from a start-up in Western Europe: in the East, start-ups may well be part of the process of communal infrastructure building following decades of oppression; in the West, start-ups are more likely to be a reaction against a communal infrastructure long experienced as spiritually somnolent, culturally dull or

30 Ahad Ha’Am (1909) “The Negation of the Diaspora”, in Hertzberg, p.270.

31 Jacob Klatzkin (1914-1921), “Boundaries” in Hertzberg, p.322.

32 Rav Abraham Isaac Kook (1910-1930), “The Land of Israel”, in Hertzberg, p.420.

politically abject. In addition, the proportion of initiatives found in the study that focuses on university students and young adults in their twenties and thirties is noticeably high, which, whilst possibly suggestive of a renaissance, may also simply be a reflection of a phenomenon psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett has called “emerging adulthood”, a newly-identified developmental phase unique to a generation that is delaying marriage and parenthood.³³ The Jewish community infrastructure in many parts of Europe tends to cater reasonably well for children, teenagers and young families, but it has struggled to adapt its services to cater for the now sizeable group of single or unmarried adults. Whilst the creation of a burgeoning number of new bespoke initiatives for this age group might constitute an indication of vitality, one could equally argue that it demonstrates signs of decay, insofar as it suggests that the existing and established architecture of the Jewish community is simply not engaging or nimble enough to cater adequately for them.

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Intriguingly, one might also hypothesise that the strongest proponents of the imminent renaissance position have been shaped by precisely the same narratives as those upholding the impending catastrophe position, albeit in a wholly different way. For the latter, the history of fleeing Europe in the face of persecution and genocide may cause them to be particularly attuned to signs of antisemitism in the present, and lead them to place heavy emphasis on the dangers they see. For the former, the encounter with European Jewish dynamism and creativity, which runs so counter to the historical picture of desolation and despair, may cause them to be disproportionately influenced by the examples of innovation they see, and lead them to place heavy emphasis on the vitality.

That said, there is no question that innovation is taking place in Jewish Europe. In a 2011 article, Clive Lawton, an outstanding British Jewish educator and a key force behind the success of Limmud, wrote that he encountered “a sense of buoyant optimism” upon leaving the ‘Summer of Change’ programme in Sweden that year.³⁴ The programme, organised by three of the major organisations engaged in the European Jewish revitalisation effort – Paideia, ROI and JHub – sought to bring together the key players involved in the regeneration of Jewish culture

in Europe, in order to learn, network, develop ideas and gain access to sources of funding. Lawton was impressed by “so many young enthusiasts from so many walks of Jewish life!” This was no illusion. In a European Jewish population of 1.4 million people, there are, of course,

“Much more evidence is needed before claims of a significant renaissance can be made with anything approaching empirical certainty.”

plenty of examples of social entrepreneurs and plenty of examples of creativity. These are some of the people Diana Pinto hoped would emerge – no longer “the museum keepers of world Jewry” or “dying species obsessed with declining numbers”, but rather those who “infuse Jewish life in the numbers they have and welcome inside the Jewish ranks those who want to join the Jewish people.” They exist – of that there is no question. But whether they are genuinely transforming European Jewish life for the long-term, whether they are “increasingly towering over the crossroads of the continent’s past, present and future, very much on centre stage” and building the foundations for Europe to become Pinto’s “third pillar” of world Jewry alongside Israel and America, is far more debateable.³⁵ Much more evidence is needed before claims of a significant renaissance can be made with anything approaching empirical certainty.

The demographic picture

Furthermore, if claims of a renaissance are ever to be fully substantiated, they will need to overcome in some way a third hypothesis about contemporary European Jewry which, implicitly at least, suggests that the proponents of the imminent renaissance view are rather overstating the case. When one looks at the demographic characteristics of European Jewish populations, the ‘innovation ecosystem’ appears to be an aberration. Indeed, in this instance, the data are quite clear: European Jewry is declining. The largest Jewish populations in the area – Russia and Ukraine – neither of which, strictly-speaking, is part of Europe, but are often seen as part of the European story nonetheless, declined from 807,900 in 1970 to 199,000 in 2010 in the case of Russia, and 777,100 in 1970 to 69,000 in 2010 in the case of Ukraine. Equally importantly, in those countries that are unquestionably part of contemporary Europe, most Jewish populations are ageing, with death rates consistently higher than birth rates, a demographic situation which inevitably leads to population decline. According to Sergio DellaPergola, probably the world’s leading expert in global Jewish demography, the UK Jewish population declined by 100,000 between 1970 and 2011, the French Jewish population by 50,000 over the same

33 See: Arnett, J.J. (2000). “Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens Through the Twenties.” *American Psychologist*, Vol.55, No. 5, pp.469-480.

34 Clive A. Lawton, “Renewing the Jewish Communities of Europe through European Eyes”, in: *eJewish Philanthropy*, August 19, 2011. See: ejewishphilanthropy.com.

35 Diano Pinto, “A Third Pillar? Toward a European Jewish Identity.”

period, and the Hungarian Jewish population by over 20,000, largely as a result of this demographic rule. The only exception is Germany, whose Jewish population grew dramatically in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of communism as thousands of Jews from the Former Soviet Union migrated to its towns and cities. However, DellaPergola's projections for the future – for Germany as well as these three other main European Jewish population centres – are bleak. DellaPergola categorises France, the UK and Hungary as “ageing” populations and Germany as a “terminal” population, both of which are technical terms denoting a lower proportion of young people than elderly people in the Jewish population as a whole.³⁶ Populations with these types of age compositions have higher death rates than birth rates, and thus are bound to decline naturally over time. If he is right – and interestingly there is new evidence from the UK that may require a slight rethink in that instance at least – the imminent renaissance narrative may simply prove to be wishful thinking. Indeed, in a conversation I had some years ago with a leading Zionist educator, he argued that a parallel should be drawn between contemporary Jewish life in Europe and a pot of boiling soup: just as the soup strengthens in flavour as it evaporates, so any renaissance of Jewish life in Europe is probably just a momentary flurry of richness before its

“Short of a highly dramatic development elsewhere in the Jewish world, it is more or less inevitable that the Jewish population of Europe will decrease over the coming decades.”

inevitable demise. For a short while, a declining number of engaged and committed Jews will inevitably be drawn to one another in search of something meaningful, and in the right circumstances, will create that for themselves and others. But the harsh realities of demographic decline cannot be overcome indefinitely through innovation and social entrepreneurship alone; sooner or later, the numbers will simply be insufficient for Jewish life to thrive. Perhaps this theory is correct? Perhaps wonderful developments are indeed taking place, but as demographic realities catch up, the key actors will fail to reproduce themselves in equal or larger numbers, or they will simply migrate in search of a larger community and more sustainable Jewish life elsewhere. Certainly, no demographer or social scientist is

36 A population with a “terminal” age composition pattern has percentages of those aged 65-plus that are double or more than the percentages of those age 15 or under, and a median age of 50 or higher. A population with an “ageing” age composition pattern shows similar but less distinct contrasts between those in the older and younger age bands, and a median age in the range of 35-49 years. Both types can continue to exist and be productive for many more years, but have ceased to regenerate themselves, so, are bound to decline naturally over time, unless bolstered by migration levels that are equal to, or greater than, the levels of natural decrease.

anticipating a significant growth of the Jewish population in any European country any time soon, and any objective reader of the data in the vast majority of European states would have to accept the population decline proposition. Short of a highly dramatic development elsewhere in the Jewish world, it is more or less inevitable that the Jewish population of Europe will decrease over the coming decades. DellaPergola is not wholly pessimistic insofar as he does not expect European Jewry's imminent demographic collapse, but he has argued that “the ultimate challenge ahead stands in the ability to preserve not a mere community of presence – driven by, and dependent upon favourable market forces – but a community of creativity – able to nurture and transmit its own demographic momentum and cultural identity.”³⁷

Nevertheless, some of the demographic data in this instance are quite strongly contested, not least because definitions vary about who is a Jew, most notably in former communist countries where, for historical reasons, Jewish identity is so extraordinarily complex. Jewish population estimates for Hungary, for example, range from 48,000 to 160,000 depending upon who is included and excluded. Whilst one would have to bring highly credible data to challenge DellaPergola's figures, they are challenged, or at least questioned from time to time, by some Jewish leaders convinced that they are simply too low. In many instances, they challenge the figures with little or no reference to reliable alternative data, and for their own reasons. In doing so, they also claim, on occasion, that Jewish demographers and social scientists are as liable to be influenced by the impending catastrophe or imminent renaissance narratives as anyone else; that some degree of Diaspora negation, or some desire to see European Jewry succeed, leads scholars to generate and read the data in ways which support their position.

This may be the case in a few instances, but ultimately, the most credible demographic data all tell a very similar story. And the various different numbers that exist can all be explained, with the higher estimates representing ‘enlarged’ counts (which include non-Jewish members of Jewish households) and the lower ones ‘core’ counts (i.e. self-identified Jews). Yet, the bottom line with all of this is that we simply do not know enough. Where Israel has outstanding academic institutions and government machineries to gather and analyse robust data, and where American Jewry has a growing number of talented and qualified social scientists engaged in data collection and analysis, as well as several major investors involved in

37 Presentation shared with the author by Professor DellaPergola. DellaPergola originally used this formulation – that European Jewry can be viewed in terms of two alternative models: a community of presence and a community of creativity or continuity – in his paper “Jews in the European Community: Sociodemographic Trends and Challenges”, *American Jewish Year Book 1993*.

backing this work financially, Europe lags far behind. In spite of all the talk about antisemitism, innovation and demographic change, no research institute in Europe has both the social scientific skills and financial resources necessary to continually monitor perceptions and experiences of antisemitism, or to assess levels of Jewish vibrancy and vitality, or to carefully and steadfastly monitor demographic trends, with the accuracy and impartiality required to provide a robust empirical basis upon which serious policy decisions can be made. While

“In the third most densely populated region of the Jewish world, home to 1.4 million Jews, many of whom live within nations that play key roles in global politics, we are left with insufficient data and, therefore, uncertainty.”

the Institute for Jewish Policy Research has many of the skill sets to do all of this and achieves an extraordinary amount with very limited support, without an enhanced capacity and sustainable investment, it will always face a struggle. So, as things currently stand, in the third most densely populated region of the Jewish world, home to 1.4 million Jews, many of whom live within nations that play key roles in global politics, we are left with insufficient data and, therefore, uncertainty.

Uncertainty is not good enough. Because in the vacuum of uncertainty, anecdotes are sovereign. And anecdotes, whilst often powerful and compelling, tend to illuminate very small parts of the picture, leaving most of it in the dark. The shocking murder of a Jewish teacher and three schoolchildren at a Jewish school in Toulouse in 2012 is profoundly disturbing, but it tells us nothing of an empirical nature about the realities of day-to-day life for Jews in contemporary France. The 7/7 terrorist attack in London in 2005 may shake many of us to the core, but it

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reveals nothing of an empirical nature about the extent to which people in Britain are threatened by Islamic extremism. And the fact that Jobbik, the right-wing extremist group with openly antisemitic views, is now the third largest political party in Hungary, may be deeply alarming, but again, gives us little of an empirical nature that allows us to make reliable assessments about what is actually going on in that country.

More work has to be done. In pure statistical terms, European Jewry may pale in significance next to the two giants of world Jewry: Israel and the United States. Yet

Jews from Europe inevitably bring different experiences and voices to the global Jewish conversation, and have the potential to add depth, nuance and perspective to it. The Jewish world is not binary, and ‘American Jewry’ does not equal ‘Diaspora Jewry’; indeed, part of the beauty and value of Diaspora is the diversity that exists within it. Jews in Europe constitute part of that diversity, and like bio-diversity in nature, we should, at least, ask the question of whether the European part of the global Jewish eco-system is worthy of our protection. Hillel Halkin argues that it is not, maintaining that “the Jewish people would suffer no great loss if all the Jews of Europe were to pack and leave tomorrow.”³⁸ The Jewish educator, Barbara Lerner Spectre, begs to differ, arguing that “what is currently taking place in Jewish education [in Europe] has importance not only for Jewish life in Europe, but also has far-reaching implications for education in the rest of the Jewish world.”³⁹ This is an important debate. If European Jewry is genuinely becoming an endangered species, should we not know that and respond accordingly? Equally, if a renaissance is occurring – or even if it has the potential to occur – should we not be carefully measuring and analysing it in order both to support its development and learn from its example?

“The long-term lack of investment in empirical research and in the cultivation of high quality researchers specialising in the social scientific study of contemporary Jewish life in Europe has taken its toll and urgently needs to be addressed.”

The answers to these questions remain contested and imprecise. While data do exist on Jews in Europe, the truth is they are rather sparse, they differ dramatically in quality and there is little coordination between research efforts. The long-term lack of investment in empirical research and in the cultivation of high quality researchers specialising in the social scientific study of contemporary Jewish life in Europe has taken its toll and urgently needs to be addressed. While there is considerable debate about European Jewry and a great deal of speculation and conjecture about its future, there is little empirical basis upon which to develop an educated view.

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights data

Somewhat ironically, this empirical base has been strengthened recently by the European Union, an organisation more commonly criticised in Jewish circles

38 Halkin, “Cause for Grief”, op.cit.

39 See: Barbara Spectre, “Education of Adult Jewish Leaders in a Pan-European Perspective”, in: Miller, H. et. al. (eds.) (2011). *International Handbook of Jewish Education*. New York: Springer.

for its lukewarm support for Israel and less than robust stance against terrorism. Following several years of engagement in the issue, in mid-2011 its Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) issued an open tender to conduct a pan-European study of Jewish perceptions and experiences of antisemitism. JPR, working in partnership with research agency Ipsos MORI, and with the support of its multi-national team of social scientists and specialists in contemporary antisemitism, won the tender.⁴⁰ The research, undertaken in nine European Member States and conducted in eleven languages, was completed in December 2012, and the findings were published by the FRA in November 2013.

It is a landmark study. It probably constitutes the largest and most extensive survey of Jews across Europe ever conducted. The data, gathered online over the course of four weeks in September and October 2012, include the views of just under 6,000 Jews living in nine European Union Member States – Belgium, France, Germany,

“It is a landmark study. It probably constitutes the largest and most extensive survey of Jews across Europe ever conducted.”

Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Romania, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Not only does it allow us to paint a portrait of how Jews living in different parts of Europe see and experience antisemitism, it also offers us several important insights about European Jewish life and existence. Furthermore, it enables us to compare and contrast the situation in different countries and cities, thereby giving us a basis upon which to start making some claims using empirical evidence.

So how credible are its findings, and what precisely does it tell us? First, the credibility of the data is an important issue. The FRA is dedicated to the generation of empirical research about different minority groups, and plays an important role. Its research findings are designed to support the development of policy across the continent, aimed at nothing less than ridding Europe and its Member States of all forms of racism

⁴⁰ In addition to the permanent members of the JPR staff, the JPR research team included several of its Associate Fellows, including Michael Whine MBE and Mark Gardner of the Community Security Trust, and several of its specialists in the social scientific study of contemporary European Jewry and/or antisemitism: Professor Eliezer Ben-Rafael (Tel Aviv University); Professor Erik Cohen (Bar Ilan University); Professor Sergio DellaPergola (Hebrew University of Jerusalem); Professor Lars Dencik (Roskilde University, Denmark); Professor David Feldman (Pears Institute for the Study of Antisemitism, Birkbeck University of London); Dr Olaf Glöckner (Moses Mendelssohn Zentrum, University of Potsdam); and Professor András Kovács (Central European University, Budapest). I am indebted to all of them for their advice and wise counsel.

and xenophobia. In preparing for its study of Jewish perceptions and experiences of antisemitism, it consulted widely with experts in the social scientific study of European Jewish populations, including the team at JPR, in order to determine the best way to survey Jews in Europe. The results of that process could be seen in the FRA’s tender documentation for the study which, intriguingly and revealingly, called for the employment of two distinct research methods: its preferred one known as Respondent-Driven Sampling (RDS), and a second option of an open web survey. I say “revealingly” because, at present, there is no obvious and cost-effective way to collectively research European Jews. RDS, a sophisticated version of snowballing, which is commonly used to research difficult-to-reach populations, had only ever been tried with Jews in Europe once previously, and never online. Yet, after much consideration, it was deemed worthy of trial, by virtue of the fact that all were in agreement that it was the best of all available options. Nonetheless, the inclusion of a back-up approach provided evidence of the experimental nature of the RDS option; there was considerable apprehension about whether or not it would work, and the FRA sensibly chose to hedge its bets. It was ultimately vindicated in its decision: RDS failed to produce sufficient data in any of the nine countries surveyed, so the alternative approach became critical to the success of the project. Indeed, the published results are based entirely on the data generated in the open web survey.

On paper, an open web survey is one of, if not the least robust means of generating representative data about a population. It has no clear sampling frame, and it is difficult to establish with certainty the extent to which such a survey is representative of the population from which the survey sample is drawn. Yet there is a growing body of evidence to indicate that it can produce credible findings when studying Jews if thoughtfully planned, carefully conducted, intelligently analysed and clearly reported. It requires research expertise; it relies on the existence of good quality baseline data from other sources; the results need to be reported and understood judiciously; but with all these elements in place, it can make a valuable contribution. The key issue is representativeness – quantitative social research will ideally generate results that are representative of the studied population as a whole, so that the percentages reported can be generalised from the relatively small group of respondents to the wider group they represent. To achieve this, social scientists require a clear sampling frame – a list of people to contact who are drawn at random from the group being researched. The challenge in the particular case of Jews is twofold. First, in most instances, no such list exists. Individual organisations may hold records of their particular members, and some community umbrella bodies have complete communal membership records, but none of these are

fully comprehensive of the Jewish population as a whole, because not all Jews belong or affiliate. Second, unlike other groups who might be surveyed – for example, women, or people aged sixty-five and over, or the residents of a particular geographical area, all of which form very clear categories (either one is in the group or one is not) – there are multiple definitions of who is a Jew. One of the clearest ways of illustrating this can be seen in the recently-published results of a Pew survey of Jews in America, which demonstrates that estimates for the size of the American Jewish population can range from 4.2 million to 11.9 million depending upon which definition of Jewish is being employed.⁴¹ Thus, in the particular case of Jews – and other similarly difficult to define groups – even data proved to be ‘representative’ can only be so if the researchers are clear about what they are representative of – e.g. people who are Jewish according to Jewish law, people who are affiliated to a Jewish communal organisation, people who self-identify as Jews, people who live in a household in which at least one person is Jewish, people with some Jewish ancestry in the previous two generations, etc.

In the FRA’s report on the survey, published in November 2013, there is no suggestion that the data are representative of the Jewish populations as a whole in the eight countries reported – however that is commonly defined – but there is evidence to suggest that the sample is representative of the most communally-engaged parts of it. However, since submitting our report to the FRA in December 2012, JPR’s academic team has used existing baseline data on the Jewish populations of several of the countries investigated to more carefully assess how representative the FRA survey data are. While the quality of these baseline data vary from country to country and more work still needs to be done, there is significant evidence now to suggest that the findings may indeed be broadly representative of the various self-identified Jewish populations surveyed. Certainly, in the cases of the UK, Italy and France, we can be reasonably confident that this is the case, and given the success of the approach in these three places, it is not inconceivable that the data from the other countries will be found to be similarly representative.⁴² Yet to be fully confident of this, more work needs to be done, not just in terms of analysing this particular dataset, but also in terms of running additional surveys, and more importantly, building the most robust research infrastructure possible to enable credible studies to be undertaken in the future.

41 Lugo, L. and Cooperman, A. et. al. (2013). “A Portrait of Jewish Americans. Findings from a Pew Research Center Survey of US Jews.” Washington DC: Pew Research Center. See also: pewforum.org, entry for October 1, 2013.

42 Over the course of 2014, JPR will be publishing a series of reports that examine the data for each country investigated. Each one of these will include a detailed assessment of how representative the data are in each instance.

Key insights from the FRA data

That stated, in what ways do the FRA data help to answer the core questions concerning contemporary European Jewry? Whilst the report contains multiple insights worthy of consideration, I would maintain that there are six key findings that ought to be highlighted in this context.

1. We should not think of European Jewry as a singular, uniform group

The first is that, when applied to issues relating to the continent’s Jewish population, the term “Europe” needs to be used with a considerable degree of caution. There are highly significant differences between the Jewish populations of the different cities, countries and regions of Europe, which render any attempt to characterise European Jewry as a singular monolithic mass inadequate, inaccurate and, ultimately, wrong. This can be seen in numerous other studies, and is crystal clear in this one. Putting aside the cultural and linguistic differences, not to mention the political and ideological histories of each country, the characteristics of the various Jewish populations that exist and the ways in which they perceive and experience antisemitism, are far from uniform. Some of these distinctions are obvious and well-known: the Jewish populations of former communist states tend to have very different Jewish identities, exhibit very different Jewish behaviours and make very different Jewish choices from the Jewish populations of western countries. British Jewry is overwhelmingly Ashkenazi, whereas French Jewry is overwhelmingly Sephardi. Almost all Jews

“We should be deeply sceptical about any commentator making generalisations about Jewish life in ‘Europe’.”

living in Hungary today were born in the country and grew up there; the majority of Jews in Germany were born elsewhere and grew up elsewhere. But antisemitism also exhibits itself differently, and to different extents, depending upon which particular part of Europe is being explored. Most strikingly, there are substantial differences between antisemitism in Western Europe, where anti-Jewish prejudice and violence are heavily influenced by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and in Central-Eastern Europe, where they are driven predominantly by nationalism. The situations in France and Hungary represent the epitome of these two types: particularly high levels of incidence and concern are recorded in both places, but in Hungary, antisemitism has become embedded in an ultra-nationalist agenda, whereas in France, it is mostly associated with Muslim extremism. Furthermore, whereas 80-90 per cent of Jews surveyed in France, Hungary and Belgium believe antisemitism to be at least a “fairly big” problem in those countries, fewer than half in the UK and Latvia take the same position, and whereas approximately half of those surveyed in France and Hungary characterise it as “a very

big problem” there, only 10-20 per cent do so in the UK, Latvia, Italy, Germany and Sweden. Numerous other distinctions can be drawn. In short, we should be deeply sceptical about any commentator making generalisations about Jewish life in “Europe.” It may be a meaningful geographical or political category, but it is not meaningful when attempting to characterise the nature and experience of the Jews who live there.

2. Most European Jews feel attached to the countries in which they live

Second, most European Jewish populations appear to feel a strong sense of belonging to the countries in which they live, and most seem to be able to comfortably manage the relationship between their Jewish and wider national identities. Even in the countries where levels of antisemitism are revealed by these and other data to be highest, Jews feel remarkably attached to the nations in which they live: over 70 per cent of respondents in Hungary feel a strong sense of belonging to Hungary, and over 80 per cent of respondents in France feel a strong sense of belonging to France. Close to three-quarters of respondents in France appear to comfortably integrate their French and Jewish identities, and the equivalent figure for Sweden, a country which has recently received considerable attention about antisemitism, stands at 70 per cent. The only real exceptions in these data are Germany (where the vast majority of the contemporary Jewish population emigrated quite recently from the Former Soviet Union and thus has had little time to develop strong attachments), and Latvia, where, for historical reasons, the Jewish population tends to feel far more attached to the Russian culture and

“Over 70 per cent of respondents in Hungary feel a strong sense of belonging to Hungary, and over 80 per cent of respondents in France.”

language than Latvian. Yet, even taking these countries into account, across the entire sample, two-thirds hold positive attitudes towards both Jewish and wider national culture and society, and a further 11 per cent, whilst more ambivalent about their Jewishness, feel positive towards their home country. These findings should help to inform our understanding of the position of Jews in Europe, although they require further analysis and verification. Some might argue that the pre-Second World War German Jewish community felt much the same, yet their faith in their country was proved to be wholly misplaced, with utterly devastating results. Others might draw parallels with contemporary American Jewry, which also exhibits very high levels of attachment to America, but few, if any, would argue that its position is anywhere near as vulnerable as that of inter-war German Jewry. Strong attachments to the nations in which Jews are born and grow up are not inevitably based on hopelessly naïve and foolish beliefs grounded in quicksand; sometimes Jewish

feelings of security and attachment are based on a solid and robust assessment of their circumstances. Nonetheless, these feelings ought to be carefully monitored, alongside antisemitic incidents, because variations over time are important indicators of security and insecurity, and can cast significant light on the realities of Jewish existence in each place.

3. European Jews feel more vulnerable than previously

Notwithstanding the second insight above, no one should be left in any doubt that Jews feel more vulnerable today than they have done for some time. Three-quarters of all respondents believe that antisemitism has increased over the course of the past five years, and two-thirds believe

“It is utterly unacceptable that any minority group should feel this way in any part of Europe today, and these data ought to be used to demand action on the part of European and national authorities to address it.”

that racism in general has become worse. Again, national variations can be discerned – the problem is clearly considered to be rising most acutely in France, Hungary and Belgium – but the data show that Jews perceive an increase to have occurred in all of the countries surveyed. Moreover, antisemitic verbal threats and harassment are disturbingly common – close to a quarter of all respondents reported that they had experienced an incident of this type in the twelve months prior to the survey. Again, there was significant regional variation in this regard, with the highest proportions showing in Hungary and Belgium. And many Jews feel vulnerable and anxious about antisemitism. Close to half of all respondents are worried about becoming a victim of a verbal attack or harassment, and approximately a third is worried about becoming a victim of a physical attack. Whilst Jewish life continues, there is clear evidence to indicate that some Jews stay away from Jewish sites or events out of concern for their safety, particularly in Hungary, Sweden, Belgium and France. This and other factors combine to create a situation in which close to a third of all Jews across the sample say they have considered emigrating because they do not feel safe in their country as a Jew. Whilst other data sources show that the number of people who have acted on that remains small,⁴³ these are just a few examples of the findings in the study that ought to strike anyone concerned with combating antisemitism in Europe, or racism more generally, or those who depict an overwhelmingly rosy picture of Jewish life there. It is utterly unacceptable that

43 Staetsky L., Sheps M. and Boyd J. (2013) *Immigration from the United Kingdom to Israel*. London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research.

any minority group should feel this way in any part of Europe today, and these data ought to be used to demand action on the part of European and national authorities to address it.

4. The primary arenas of European antisemitism are online and in the media

The fourth issue to highlight is that the survey demonstrates that antisemitism on the Internet is perceived by Jews to be particularly problematic. Three-quarters of all respondents regard online antisemitism to be a problem, and the same proportion believes that it is on the Internet where levels of antisemitism have increased most significantly over the past five years. Antisemitism in the media is seen in a similar light, albeit to a lesser extent, rendering these two arenas – online and the media – the primary concerns. In contrast, the percentages reporting experience of a physical attack or threatening behaviour in the five years prior to the survey are significantly lower – in the region of 3-10 per cent depending on the country investigated. These are important findings. Antisemitism online and in the media are more ambient than physically violent; they create a certain discomfort, unease or anxiety among those able to detect them in what they read and hear, rather than bruises or broken bones

“Perceptions of antisemitism are different from experiences of it; sometimes links between the two are real, but sometimes they are not, and it is critical that we see the difference.”

which can be more easily witnessed by others. Yet given that the roots of Nazi antisemitism were intellectual – or, more accurately, pseudo-intellectual – it should not be surprising that so many Jews are particularly attuned to this type of antisemitism. Furthermore, perhaps because it is often only seen by those who look for it, it is more easily dismissed, both by Jews and non-Jews, as somewhat illusory. However, as British journalist Jonathan Freedland wrote recently, “antisemitism doesn’t always come doing a Hitler salute.” It can seem “a subtle, elusive business”, particularly when communicated through euphemism, or “nods and winks, hinted at rather than spoken.”⁴⁴ Thus, in many respects, it seems that Jews are experiencing a shift in atmosphere in Europe, an ambience of antisemitism over and above a significant increase in violence that is more or less pronounced depending on where one looks. This atmosphere needs to be very carefully monitored and understood if it is to be addressed, not least because perceptions of antisemitism are different from experiences of it; sometimes links between the two are real, but sometimes they are not, and it is critical that we see the difference. We know that a rise in intellectual or cultural

antisemitism has been proved in the past to have potentially genocidal implications. We also know that the Internet is still a new medium that allows all forms of virtue and vice into our homes with greater frequency and speed than ever before. This might mean that the Internet simply reveals to us the levels of antisemitism that have existed in the shadows all along, and/or that it helps to promote and extend antisemitic attitudes in wider society that were previously limited to the fringes. Essentially, there is scope to interpret the contemporary situation in multiple ways, so understanding precisely what we are seeing, and developing new tools to allow us to assess its potency and extent in an empirical way, should be a major priority going forward.

5. Criticism of Israel is not always antisemitism, but it often can be

Fifth, these data allow us to determine, in the eyes of the Jews surveyed, what is and is not deemed to be antisemitic. Certain manifestations are clear: Holocaust denial is more or less universally regarded by Jews as antisemitic, as is any suggestion that Jews exploit Holocaust victimhood for their own purposes. If European policy makers wish to address the issue of contemporary antisemitism, they should be absolutely clear and robust in their condemnation of any such suggestion, and they should be held to account for any failure to do so. Similarly, any suggestions that Jews are collectively responsible for the current economic crisis, have too much power in the economy, politics or media, or that their interests differ in some way from those of the rest of the population, are also widely regarded by a clear majority as antisemitic, drawing, as they do, on old antisemitic canards. At the other end of the spectrum, it is clear that only a minority of Jews in each country regards criticism of Israel *per se* to be antisemitic. However, depending on the nature of that criticism, respondents

“It is clear that only a minority of Jews in each country regards criticism of Israel *per se* to be antisemitic. However, depending on the nature of that criticism, respondents indicate that it can become so.”

indicate that it can become so. For example, the notion that Israelis behave “like Nazis” towards the Palestinians tips the criticism into the realm of antisemitism for the vast majority, and support for a boycott of Israeli goods or products similarly crosses a line for a clear majority, albeit a smaller one. The first of these two claims returns us to the Friedrich Ebert Foundation data outlined earlier that one Jewish commentator found so disturbing – that 40 per cent of Europeans believe ‘Israel is conducting a war of extermination against the Palestinians’. Whilst, as I have argued, those data need to be examined and understood very carefully, they certainly should be flagged up. There is much debate about the crossover between antisemitism and anti-Israelism, and the FRA data give us the first glimpse of how Jews in Europe collectively

⁴⁴ Jonathan Freedland, “Antisemitism doesn’t always come doing a Hitler salute”, *The Guardian*, 4 October 2013.

perceive it. They suggest that, if one accepts the notion that a racist slur or attack is one deemed by the victim to be so, these types of criticism of Israel are intolerable. Clearly, for some advocates of the boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement (which includes Jews as well as non-Jews), this result is likely to be dismissed, but the data are very clear: while some Jews regard BDS as acceptable, a clear majority of respondents in all countries surveyed does not. Again, European and national policy makers should be in no doubt about this particular finding: criticism of Israel is by no means off-limits, but the way in which such criticism manifests itself needs to be very carefully tempered if it is not to contribute to the ambient antisemitism that a majority of respondents believe to be flourishing in Europe today. This is similarly the case with circumcision (*brit milah*) and the procedures used to kill animals for kosher meat (*shechita*), both of which have been condemned – and in some instances prohibited – in parts of Europe. While respondents were not asked whether they regard such bans as antisemitic, they were asked about the extent to which they would consider a ban of either practice to be problematic for them. Again, the results are clear: while levels of concern about a ban differ slightly due to the prevalence of the two practices among the Jewish population, a majority in both instances would regard any prohibition against either to be problematic. The implication should be clearly apparent: a ban in either instance would constitute a hammer blow to many Jews living in Europe, and run the risk either of large-scale flight from the country or countries concerned, or, more likely, in my opinion, of driving the practices underground.

6. The position of Jews in Europe is intrinsically linked to the position of other minorities

Sixth, in revealing who they regard to be the primary perpetrators of antisemitic incidents, the respondents have helped us to identify the nature of the problem further. As already stated, clear distinctions can be drawn between eastern and western Europe in this regard – in

“The integration question is very complex: as the populations become more mixed and heterogeneous, the character of national identity changes, rendering it both harder to determine what binds one citizen to another and increasing the likelihood of internecine conflict.”

the east, antisemitic incidents are likely to be linked to a right-wing ultra-nationalist agenda, and, to a lesser extent, a Christian extremist view. In the west, they are likely to be linked equally to a hard core leftist political agenda and Muslim extremist view. The western issue poses a very particular challenge (not least because that is where the majority of European Jews resides): whereas right-wing ultra-nationalism is now quite commonly

condemned by most politicians in Europe (witness, for example, the recent arrests of the leaders of ‘Golden Dawn’ in Greece), antagonism from the political left or from Muslims is considerably harder to deal with. The shadow of the Second World War and the Holocaust still hangs over Europe, and a fundamentally very welcome human rights agenda – of which the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights is very much a part – dominates political discourse as a result. Indeed, it is that agenda, in part, that has encouraged European Union Member States to enable their populations to become more open and diverse. But this, in turn, has raised difficult questions about the status of minority groups within society and how they should be integrated. And the integration question is very complex: as the populations become more mixed and heterogeneous, the character of national identity changes, rendering it both harder to determine what binds one citizen to

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another and increasing the likelihood of internecine conflict. And if the very concept of national identity is in a state of flux, what exactly is it that nation states are asking immigrants to integrate into? These questions are common to most, if not all EU Member States today, and the two narratives discussed in this paper – impending catastrophe or imminent renaissance – ought to be viewed in this context. On the one hand, the strong European emphasis on human rights results in widespread support for Palestinians, precisely because there is a common perception that their human rights are being denied. It further results in increased questioning of religious practices that are perceived to compromise children’s rights to ‘physical integrity’ or to damage animal rights. On the other hand, the very same emphasis also motivates politicians to build a Europe that welcomes difference and thrives on diversity, and thus minority groups – including Jews and Muslims – are arguably freer than ever before to express their particular identities as they wish. But both of these positions, when taken to an extreme, can be problematic for Jews. The former, in its attempt to protect the universal human rights of all, has the potential to run roughshod over the particular rights of the few; the latter, as it bends over backwards to tolerate and accept everyone, runs the risk of tolerating the intolerable and accepting the unacceptable.

And, of course, all of this ought to be seen in the context of the demographic challenge that is far from

unique to the Jewish populations of Europe. In general, the indigenous populations of Europe are ageing and declining due to low fertility rates, and the population balance between them and recent immigrants is slowly but surely shifting. Western European populations will contain a larger proportion of Muslims over time (as well as other religious groups such as Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists), but whether that means those nation states will become more anti-Israel or antisemitic is a moot point, and depends heavily on the extent to which Muslims integrate into Europe or Europe adapts itself to become more Islamic. Whatever happens, it is highly probable that the position of Jews in western Europe will be intrinsically linked to the position of Muslims, and thus the ways in which Muslim-Jewish relations are managed are likely to be critical. The European Union and national governments throughout the continent find themselves trying to formulate policy in the midst of this complexity at present, and Jewish leaders and commentators would do well to play as constructive a role in that process as possible.

Conclusions

In the final analysis, the FRA survey itself captures the position of Jews in Europe today rather well. The very fact that it happened, and was commissioned by a European Union agency, demonstrates the concern that exists within the institution that all minority rights should be protected. The very fact that it was so hard to conduct from a methodological point of view demonstrates that, empirically, we know far less than we should about European Jewish existence. The very fact that we found

widespread anxiety and concern about rising levels of antisemitism, particularly directed at the political left and Muslim extremists, demonstrates that both the European Union and Jewish leaders and commentators are right to be concerned. Yet the very fact that most Jews feel highly integrated as Jews into the countries in which they live and exhibit a strong sense of belonging to them, suggests that many feel rather comfortable living where they do, and

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are able to build meaningful and rich Jewish lives there if they wish. In essence, we have data that indicate life is becoming increasingly uncomfortable for Jews in Europe, and data that indicate that Jewish life remains quite secure. We should be clear that these insights come from just one dataset that, whilst valuable in multiple ways, is also imperfect in others. We need to learn from its findings – all of them, rather than simply those that support our pre-existing convictions – and utilise them as a basis from which to deepen our understanding, sharpen our analysis, and determine the most appropriate policy interventions for the future. Only with ongoing robust research and monitoring will we be positioned to continue the essential public debate about the future of Jewish life in Europe in a thoughtful and intelligent way. More data, gathered and analysed in ever more methodologically rigorous ways, can help us to accurately assess whether Jewish life in the various and diverse parts of the continent is closer to impending catastrophe or imminent renaissance, or, as I suspect, contains elements of both.

The Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) is a London-based independent research organization, consultancy and think-tank. It aims to advance the prospects of Jewish communities in Britain and across Europe by conducting research and developing policy in partnership with those best placed to positively influence Jewish life.

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