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THE EMERGING EUROPEAN JEWISH COMMUNITY STRUCTURE

Ernest Stock

A little known aspect of the postwar reconstruction of European Jewry has been the effort to establish a multi-country association to embrace the European Jewish communities. Its members are the central community organizations of the various countries on the continent; its main purpose is the facilitation of interaction, bi-lateral and multi-lateral, formal and informal, in the area of services.

The experience of the European Council of Jewish Community Services can serve as a vantage point from which to compare certain characteristics of the member communities, in the context of their relationship to the Council.

Limited regional arrangements among local communities, both within a given country and across national borders have not been frequent in Jewish history. In this century the rise of multi-country associations on a worldwide basis has become a characteristic feature of organized Jewish life. Among 25 such groups listed as part of an analysis of Jewish multi-country associations published some years ago*, all but one were worldwide in scope. The one exception was the European Council of Jewish Community Services. While multi-country in the sense of operating across national boundaries, its functions are limited to Europe.

Thus in our time a fourth, continental arena has been added to the three conventional arenas of Jewish community organization -- the local, the countrywide, and the worldwide. It should be noted, however, that Europe is no exception to the rule that the intensity of Jewish life diminishes the further the instrument is removed from the local community, the *kehillah*.

The concept underlying the European Council is an American one, based in rather vague fashion on the example of the Council of Jewish Federations. The European Council evolved from the Standing Conference of European Jewish Communities, founded by the American Joint Distribution Committee and directed out of JDC European Headquarters which, as part of its postwar reconstruction program for European communities, helped activate communal services in such countries as France, Belgium, Italy, Germany, and Spain.

JDC's policy has been to withdraw from the scene once a community is functioning and its structures operative. The conversion of the Standing Conference into an autonomous European Council fitted in with this policy. However, the member communities have not been particularly enthusiastic about assuming the burden of maintaining their

* Ernest Stock, "Jewish Multicountry Associations," American Jewish Year Book, 1974/75.

Council. As a result, the JDC's insistence on seeing their contribution increase as its own support diminishes poses a major dilemma.

Let us now look at some of the structural constraints that have stood in the way of a more accelerated growth.

1. Constitutionally, the members are countrywide bodies. Yet on that plane, the motivation for European-wide association and cooperation is more political than service-oriented. The common political interest is expressed through the European section of the World Jewish Congress or through *ad hoc* arrangements, such as meetings of leaders from the EEC countries to oppose the European initiative on the Middle East, or participation in the "Brussels Conference" on Soviet Jewry. It is probably true that these community relations or political functions, which deal with such problems as the rising influence of the PLO, the emigration of Russian Jewry, and anti-Semitism, furnish more interesting topics for discussion on the European plane than the service functions, such as Jewish education, care for the aged, vacation camps, and community centers, which are the concern of the European Council. And while, for political purposes, a larger interlocutory unit is patently more effective, the Council faces the problem of internationalizing, or Europeanizing, concerns that are perceived as primarily local in nature and to which solutions must be applied locally.

2. The heterogeneity of the membership, and therefore the range of divergent interests, impede the Council's effectiveness. There is a great disparity in the type and function of the countrywide organizations: in demographic structure; in linguistic-cultural background; historical, material, and institutional resources; in sources of financing; and, of course, in the size of the communities represented. The two largest member communities, in France and in Great Britain, contain between them 85% of the Jewish population of Western Europe, the remaining 15% are divided among the other 15 members (leaving aside for the moment the two East European members, Romania and Hungary). The medium-sized countrywide communities, Belgium, Italy, Germany, Holland, with between 30- and 50,000 Jews each are a group apart from those with under 10,000 (Denmark, Austria) and these in turn tower above the micro-communities (Portugal, Norway, Finland).

JEWISH POPULATION IN COUNTRIES REPRESENTED IN THE
EUROPEAN COUNCIL OF JEWISH COMMUNITY SERVICES

<u>Country</u>	<u>Estimated pop. (1979)</u>	<u>Country</u>	<u>Estimated pop. (1979)</u>
Austria	13,000	Italy	41,000
Belgium	41,000	*Luxembourg	1,000
*Denmark	7,500	Netherlands	30,000
Finland	1,000	*Norway	900
France	650,000	*Portugal	600
Germany		Romania	45,000
(both East & West)	38,000	Spain	12,000
Great Britain	410,000	Sweden	17,000
Greece	6,000	Switzerland	21,000
Hungary	80,000	Yugoslavia	5,500
		E U R O P E A N T O T A L	1,420,500
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* Single city communities in which Jewish population is concentrated in respective capitals.

As for the diversities in function: the members include functional agencies, such as the *Fonds Social Juif Unifié (FSJU)*, in France, as well as consistorial bodies; or amalgams of the two. The functional agencies themselves have varying types of concerns. The FSJU is a multi-function agency with responsibility for

social service, cultural and educational activities, and community centers. The Jewish Welfare Foundation in Holland is a single-function agency concerned with social services only. There are members with both representative and community relations functions, such as the Federation of Swiss Communities and the Union of Italian Communities. There are those that do their own fundraising while others derive their income from taxation within the community or through the state.

Functional Agency	provides direct services
Consistorial Body	countrywide or regional organization of synagogues
Representative Functions	represents the community before the governmental authorities of the host country
Community Relations Functions	activities to combat anti-Semitism and improve relations between Jews and non-Jews

Structurally, there are centralized and federated communities. As in political life generally, we also find compromise forms along the continuum. In France, the FSJU is highly centralized. (Its director once remarked, "We are subject to the centralized nature of the French body politic." It will be interesting to see what, if any, influence the decentralizing policies of the Mitterrand regime will have on Jewish structures.) In Germany, the *Zentralrat* and the *Zentralwohlfahrtsstelle* announce their structure by their very nomenclature.

At the other pole, there is Switzerland where the name of the countrywide organization, *Schweizerischer Israelitischer Gemeindebund*, or Federation of Swiss Jewish Communities, makes clear the federal nature of the structure. As in the larger Swiss polity, the federal plane is strictly circumscribed in its authority. It is charged with relations with the federal government and with outside organizations such as the World Jewish Congress and the European Council, and it has departments dealing with youth and social service activities where these are not handled by the member communities.

In between these two poles is the Union of Italian Communities, which, by virtue of Italian legislation recognizing the Jews as a religious group, has a legally recognized representative function. With the two large communities, Rome and Milan, largely autonomous, the *Unione* plays a main role in supplying cultural services to smaller communities.

In Spain, too, recently passed legislation recognizes a Federation of Spanish Communities as a legal body; but the Federation so far exists mainly on paper. Its consummation is being held up partly because of the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the second largest community, Barcelona, to join a body which it fears will be dominated by Madrid. The "dual monarchy" pattern prevails in Belgium as well, where Brussels and Antwerp are dominant and there is no federal structure, or for that matter, any countrywide structure except the strictly religious *Consistoire*. With the country as a whole sharply divided into ethnic-linguistic domains (Walloons and Flemings), the virtual absence of relations between the two large communities is reflective of that fissure.

As a generalization, it can be said that federal-type structures are weaker and centralized ones stronger. Functional agencies tend to be stronger; representative (community relations) agencies weaker. This is partly because functional agencies benefit from government financing for certain defined functions. (An exception is the Central Council for Jewish Social Service in England which is a loose federation.) Consistorial agencies on a countrywide plane (such as the *Consistoire Central* in France) are perhaps the weakest, especially where they are uni-functional (religious), as in France and Belgium, since they are associations of local *consistoires*.

We also have the phenomenon of one-city communities, where the local consistorial body is in effect also the countrywide one. This exclusivity should make for relative strength, but the reality tends to be different. The community is structured around the synagogue (like some medieval bishopric around its cathedral), yet a declining percentage of the members are synagogue-goers. The centrality of the synagogue -- which the majority does not attend -- causes tensions, at times weakening the whole structure to the breaking point. This is currently happening in one of the Council's northern member communities. There are other instances where the consistorial framework, or a mixed framework with a consistorial component, if it finds itself unable to accommodate "deviant" organized religious expression, is weakened by disaffiliation, or the threat of it.

Mixed consistorial-political bodies, such as the Union of Italian Jewish Communities and the Federation of Swiss Communities, are apt to be strong *vis-à-vis* the outside and weak internally. Their representative function enables them to play an exclusive role in relations with the government, the press and other public bodies, although the degree of their influence on their own constituent bodies is limited. The recent manifestations of anti-Semitism, with their attendant media coverage, pointed up the outer-directed function of the community relations bodies. At a panel discussion on the community and the press which took place in Paris in May 1981, a former president of the CRIF (*Conseil Représentatif des Institutions Juives de France*) recalled that during his incumbency it was almost impossible to get a news release published in the daily press. After the bomb explosion in front of the *rue Copernic* synagogue, he added, everything that CRIF puts out is published immediately: the Jews are news.

Although it is one of the announced aims of the European Council to strengthen organizational structures in its member communities, there is in effect very little leverage for an outside actor to overcome weaknesses on the countrywide plane through its intervention.

What are some of these sources of weakness?

1. Dominant local communities may not be interested in a strong countrywide structure. This is true especially in countries where a single community is dominant, such as Greece, Sweden, and Austria.
2. The existence of rival communities who fear that a countrywide structure might favor or strengthen one over the other, as in Belgium, Spain, and Italy.
3. There are several organizations functioning in the countrywide arena, but none can claim representative functions. The best example is Holland where there is the Federation of Ashkenazi Communities, the Sephardi community, the Liberals, and, in the welfare field, the Jewish Welfare Foundation. The community relations function goes by default and is performed *ad hoc* by the Liberal rabbi in the capital.
4. There is a true federation, with local communities unwilling to cede more than strictly circumscribed functions to the federal body, as in Switzerland.
5. Religious divisiveness, as has already been pointed out, is a very important cause of weakness. Some form of orthodoxy continues to be the dominant religious factor in European communities. Under the consistorial model, the religious establishment, so to speak, is orthodox. Consequently, there is a greater or lesser degree of intolerance of non-orthodox religious structures -- ranging from a kind of blackout, as in Holland, to benign sufferance -- as in France.

Quite apart from the weakness of the European Council's component bodies, there is also a potential for dissonance in the process of the interaction between the umbrella organization and its members.

1. The umbrella organization must not appear to rival the member body on its home territory. If the member organization is weak, or up against competition from within its

own community, or has leadership problems, it may perceive the multi-country group in a competitive role; unless, that is, it is able to manipulate it.

2. The member organization does not welcome the umbrella organization in any monitoring capacity. It has no desire to have an outside body become too familiar with its business, or rattle any skeletons in closets.

3. Since the leadership pool is limited, it does not like to see the multi-country body make demands on its active leadership. On the other hand, it may designate as its delegates to the multi-country group "has beens" who no longer have much influence or effectiveness.

4. There is reluctance to comply with demands on skilled professional manpower. The European process requires local participation and commitment. Ideally, it is one where communities assist one another. But when this requires absence of professionals from their local responsibilities, or time-consuming preoccupation with the affairs of the umbrella body, there may be local resistance.

So far we have looked at the constraints, of which there are many. What, then, are some of the factors on the plus side that make for readiness to take part in this cooperative effort?

It was pointed out earlier that the motivation for sharing the financial burden was weak, but this is an oversimplification. There is motivation to help other, weaker communities, especially in those countries which escaped the Holocaust, and more particularly in the United Kingdom. The idea of a European Jewish polity, however tenuous, has made some headway and has found adherents, at least in the abstract. This may have been spurred by the general belief in European unity - *wie es sich christelt*, etc. There is even talk of an eventual parliamentary function for the European Council.

The notion of playing a role on the European plane has its attraction for both voluntary leaders and professionals. There is a certain amount of appeal in getting to know other communities and their ways of doing things. And there is recognition, to an increasing extent, of the genuine benefits to be derived through exchange of experience and mutual consultation; through the training seminars which the Council arranges, etc. There is concrete benefit to be derived when the Council acts as intermediary in applications to the Pincus Fund, the Memorial Foundation, and other resources.

Through their umbrella body, communities have an opening for contact with the Jews of Eastern Europe. Two of the Soviet bloc communities (Romania and Hungary) are members; others send observers to meetings and professional seminars. By virtue of its non-political character, the Council has considerable leeway in developing such contacts.

The challenge is to put these positive factors to optimum use so that some of the constraints will be neutralized or deflected. But it is necessary to keep in mind the objective limitations of the structure and the fact that there is as yet among the Jews no discernible powerful integrationist dynamic such as is at work within the general European community, where its sources are economic and political.

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