JERUSALEM LETTER
Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

No. 356 8 Nisan 5757 / 15 April 1997

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF VIENNA: EXISTING AGAINST ALL THE ODDS

Sonia Misak

700 Survived the Holocaust / The Influx of Immigrants / Religious Affiliation / Jewish Culture / Coming to Terms with the Holocaust

Vienna, one of the two capital cities of former Galicia, boasts splendid Hapsburg architecture, a slightly *altmodisch* aspiration to "high culture," and an unparalleled enjoyment of a lively coffee-house scene. Here we focus on its present-day Jewish life, culture, and community which, in light of its history, exist against all the odds.

This account is primarily descriptive, detailing the plurality of religious denomination, the importance of Jewish immigration, and the role of politics. The issues include questions of Jewish identity, the problem of antisemitism, the ambivalent attitudes of Austrians towards Jews, and attitudes towards the Holocaust.

700 Survived the Holocaust

Before the war, Vienna was home to approximately 176,000 Jews, with a further 17,000 living elsewhere in the country (including Salzburg, Graz, Linz, and Baden). From the beginning of Nazi involvement in Austrian governmental matters, the Jewish community (under the leadership of Dr. Josef Löwenherz) sought to arrange the possibility of emigration for its members. Until the *Anschluß*, it was possible for Jews to cross the border into neighboring Czechoslovakia and Hungary, although they preferred to flee to Switzerland and then illegally cross the borders to Luxembourg, France, and Belgium. In the spring and summer of 1938 an estimated 4,000 Austrian Jews did this. This means of exodus was ended with the International Conference on Refugees at Evian (July 1938). After Kristallnacht (9 November 1938) the situation for Jews in Austria worsened and more sought to leave. However, the options of where to flee were limited. Several hundred were able to leave for the U.S.A., Palestine and Shanghai, but it was only England — under pressure — that took Jews by the thousands. By May 1939 around 100,000 Austrian Jews had emigrated. Those not so lucky to escape were to suffer bitterly under Nazi rule and, by April 1938, 150 Viennese Jews had committed suicide. The majority of the 70,000 Jews who remained in Austria were eventually taken east, and murdered in the death camp of Bełżec, or the Lodz Ghetto, or at mass execution sites near Minsk,

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor. 13 Tel-Hait., Jerusalem, Israel; Tel. 02-5619281, Fax. 02-5619112, Internet: elazar@vms.huji.ac.il. In U.S.A.: 1616 Walnut St., Suite 507, Philadelphia, PA 19103; Tel. (215) 204-1459, Fax. (215) 204-7784. ISSN: 0334-4096.

Riga, and Kovno.

Despite the myriad of books about the Holocaust now available, relatively little has been published on the fate of the Jews of Austria. More often than not they are included in the statistics of German Jewry, or mentioned only in passing in relation to the Mathausen concentration camp (near Linz). What is better documented, however, is Austrian involvement in the SS and public support for Nazi policy.

In the years following the war it was believed that as few as 219 Austrian Jews had survived the Holocaust. However, this figure was later amended to nearly 700. Few of these Jews chose to return to Austria to live, although many claim to this day a love-hate relationship with the city. Instead, the majority emigrated elsewhere in Europe, to America, and to Israel, where today their number includes many prominent academics, diplomats, film-makers, writers, and artists.

The Influx of Immigrants

From 1945 to 1953 some 170,000 Holocaust survivors from Central and Eastern Europe streamed into Vienna. Although many used the city as their first stop from the displaced persons (DP) camps, and later went on to other countries, some stayed on, reestablishing a Jewish community.

It was not until 1956 that the largest, and most influential, immigration occurred — that of Hungarian Jews, who today still form the backbone of the community. Looking at the ethnography of the Viennese Jewish community in the decades following the war, perhaps the single most important thing to remember is that this was a war-shocked refugee population. Fifty years later it is important to note the resultant experiential gap between generations and observe its influence on the community.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the next wave of immigrants joined the Jewish community, this time from Russia and the former Soviet republics (particularly Georgia, Bukharia and Tadjikistan). Previously Vienna had been used as a stopover between the Soviet Union and Israel. However, the late Bruno Kreisky, then Chancellor, and the leaders of the Israelitische Kultesgemeinde Wien (Vienna Jewish Community) decided that the Jews should have the option of remaining in the country and gaining Austrian citizenship. By the time this option was made available, many of the refugees had already reached Israel. Those willing to return were brought back to Austria, though not always without a financial incentive. (Budapest subsequently replaced Vienna as the point of stopover.)

The official 1994 figure for the Viennese Jewish population, i.e., the *core community*, is 7,600 persons. This may rise to as many as 10,000 by the end of 1995. Statisticians in the community estimate the *enlarged community* to be as great as 20-30,000. The total population of Austria is approximately 8,000,000.

Today the Russian and former-Soviet Sephardic communities make up about half of the Jewish population of Vienna, or some 4,000 persons. These immigrants had even less in common with their Austrian and Jewish hosts than previous groups. They did not speak Yiddish or German, they have different religious practices, traditions, rituals and even food, have endured different wars and hardships, and share neither Austrian and European history nor the history of the Holocaust. Their subsequent integration, or at least acculturation, into Austrian life is a key point in understanding the workings of the Austrian Jewish community.

Financially, they were taken care of by the American Joint Distribution Committee (Joint), the Vienna Jewish Community and the Austrian government, and today, for the most part, those of working age are employed and financially stable (if not secure).

Religiously, from the outset the Lubavitch/Chabad organization was instrumental in the acculturation process of the Soviet Jews, or at least took charge of their "spiritual welfare." Even today upon entering a Bukharan Jewish household, the presence of the late Rabbi Schneerson is noticeable. However, the religious members of the group pray neither in the Chabad Synagogue nor in the Stadttempel (City Synagogue), but have their own Sephardic synagogue, attached to which is one of several Sephardic and Russian social centers, where the immigrants meet. It will not be possible for some years to assess the level of development and acculturation in this community, and to compare it with the advanced process of "Austrianization" of the Hungarian-Jewish immigrants.

In addition to the immigration wave of former Soviet Jews, in the 1980s with the fall of the Shah of Iran, the late Rabbi Pressburger, with the help of the Joint, the Israeli government and the Viennese Jewish Community, brought over some 20 or 30 Jewish families, mainly from Tehran, in a secret operation. Today they have their own small synagogue and community center, which is now run by the late rabbi's son.

Statistically, the growth of the community stems primarily from an influx of new members. For example, in 1993, while there were only 26 births (and 148

deaths), there were 321 new registered members. A small portion of those newly registered have rejoined (for example, old people wanting to insure a plot in the cemetery). However, the majority are family members from the ex-Soviet community. Demographically, the community is surprisingly young (nearly 63 percent are under 50), clearly showing the characteristics of an immigrant populace. If these population patterns continue, it seems that the community's survival is assured in the future.

Religious Affiliation

Today in Vienna there are a total of eleven synagogues and prayer-houses. Even though the Stadttempel, designed by the Viennese architect Kornhäusel and the only synagogue in Vienna to survive Kristallnacht, is in the First District of the city, the other synagogues, kosher shops, and Jewish schools remain in the Second District, also called Leopoldstadt, Vienna's prewar center of Jewry.

As with any community made up largely of immigrants, the Jewish religious and cultural affiliations are numerous. All of the members of the various groups are also registered with the central Jewish community (and pay membership fees), although they may not identify with it religiously or culturally. As a result, despite the fact that each community has a certain degree of autonomy, ultimately the actions of the community are answerable to the board of the Stadttempel. For example, recently plans from the Chabad community to build a new synagogue and center were refused, as were their previous plans to be attached to the Sephardic/Russian center. On the other hand, the Satmar community was successful in its bid to build a school and yeshiva (the former stands on the site of the prewar Jewish hospital). Socially, however, the communities have almost no relationship with each other, except for perhaps a few overlapping members and individual friendships across the boundaries.

Briefly, the Jews attending the Stadttempel make up 45 percent of the Jewish population of Vienna. Even under the liberal leadership of the current Chief Rabbi of Austria, Dr. Paul Eisenberg, the community is considered by many to be elitist and strongly hierarchical. Now and in previous years, it has been troubled by internal political problems, for the most part caused by the opposition of two strong individual personalities — Simon Wiesenthal and Leon Zelman — as well as problems during the eras of President Waldheim and Chancellor Kreisky.

Simon Wiesenthal is the best known in international terms, although it is not always known that he is based in Vienna (he came to Linz from a DP camp, and then settled in the country). He has always been outspoken, not only on matters of Nazi-hunting, and for many years represented the center-right faction of the Jewish community. Leon Zelman, a Polish Holocaust survivor, who settled in the country after having survived Mathausen concentration camp, has made his life's work in reconciliation. His political allegiance is to the left of Wiesenthal's. In previous years he worked closely with the Austrian government, the World Jewish Congress, and the Joint Distribution Committee. Today, as Director of the Jewish Welcome Service in Vienna, he is responsible for the exchange of tourists with Israel, and has recently set up a project of an Austrian-funded school in Jerusalem. The ongoing debate over the Austrian Holocaust memorial, unveiled in November 1996 (see below), is the latest forum for their differing personal and public viewpoints.

The other dominant Orthodox community is the religious Mizrachi group, which also has a synagogue situated in the First District, in Judenplatz (Jewish Square).

Smaller communities include some 30 or 40 Hasidic families. These Hasidim come from different dynasties, the largest number being Satmarer Hasidim, but there are also Gerer, Klausenberger, and Belzer families. They share a synagogue, yeshiva, and school — more out of necessity due to lack of numbers than to religious inclination. Despite the outreach work of the Lubavitch in Vienna, the core community has also remained small and really only numbers the rabbis, their wives, and children. They run a kindergarten and a Jewish education center. Chabad is perhaps more influential in the community in Salzburg. This community includes a number of members from the ex-Soviet Union, and also a group of American students.

The last of the Viennese communities to be included here is a Reform community, Or Chadash, set up in 1990. The community is not officially recognized by the central Vienna Jewish Community and therefore receives no funding. However, as Reform Judaism is an internationally recognized branch of Judaism, though the group has no permanent rabbi, it may well be eligible for state funding. This, of course, puts the Stadttempel community in a quandary. Or Chadash is a refuge for those not able or willing to be part of the Stadttempel community. It caters mainly to Austrians who are interested in or have converted to Judaism, Jews with non-Jewish partners (in the past few years there has been a marked increase in intermarriage in

Austria), and the occasional American and English Jew living in Vienna. It is in its alternative nature that its sociological importance lies. It is a paradigm for the ambiguity of Jewish identity that still exists in Austrian society.

Jewish Culture

In recent years, in Austria in general and Vienna in particular, there has been an awakening of interest in Jewish culture. While this derives primarily from external sources (i.e., Austrian non-Jews), Jews do attend the cultural events which for the most part are organized by the Jewish community and now by the Jewish Museum. The interest in matters Jewish comes close to being a fashion. The events organized in Vienna include: a Jewish cultural week of art, music and literature (events are replete with falafel — so-called "Jewish food"); a Jewish film week where films of Jewish interest are shown; and a variety of smaller regular meetings, groups, and courses. There are also several Jewish museums around the country.

The Vienna Jewish Museum was founded and housed in the Jewish community buildings in the early 1980s. However, this was more a matter of convenience than policy, as its aim was not to be an extension of the Jewish community, although it takes pride in being "a museum of a living community." It opened at its present site, off one of Vienna's most attractive shopping streets, in 1993. Since then, the museum has held twenty major exhibitions, and in its first year had over 100,000 visitors. Fifty percent of the visitors were tourists (over half of whom were German and only 3 percent Israeli). Half of the visitors were Jewish. The museum is free for school and university groups and societies, in order to encourage young Austrian visitors. Those running the museum see its aim as not only to educate the gentile and Jewish public about Judaism, but also to propagate messages of a shared Austrian and Jewish history, human rights, tolerance, and multiculturalism. It seems the success of this post-modern formulation is matched by the museum's ever-increasing budget, its ambitious programming, and its appropriation of matters previously managed by the community.

In recent years there has been a fashion in Austria (and indeed in Germany and Poland) to open up Jewish museums in the disused synagogue buildings of small towns, for example, in Eisenstatdt (late 1970s) and Hohenhems (mid-1980s). Generally the museums are not terribly well organized and they often include reconstructions of the synagogue, representations of Jewish ritual, and often some sort of Holocaust memorial.

In recent years the Vienna community has reopened the Jewish School. It has several affiliate youth groups and holds a successful annual Jewish cultural week and Jewish film week in association with a Jewish adult education center. The center, set up to commemorate 50 years after *Kristallnacht*, has 1,500 registered members who attend its lectures, workshops, and cultural events. There are also numerous community publications cover-ing all political and religious bents. All of this indicates a thriving and surviving community.

Coming to Terms with the Holocaust

Politics plays an important role in Austrian Jewish community life and has been the source of innumerable complexities, contradictions, and cover-ups. Through the 1970s at the time of Austria's first Jewish Socialist Chancellor, Bruno Kreisky, to the 1980s and the era of Kurt Waldheim as President, the community was outspoken and active in public affairs. This is also true in the 1990s, a period in which Austria is beginning to come to terms with the Second World War and the Holocaust.

Gedenkdienst, commemorative civil service, has been instituted as an option for conscripts. Austrians have been working at the site of the death camps in Poland and concentration camps in the Czech Republic and Austria for the last four years (it is also possible to work at the Holocaust Museum in Washington or Yad Vashem in Jerusalem). Often the participants subsequently use their experiences in an educational forum.

There have been major exhibitions on antisemitism. One, "Die Macht Der Bilder" (The Power of Pictures), held in April 1995 in Vienna's city hall, had an estimated 60,000 visitors. Subjects such as the teaching of the Holocaust in school are now publicly debated. However, as the debate over the proposals for the city's first Holocaust memorial shows, the process of recognizing the past is not only slow, but one in which many compromises have to be made.

The memorial, a competition-winning design, was unveiled on the 58th anniversary of *Kristallnacht* (November 1996). It was designed by the British artist Rachel Whiteread. Wiesenthal was the original driving force behind the memorial, and it has the backing of Michael Haüpl, the mayor of Vienna and a member of the conservative People's Party. The city provided $1.1 million to build the structure, a giant closed concrete bookcase, with nameless books symbolizing anonymous

victims. It will stand in the Judenplatz (site of the Mizrachi synagogue), a nineteenth-century square in the center of the city. From the start, the design was perceived as problematic by the Jewish community. However, when the foundations were being laid and the ruins of a synagogue destroyed by fire in 1421 were discovered (along with bones of the victims), the controversy grew. Haüpl originally ordered speedy archeological excavations to ensure it being finished by the *Kristallnacht* anniversary; however, opposition to the entire project continued to mount. It may well be that the monument will prevent further archeological exploration and the site of the ruin will be lost.

A key question in this debate is that of "ownership." Who "owns" the monument — who should pay for it, for whom is it intended, and to what end? Critics in the Jewish community point out that since it has taken over fifty years for the Austrians to commemorate the Holocaust in an official manner, it is more important to conduct a thorough archeological exploration of a medieval synagogue, and wait a little longer. Haüpl's eagerness for a large commemorative ceremony, which will no doubt catch the eye of the world's media, has been fueled, say his critics, by a mix of political opportunism and guilt — indeed, not a flattering portrait of a society making amends.

The rise of the far-right in Austria, in the form of increasing respectability of the Freiheit Movement (formerly the Freiheitliche Partie Österriechs — FPÖ), headed by Jörg Haider, who gained approximately one-quarter of the vote in the December 1995 general election, also raises questions about the state of introspection of Austrian society. It is easy to explain Haider and his party away, in the context of the present electoral success of other European rightist political movements (for example, Lega Nord in Italy and the Front National in France), whose leaders also have adopted nationalist and anti-immigration platforms. However, if one sees Haider as a charismatic leader taking advantage of a general disenchantment with the political system, his political platform takes on another hue. His flirtations with former SS officers, comments about Hitler's economic polices or about the Romany experience during World War II, pander to the fears of a sector of Austrian society. That these beliefs go hand in hand with antisemitism or stereotypes about Jews may also be supposed. An opinion poll conducted by the American Jewish Committee (AJC) in 1995 went some way towards clarifying and quantifying these beliefs.

The survey suggested that, overall, attitudes towards Jews in Austria had improved and Austrians had developed a more positive orientation towards Holocaust remembrance. Yet, 19 percent of Austrians in 1995 (28 percent in 1991) still saw Jews as having "too much influence on Austrian society" and 29 percent of Austrians (37 percent in 1991) maintained that, "now, as in the past, Jews exert too much influence on world events." Twenty-eight percent also believed that "Jews are exploiting the Nazi Holocaust for their own purposes." A noticeably higher percentage of Freiheit Movement supporters than other Austrians had negative attitudes towards Jews and other ethnic minorities (Jews in fact came out marginally better than other minority groups). However, it must also be said that the difference between the views of Freiheit Movement supporters and those of the other political parties, including the Social Democrats, was not as great as expected. Indeed, although the level of prejudice among Freiheit Movement supporters was alarmingly high, it was more significantly reduced in comparison with previous years than that recorded for supporters of other major political parties.

Other than making Vienna a less pleasant place in which to live, the effect on the Jewish community of living in a society which holds such views is difficult to measure. Also hard to imagine is what life would be like for the Jews were Haider ever to gain power. There would be an immediate financial price to pay, as the community could not expect the support it now receives from the government, but further than that it is difficult to project. The analysis is made even more complex by Haider's appointment of the Jewish writer Peter Sichrovsky as the Freiheit Movement representative to the European Parliament. While the election has not yet been won, the appointment seems from Sichrovsky's side an exercise in political opportunism, and from Haider's viewpoint, a shrewd move to allay charges of antisemitism.

* * *

Sonia Misak has lived in Vienna and is currently researcher at the Institute for Jewish Policy Research in London, where she is volume editor of their annual publication, *The Antisemitism World Report*. This *Jerusalem Letter* is based on the author's chapter in the forthcoming book *European Jewry: Between America and Israel — Jewish Centers and Peripheries 50 Years after World War II*, edited by Ilan Troen and stemming from the 1995 Conference on European Jewry held at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies.

★ ★ ★ NEW PUBLICATIONS IN HEBREW ★ ★ ★ FROM THE JERUSALEM CENTER

Emigration from Israel

Asher Friedberg

Included here are most of the empirical studies, reports and surveys of Israeli emigrants conducted in Israel and abroad, as well as research and newspaper articles on the subject. Specific topics include demographic and economic aspects, Israeli students abroad, emigration among new immigrants to Israel, and government policy regarding emigration. (Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 1996; Hebrew). 99 pages; NIS 25

Direct Election of the Prime Minister

Baruch Susser

This article deals with the lessons to be learned from the change in the Basic Law: the Government which enabled direct election of the Israeli prime minister for the first time in the 1996 elections. It also discusses how this change has affected the style of Israeli political life. (Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 1997; Hebrew). 31 pages; NIS 15

Local Government in the Framework of a Democratic State

Haim Kalchheim

This book analyzes the interrelationships between the central government and local governments in Israel, drawing a detailed picture of local governments as having significant autonomous powers which extend beyond their assumed lines of authority as specified in law. (Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 1997; Hebrew). 201 pages; NIS 35

Survey of Academics and 12th Graders in the Druse Sector

This is the first comprehensive and reliable survey of its kind in Israel on all degree-holders in the Druse sector, according to village, profession, work status, income, and position. In addition, 12th grade students were also surveyed to learn of their plans and attitudes with respect to continuing in higher education. (Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 1997; Hebrew). 30 pages; NIS 25

Grey Education in Israel in the 1990s

This is a comprehensive study of the widespread phenomenon of supplementary classes in Israeli schools paid for directly by parents (and not the Ministry of Education). The report analyzes the reasons for this phenomenon, its administrative aspects, and the influence of parental involvement in the schools, from the perspective of principles, students, teachers, and parents. (Milken Center for the Study of Educational Systems, 1997; Hebrew). 184 pages; NIS 35