How Antisemitism, Obsessive Criticism of Israel, and Do-Gooders Complicate Jewish Life in Germany

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In the past twenty-five years, the picture of Jewish life in Germany has changed dramatically. Thanks to the strong Russian-Jewish influx during the 1990s, caused by the general exodus from the former Soviet Union, local Jewish communities have grown considerably. Supported by state, official, and also private initiatives, new synagogues were built and sanctified. Jewish kindergartens and schools opened their doors, and Jewish theaters, galleries, and restaurants appeared. For a while, media reports were quite euphoric, reporting on a Jewish “revival” or even “renaissance,” at least in bigger cities like Berlin, Frankfurt, and Munich.

Meanwhile, that euphoria has ebbed somewhat, but there are indications that Jewish life will play a significant role in German society in the long run. “Native” Germans, Polish and Russian Jews, Israelis and even American Jews have arrived in the country of Bach, Heine and Einstein, but also the country of Hitler, Himmler and Mengele. The often hotly discussed suitcases are now “unpacked,” emigrations, re-emigrations, and even decisions to make aliyah are nowadays the exception rather than the rule.

It makes it easier for Jews who have decided to live and settle in Germany, that many natives today identify themselves as “Berliners,” “Hamburgers,” or “Frankfurters”—or just as “Europeans”—rather than as proud Germans. Young Jews in particular have no or few reservations over making contact with non-Jews, participating in public life, showing their own Jewishness, and co-designing future German society. For Jews from abroad, Berlin in particular has become a very attractive place to spend a few eventful and inspiring years, to open a shop or a gallery, to attend university, or launch a business career. It is consistently rumored in the German media that about 15,000 Israelis are now living permanently in Germany’s capital, and the Israeli embassy has not issued a disclaimer.

The setting-up in Germany, and in some cases also the return to it, by prominent international Jewish organizations like the American Jewish Committee (AJC), United Jewish Appeal, American Joint Distribution Committee, and the
Pincus Fund, but also religious organizations like the Union of Progressive Jews (UPJ), Chabad Lubavitch, and the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, proves that the “Jewish world” is now assuming that there will be a promising Jewish future in Central Europe. Within German society, and even more so abroad, many people have the impression that Jewish life in Germany has become normalized over the past two decades.

All in all, the local Jewish communities now number approximately 100,000 members, a figure that is, however, just a fraction of Germany’s large and vibrant Jewish community before 1933, which numbered half a million. This has, in fact, restored self-confidence among Jews in Germany, and that is what they demonstrate, at least externally. In fact, the Jewish infrastructure in Germany has greatly improved. Aside from community institutions, there are also Jewish cultural centers and Jewish adult education centers. Scientific institutions devoted to topics of Jewish history, past and present, have been established. The public resonance is remarkable, especially among non-Jewish students and scholars. In many German cities, annual festivals of Jewish culture or Jewish film help people overcome their trepidation or stereotypes. In several towns, people from different cultures and religions try to get to know each other in “Associations for Christian-Jewish Cooperation,” an idea that was originally introduced by the Allies at the end of World War II.

Meanwhile, the next generation of Russian Jews in Germany has been growing up, and is often indistinguishable from their native-born peers. The children of these immigrants are also on their way to joining the German middle-class as engineers, doctors, lawyers, artists, scholars, and businesspeople. It should be noted that the new Jewish self-confidence in Germany probably also has much to do with the passing of generations that has occurred in recent years. There is no doubt that most young Jews, regardless of their German, Polish, or Russian roots, do not feel like “guests” or tolerated outsiders. On the contrary, they more or less identify with the new “Berlin Republic,” and feel that they are a part of the whole.

Is German society reaching a phase of “normalcy,” after all that happened in the last century? In the public arena there is much that seems to confirm this trend. Top-ranking politicians are confirming their interest—albeit limited—in immigration, multicultural exchange, tolerance, and encouraging and strengthening minorities. In today’s Germany it has become normal that the President of Germany, the Minister of the Interior or the head of a parliament faction attend ordination ceremonies for new rabbis or attend the opening of a newly built synagogue. For example, prominent public figures come to the lighting of the colossal Hanukkah menorah in Berlin near the Brandenburg Gate. Openly anti-Semitic statements and slogans are quickly condemned.