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Twenty years of Jewish immigration to Germany

Twenty years after the opening of the Berlin Wall, the Central Council of Jews in Germany is taking stock of the development of Jewish life in this country over the last two decades. Main points are provided below, followed by a detailed account of Jewish immigration from the USSR and its successor states to Germany which began with the collapse of the Soviet Bloc.

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Summary

1989, the year which heralded Germany's reunification, also marked a turning point for the Jewish community in Germany. Among Soviet Jews, the political changes discernible in the Soviet Union gave rise not only to joy but also to fears of growing anti-Semitism. Many Jews sought shelter in Germany. In 1991, the Federal Government and governments of individual federal states adopted official immigration rules for Jews from the USSR admitting them to Germany as so-called quota refugees. Over the last two decades a total of 220,000 people come to Germany within the framework of "Jewish immigration". About 50 percent of them are Jewish according to religious criteria, the rest being persons of Jewish descent and non-Jewish spouses.

Today, registered membership of Jewish communities in Germany stands at some 120,000 – a fourfold increase since 1989. New Jewish communities emerged in many cities, particularly in eastern Germany, numerous synagogues have been built. Two rabbinical colleges were established: the liberal Abraham Geiger College and the orthodox Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary. A number of rabbis trained in Germany have been ordained. Other rabbis have arrived from abroad to serve in Jewish communities. Overall, the number of community rabbis has tripled since 1989.

The wave of immigration was a psychological turning point as well. In the first decades after the Holocaust, Jewish life in Germany had been far from being taken for granted. Even Jews living in this country shared this view. The immigration from the former USSR brought about a fundamental change in Jewish self-perception. Unexpectedly, the Jewish communities, initially considered to be temporary, became an anchor for the newcomers. This gave many veteran residents a feeling of being vindicated in their choice to stay in Germany.

The Jewish communities were hugely successful, with material and moral support from the federal and the states governments, in integrating the newcomers. Many challenges, however, remain to be addressed. The integration of about 100,000 new members has posed a major challenge to the communities. The fact that the immigrants grew up in an atheistic state whose regime was hostile to the Jews, has alienated many of them from Judaism. Therefore, special efforts are required to promote Jewish knowledge and Jewish identity. It is also necessary to expand the existing religious infrastructure. For the communities to develop successfully, more rabbis, cantors, religion teachers, and Jewish schools are required.

The immigration rate has declined considerably in recent years, and not only due to the changed immigration rules. Rather, the urge of Jews in the former USSR to emigrate, has decreased in general. Nonetheless, integration remains a primary task.

(The full text follows on next page)



German reunification – New beginning for Jews

Twenty years ago, Soviet Jews began to immigrate to Germany / The number of community members has since quadrupled

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1. Immigration

The year 1989 was a fateful one for Germany. It saw the Soviet block begin to collapse and the inner-German border disappear. Less than a year after the opening of the Berlin Wall in November, the reunification of Germany was completed.

These dramatic political changes had a profound impact on Germany's Jewish community and laid a foundation for its future development. However, it was not the unification of Jewish communities of West and East Germany that brought about the major change. The Jewish population of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) had been small, and the majority of Eastern German Jews had not participated in Jewish life. In 1989, the five Jewish communities in East Germany had a total membership of no more than 400. After reunification, these communities joined the Central Council of Jews in Germany, which was morally and politically important but had no considerable impact on the community as a whole.

The real turning point was the immigration of Soviet Jews to Germany which began in 1989. Among Soviet Jews, the political changes discernible in the Soviet Union gave rise not only to joy but also to fears of growing anti-Semitism. It was mainly for this reason that they chose Germany – then in the process of reunification – as a new haven. In the time shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, their main destination was the then still existing GDR, but soon the immigration wave reached West Germany as well.

After negotiations with the Central Council of Jews in Germany, the German federal government and the governments of individual federal states adopted official immigration rules for Jews from the USSR, admitting them as so-called quota refugees. This humanitarian gesture was, among other things, an expression of Germany's willingness to live up to its historical responsibility.

2. Growth of the communities

The immigration rules applied to persons who were Jewish according to religious law, i.e. children born to a Jewish mother, as well to children of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother and to members of their families. The last two groups could not be admitted to the Jewish communities which function as religious bodies.

Over the last two decades a total of 220,000 people come to Germany within the framework of “Jewish immigration”. About half of them were Jewish in terms of the religious definition.

In consequence, the Jewish communities’ membership has reached levels unimaginable before the political change in Europe. Today, the Jewish communities in Germany have about 120,000 registered members, four times as many as in 1989. The largest Jewish community in Germany is that of Berlin with a membership of some 11,000. It is followed by the Jewish community of Munich with its 9,000 members and the communities in Düsseldorf and Frankfurt with more than 7,000 members each. In Munich the number of community members has doubled compared with 1989, and in Düsseldorf, the size of the community has almost quadrupled. New Jewish communities were founded in many cities, particularly in eastern Germany. In Rostock there no Jewish community had existed in the Communist era. Today the city’s Jewish community has more than 700 members, almost all of them immigrants from the former USSR. The Jewish Community of Leipzig has grown from 30 members in the late eighties to 1,200 today.

Presently, there are 107 Jewish communities in Germany which are organized in 23 regional associations. The umbrella organisation for the communities representing their interests at federal level is the Central Council of Jews in Germany.

New synagogues were built in many German cities. Moreover, two rabbinical colleges were established: the liberal Abraham Geiger College and the orthodox Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary. A number of rabbis trained in Germany have been ordained.

3. New self-perception

The immigration wave was a turning point not just in numbers. It also marked a change in the self-perception of Jews living in Germany. In the first decades after the Holocaust, Jewish life in Germany was not taken for granted. Jews who had decided to stay in the “land of the perpetrators” after the World War II were often ostracised as traitors by the international Jewish community. Most of them did not want to stay in Germany forever, or at least, did not want to admit that to themselves. “We are sitting on packed suitcases,” was a phrase frequently heard at that time, even after the suitcases had long been stored away in the attic. The founders of the post-war communities – German Jews who had lived in the country before the World War II as well as Eastern European Jews from DP camps on German soil – were later joined by new refugee groups: Jews from Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and even from Iran. Nevertheless, even in the eighties, living in Germany was for many Jews an emotional state of emergency.

The immigration from the former USSR led to a fundamental change in Jewish self-perception. All at once, the Jewish communities – initially considered to be temporary organisations – became an anchor for the newcomers. Jews who had hitherto regarded their life in Germany as a problem, saw large numbers of ex-Soviet Jews seeking shelter in this country. This made many veterans of the Jewish community feel vindicated in their difficult decision to stay in Germany. Thus, the immigration stamped the final seal of legitimacy on

Jewish life in Germany. In the past years, the international Jewish community's criticism of the Jewish immigration to Germany – or, as some would put it, “to Germany of all things” – has gradually died down. Today representatives of Germany's Jewish community enjoy considerable weight within Jewish organisations.

4. Challenges

Jewish immigrants are an asset to Germany. They work in universities and research departments, industrial enterprises and hospitals. Immigrant musicians, painters, and writers contribute to Germany's cultural life. Yet it is not only the achievements of individual immigrants which enrich German society. Rather, the growing Jewish community and its Jewish make a contribution, too. Jewish immigration also helped enhance Germany's reputation in the world's Jewish community and international politics in general.

The Jewish communities were hugely successful, with material and moral support from the federal and the states governments, in integrating the newcomers. The fourfold growth of community membership and the establishment of new Jewish communities have been successfully coped with in terms of organisation. The traditional German model of a unified Jewish community in which different strands of Judaism are represented – the Einheitsgemeinde - has stood the test of time. The number of immigrants occupying leading positions within the Jewish community is growing, but this process needs to continue.

Meanwhile, many challenges remain to be addressed. The integration of about 100,000 new members has posed a major challenge that could not be met with a community infrastructure designed for a membership of 30,000. In the past years, this infrastructure has been expanded, but problems still remain. Even though the number of community rabbis has increased from about 15 to 42, more are needed. Many communities have to make do without a rabbi. In order to at least partially mitigate the problem, the Central Council of Jews in Germany employs three visiting rabbis who try to provide communities that have no permanent rabbi with a minimum of religious guidance and instruction. Obviously, this is not an ideal situation. The fact that the immigrants grew up in an atheistic state whose regime was hostile to the Jews, has led in many cases to considerable alienation from Judaism. Therefore, special efforts are required in order to promote Jewish knowledge and Jewish identity.

A special problem is the integration into Jewish life of migrants of Jewish descent who are not considered Jews according to religious law. Many of them feel Jewish, either in the religious or the ethnic respect, although these two are, of course, not mutually exclusive. At the same time, the Jewish communities, being religious institutions, cannot admit them as members. In addition to being upsetting for those concerned, this situation is detrimental to the interests of the Jewish community as a whole. It is necessary to facilitate these people's access to their Jewish identity without urging them, in whatever way, to convert. Judaism is not a proselytizing religion. Conversions are possible, but they are a matter of personal decision.

Immigration has slowed down considerably in recent years. This is due not only to the changed immigration rules but also to the generally decreased propensity of Jew to emigrate from the former Soviet Union. Yet the chapter “immigration and integration” in Germany is far from closed. Two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, integration remains a primary task for the Central Council of Jews in Germany. Its success is of key importance for the future development of Germany's Jewish life.