



Austrian Jewry 70+ Years after the Shoah

Despite their almost complete annihilation during World War II, the Jewish communities in Austria – and especially the Vienna Jewish community, 98 percent of Austria’s Jewish population – have regained a religious, cultural and economic strength unimaginable in 1945. From being considered *Liquidationsgemeinden* (communities to be liquidated – by its members) without any future, whose members even tried to conceal their Jewishness from their gentile neighbors, they have become a thriving religious, cultural and economic entity that acts self-confidently and forthrightly in the political and cultural arenas, are firmly ensconced in the surrounding society, and are actively involved in the affairs of European and world Jewry (e.g. former IKG president Ariel Muzicant was for many years vice president of the European Jewish Congress; Kashrut Europe (KE) and the Union of Mohalim in Europe are based in Vienna, and the latter is also presided by Rabbi Shlomo Hofmeister from Vienna).

Until the late 1970s, for most Jews in Austria, except for the community leaders, the fact that

they were living in the country was an “accident of the war,” which had left them, against their will, in the “land of the perpetrators.” Although they stayed on for various personal reasons, it was always their intention to leave (in most cases for Israel), and they never consciously decided to settle there permanently. Instead, they saw themselves as “sitting on packed suitcases.” But during the following decade, they opened themselves up toward the surrounding gentile society and developed a “feeling of belonging to their environment” that enabled them to come out proudly as Jews and become an integral—though not assimilated—part of the local society, in which they not only do not feel threatened but believe that they have a future.

Moreover, although the Vienna Jewish community is relatively small (about 8,000 registered members), it has since the 1980s engaged in a massive drive to expand Jewish infrastructure – from eating to learning and praying – and a vital and visible Jewish life. The extent of infrastructure even exceeds significantly larger communities in

other countries. In contrast to many communities in Europe, the Vienna community has also reached a high degree of communal unity.

This overview will delineate the reconstruction of Jewish communal life in Austria after 1945, and shed light on how these developments came about and what factors shaped community reconstruction.

Communal Framework

Local survivors established Jewish communities in Austria immediately after World War II.

Since 1945 the Jews of Austria have a centralized community structure which accommodates members of all streams in Judaism

They have a centralized community structure at the local level, the *Einheitsgemeinde* (unity community), which accommodates members of all streams in Judaism from Orthodox to Reform under one roof. This structure was adopted in 1945 and is based on the *Einheitsgemeinde* model that had existed in

Austria before the *Shoah*. That model stipulated the existence of only one *Einheitsgemeinde* – a single official community¹ – in each locality. Its main characteristics are: (a) only halachic Jews can be members, and membership is upon application and can be canceled; (b) democratic elections for the community board; (c) sole responsibility for the external representation of the entire Jewish population; and (d) umbrella for different religious groups that act autonomously

in making internal political and religious decisions.

In 1960, the Austrian Jewish communities entered into a formal financial relationship with the Austrian state, attaining the same status as the two other major religious organizations at the time, the Catholic and the Protestant churches, who by law receive state funding annually.

The *Einheitsgemeinde* structure has remained unchanged until today. The biggest community by far is the *Israelitische Kultusgemeinde Wien* (Jewish community Vienna, IKG), in Vienna, whose judicial district includes five out of the nine Austrian provinces. All four – Wien, Salzburg, Linz, and “Tirol und Vorarlberg” – are local (provincial) organizational units of the *Israelitische Religionsgesellschaft* (Jewish religion association, IRG), the legal entity representing the Austrian Jews to the Republic of Austria. Due to the overwhelming size of the Viennese community in Austria’s Jewry, the IKG political leadership heads the IRG.

The *Einheitsgemeinde* structure was imposed on the Jewish communities in the 19th century in order to make state supervision easy. After World War II, it was in the communities’ best interest to maintain this political unity structure. All IKG leaders regarded it as mandatory for strengthening Jewish life in an already small Jewish community and for attaining political and social standing in Austria.

Demography

At the end of World War II, there were fewer than 4,000 Jews in Vienna (about 2 percent of the prewar Jewish population). Most surviving and returning *Alt-Wiener*² Jews identified with Orthodox Judaism at all levels of observance, while a minority was distant from such religious identification. They were joined in the early 1950s by some 3,000 Jewish displaced persons (DPs), who stayed in the country after the closure of the allied DP camps. By and large, these DPs, who came mainly from central and eastern European countries, were observant, and some even Haredi. In the late 1950s and in the 1960s a wave of immigration to Vienna of Jews from those countries,³ particularly Hungary, led to the diversification of the IKG by the presence of significant numbers of Jews committed to different streams within Orthodoxy ranging from the Modern Orthodox and Zionist Mizrachi to the Haredi and fervently anti-Zionist Satmar Hasidim. In the 1970s and 1980s, further diversification occurred with the immigration and settlement in Vienna of some 3,000 Jews from the Soviet Union – mainly from Bukhara and Georgia. The majority of these Jewish immigrants maintained a traditional way of life.⁴ Due to this immigration, new elements of Sephardi Jewish identity and tradition were introduced into Vienna's postwar Jewish community, which for three decades had remained almost exclusively Ashkenazi.

Thus, over the past few decades, the Jewish population in Vienna has become more observant (even if the majority is more traditional than strictly

observant) and diverse in terms of Orthodox practice and ideology, and more heterogeneous in terms of ethnic origin. Accordingly, there are nine Orthodox congregations in the IKG and another two religious groups outside the IKG framework (the Haredi Chabad-Lubavitch and the Progressive Or Chadasch⁵).

Today 7,787 Jews are registered members of the IKG⁶, most of whom are under the age of 40. Until the 1980s, it seemed the Vienna Jewish community was doomed to simply fade away, due to emigration, low birth rates, and high mortality rates due to demographic

ageing. Thanks to immigration from the Soviet Union, in 1990, for the first time since 1945, the IKG registered more births than deaths, and average age dropped to below 50. In 2016, half of IKG members were under the age of 40, and over 60 percent under 50.⁷ This demographic development stands in

contrast to the skewed age pyramids in most European Jewish communities – small and large (e.g. in Germany, 40.3 percent of the members are under the age of 50⁸). It is mainly due to the high birthrate among Haredi Jews (about 20-25 percent of the IKG members⁹), the relatively high birthrate among (traditional) Sephardi Jews compared to the non-Haredi Ashkenazim, and the increasing birthrate among the latter. Additionally,

Thanks to immigration from FSU and high Haredi birthrates, the Austrian Jewish community has a relatively young population

the crumbling of ethnic barriers within the Jewish community resulted in broader local marriage prospects. Increasingly accepted Ashkenazi-Sephardi “mixed marriages” helped reduce the emigration of younger Jews.

Leadership

Until the 1981 communal elections, IKG leadership significantly differed from the greater Jewish population: While from the mid-1950s, the majority of members were from Central and Eastern Europe, all IKG leaders were *Alt-Wiener*. While religion played a major role in the lives of most community members, its political leadership was predominantly secular in attitude and behavior. While the Jews were involved with Austrian society and politicians to a minimum, the *Bund Werktätiger Juden* (Union of Working Jews, BWJ), IKG’s ruling fraction between 1952 and 1981,¹⁰ was closely associated with the Socialist Party of Austria (SPÖ).

The 1981 IKG elections were the turning point in Vienna’s Jewish leadership. They marked the end of the era of undisputed loyalty of the community board and leadership to their ideological counterparts in the Austrian party spectrum, and the first time that a non-*Alt-Wiener* (Ivan Hacker) became IKG president and that members of the post-*Shoah* generation joined the IKG leadership (Ariel Muzicant was elected vice-president). It also brought a change into the IKG’s religious attitude, as more observant Jews were elected into its leadership. Subsequent elections continued reflecting the community’s demographic

developments. Thus, the 1985 elections marked the entry of Sephardi Jews into the leadership. The 1998 elections marked the first time that someone born after 1945 (Muzicant) became president. In the 2007 elections, the Sephardic-Bukhara party placed second, and a party founded by second-generation post-*Shoah* activists entered IKG politics. In the 2012 elections, Oskar Deutsch became the first IKG president born in post-*Shoah* Vienna, and, as an observant Jew, he is the first postwar president to always wear a kippa when representing the Jewish community. The Sephardic-Bukhara party came in second again, but this time with only one mandate less than the leading party (Atid). In all, the Sephardic lists significantly gained in strength, and, for the first time in IKG history, two Sephardic Jews, one Bukharan and one Georgian, were elected vice-presidents.

From “Sitting on Packed Suitcases” to “Feeling at Home”

Until the late 1970s, community leaders felt more at home in Austria than the Jewish population at large. The *Alt-Wiener* Jews in general, and the community leadership in particular, adopted a more conciliatory attitude toward Austria than did the DPs and refugees, and tended toward greater social integration, cultivated contacts with local politicians, and insisted that they were in Austria to stay.¹¹

The DPs and refugees, who fled postwar anti-Semitism and pogroms in their home countries, came to Austria because they perceived it to

be a safe haven; nevertheless they felt that they were “sitting on packed suitcases.” They saw their sojourn there as a “happenstance of war,” not as an intentional act. Indeed, they did not envision their future there but simply stayed in the meantime for a variety of personal reasons. The Austrian *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic miracle) enabled them to lead comfortable lives. But all Jewish life and celebrations took place behind closed doors. The Jews did not want to attract attention. They lived in two worlds: the outside world, which included the workplace, where they were obliged to maintain contact with people they either feared, despised, or did not trust; and the internal Jewish world, the world of family and friends. Yet nonetheless they stayed and went on with their daily lives. Indicative of their attitude toward Jewish life in Vienna was their general unwillingness to donate funds for the re-establishment of local Jewish community institutions, while contributing generously to the State of Israel. Similarly, most Jews sought to avoid occupations and lifestyles that entailed a long-term commitment to Austria.

The members of the postwar generation gradually felt more and more comfortable in their Viennese surroundings. Buoyed by Israel’s victory in the Six-Day War, they developed self-confidence as Jews significantly stronger than that of their parents. They felt more secure and more accepted by their environment and displayed their Jewishness more openly. Moreover, having grown up in Vienna and been exposed to the local society and culture, they had formed friendly relations with gentiles and, after the 1970s, began to look ahead toward a possible future there.

Since the 1980s, it has become clear that the postwar Jews have actually “unpacked their suitcases.” They increasingly felt that “we are here to stay” and actively participated in Vienna’s economic and social life. The postwar generation also adopted a much more outspoken public stance. They vent their discontent openly rather than behind closed doors, stand up for their rights in public, bring their issues and concerns out onto the streets, and seek media publicity. They do not shy away from criticizing Austrian politicians and filing official complaints and lawsuits against individuals and groups in order to safeguard the Austrian Jews’ safety, interests, and religious freedom. Moreover, although they had difficulties defining it, they also began to envisage and discuss the adoption of an Austrian identity, an issue that had earlier been taboo and unthinkable. The second and third postwar generations have evinced even stronger Austrian identities and displayed their Jewishness more openly than their previous generations – including wearing kippot in public.

From the onset, the Soviet immigrants maintained a more positive attitude toward Austria than the local Jews. They came to stay. Those who arrived as small children and the post-immigration generation studied German-language literature and culture in school, and mastery of the language enabled them to integrate successfully into Viennese society.

External Representation – Changing Relationship with the Gentile Surroundings

These developments also influenced IKG elections, and thus, the IKG's external representation. The new IKG leadership elected in 1981 publicly distanced itself from the SPÖ and the BWJ's non-confrontational and partisan positions, and each consecutive leadership showed greater outspokenness and readiness for public exposure. In the ensuing years, the IKG challenged extreme

right wing leader Jörg Haider in court and got the state to recognize the authorities' responsibilities to protect Jewish religious life.

Both Muzicant and Deutsch also take a self-confident stance toward world Jewry in general and Israel in particular, a stance that would have been unimaginable among their predecessors.

Thus, they stood up

to WJC president Ronald Lauder's attempts to interfere in the 2012 communal presidential elections, and fought against the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People in Jerusalem for the return of the Vienna Jewish community's collection (2011-2015).¹² Moreover, the Jewish community publicly opposes and criticizes any generalized and undifferentiated foreign criticism

directed at Austria, such as Israeli immigration absorption minister Yuli Tamir's call (2000) for the "Austrian Jews living under persecution" to make aliyah¹³.

The IKG leadership also fights anti-Semitism publicly and forthrightly. Today, the Jewish community is confronted with anti-Semitism – sometimes disguised as anti-Zionism – propagated by the extreme right, the radical left, Islamists, and also not-so-radical Muslims. The IKG is constantly monitoring anti-Semitic incidents, reporting them to the Austrian authorities, filing complaints with the Public Prosecution Service, and publishing and condemning them in the Austrian media. The IKG also set up its own security department, which cooperates closely with the national police.

Restitution

Developments within the IKG leadership are best illustrated by its battle for restitution. Until the late 1980s, IKG leaders conducted restitution negotiations quietly so as not to arouse anti-Semitism. Grosz was the first IKG president to publicly claim restitution. He publicly campaigned for the rights of the robbed victims. After an extensive campaign, the Austrian and provincial governments agreed to pay 18.1 million Euro, to return or compensate for confiscated real estate and art objects.

Changes in the Austrian Shoah Introspection

The 1980s were also a turning point in the Austrian political and social attitudes toward the Jewish community. After World War II, Austria defined itself as the “first victim” of Nazi Germany. For the Austrian government and the population, this self-definition served to clear them of any guilt or responsibility. The politicians and the population did not deal with Austria’s role in the *Shoah*. Thus, prejudice, the previous pattern of anti-Semitism, and contempt for Jews in the public and political spheres continued to prevail. Austria did not actively support the re-establishment of Jewish life in the country, and Austrian Jews who had fled the Nazi onslaught were explicitly discouraged from returning because the Austrian politicians wanted to protect those who had appropriated Jewish property.

Only in the mid-1980s, did the Austrian population begin to face up to its past. The Waldheim affair (1986) triggered a new public discourse on the role of Austrians in the *Shoah*, and in 1991 Franz Vranitzky was the first Chancellor to openly challenge the “first victim” myth, admitting publicly that many Austrians had been part of the Nazi murder machinery. Consequently, Austria’s policies became characterized by a willingness to deal with its responsibility in the *Shoah* and by substantial financial support for communal projects to enhance Jewish life and infrastructure. The federal government and municipal authorities sought to improve relations with Austrian Jews, world Jewry, and Israel.

Jewish Group Identity

The process of “feeling at home in Vienna” which has been underway since the late 1970s, and increasingly visible since the early 1980s led to changes in the components of Jewish identity. Each successive generation accorded diminishing weight to the memory of the *Shoah* (which had formed a virtual wall between the Jewish and the local population) and to their bonds with the State of Israel (which had served as a substitute for an Austrian identity) in their group identity, developing both a stronger relationship to Austria, and greater self-confidence as Jews in Vienna than the previous generation.

Israel was a utopia for the survivors. For the first postwar generation, it was the symbol for the Jewish survival, and many of those who remained behind in Europe continued to entertain dreams of making Aliyah. Jews generally stood behind Israel unconditionally, irrespective of their objections to Israeli government policies. While the Jewish state occupies an important place in the hearts of the second postwar generation, they openly criticize the Israeli government’s policies – though not the existence of the state. Israel is being largely taken for granted by this generation, and Austrian media, which generally portrays

The leadership of the Jewish community in Vienna recognized the specific needs of the immigrants from the FSU who make up about half of the community

Israel as the aggressor, influences the opinions and attitudes of both the gentiles and the Jews. It needs to be stressed that the State of Israel does not make significant efforts to change these opinions. The Israeli embassy makes only minimal efforts to give the Jewish community an understanding of the social, economic, and political developments in Israel. It does little *hasbara* among the community members. In the words of a former ambassador: “I am not accredited to the Jewish community, but the Austrian government.” While this is technically true, closer contact between the embassy and the community (not only its leadership) would surely contribute to a strengthening of the centrality of Israel in Jewish group identity, and also provide the Jews with information necessary to fight anti-Zionism and the ignorance concerning Israel in their surroundings.

Both the *Shoah* memory and the State of Israel had been major binding links between the various groups within the community during the first four decades after World War II. Their declining centrality left a vacuum in Jewish group identity, which was filled by religion. The postwar generation’s contribution to the process of forming Jewish identity was boosting the self-confidence and creating the institutions necessary for a flourishing Jewish life. The second postwar generation is now infusing that process with renewed involvement in Judaism as a religion, a new and broader conception of Jewish identity, and the reinforcement and public expression of Jewish self-confidence. Having grown up in a secure economic environment and in a Jewish community with the required infrastructure,

they began to examine their Jewish identity in depth, to promote the study of Judaism, and to encourage youth participation and commitment, as evidenced by the increased number of learning venues and the tendency toward greater personal religiosity. Also those who remain less observant are actively participating in activities organized by the community and the various Jewish organizations in Vienna. These organizations are almost exclusively Orthodox, but heterogeneous in their level of observance. Thus, for example, among the youth organizations there is the secular Zionist *Shomer Hatzair*, the religious Zionist *Bnei Akiva*, the Bukhara youth organization *Yad BeYad*, and the Jewish students’ organization.

Infrastructure and Jewish Life

Religious orientation within the community has strengthened with each successive generation, and since the 1981 communal elections this trend is also reflected in the communal leadership. This, together with the increased sense of having settled, led to a marked expansion of communal infrastructure and a more vital Jewish life. From the 1980s educational institutions for the general community have started to open.

Reflecting Vienna Jewry’s Orthodox orientation, cultural pluralism and increased interest in Judaism, Vienna’s Jewish infrastructure today includes 18 synagogues and prayer rooms, five Jewish elementary and high schools, Talmud-Torah schools, the Vienna Yeshiva, a Jewish business school (the Lauder Business School is the first and only Jewish university in continental Europe),

a Jewish Vocational Training Center, a Jewish teachers' training academy, and other educational institutions. There is also a center for Jewish arts and music, a community center, the Sephardi Center, two ritual baths, the Ezra psycho-social center, a retirement home, an extensive kosher infrastructure (11 restaurants, 10 supermarkets and bakeries, 4 butchers), five *kashrut* authorities, and an *eruv*.

Together with establishing Jewish infrastructure, the IKG also began to open up toward the general Austrian population. It put increasing weight on informing the Austrian population about Judaism, showing them Jewish life in Vienna, and stressing the role of Vienna's Jewish community in Austrian cultural life. It established the Jewish Institute for Adult Education (1989), which caters mainly to a non-Jewish audience.

Conclusion

The Vienna (and thus the Austrian) Jewish community is small. And while its majority is not strictly observant, it has developed a strong Orthodox religious group identity. Therefore, after the decline of the centrality of memory of the *Shoah* and the State of Israel as binding agents informing Jewish group identity, religion now fills the gap. Due to this, Vienna has today a united and flourishing community, which is constantly developing with regard to kosher infrastructure, educational institutions and cultural offerings. The community has become more secure in expressing its Jewish identity while, at the same time, has become better integrated into Austrian society.

Endnotes

1 The principle of the Jewish *Einheitsgemeinde* was enforced by the state, which recognized only one Jewish community in each city - by virtue of the Austrian *Gesetz vom 21. März 1890, betreffend die Regelung der äußeren Rechtsverhältnisse der israelitischen Religionsgesellschaft* (legislation regulating the relations between the state and the Israelite Religion Corporation of March 21, 1890, RGBl. Nr. 57/1890, Israelitengesetz).

2 "old-Viennese Jews": Jews who already before the war had been Viennese by culture, identity, and citizenship

3 Estimated numbers for this immigration waves are not available.

4 The Jews from Central Asia and the Caucasus lived in remote and less urbanized areas, where Soviet rule was weaker, and thus had been spared to a very high extent from the Soviet assimilatory policy and never had a communist orientation. Therefore, they managed to keep many of their ethnic and religious (Orthodox) traditions and did not try to assimilate into the atheistic mainstream. This stands in contrast to the Jews from the European Soviet Union, who had been strongly subjected to the Soviet assimilatory policy, and thus were generally stripped of knowledge of the Jewish religion and tradition (see: Alexander Friedmann, "Psycho-Socio-Cultural Rehabilitation in an Ethnic Subgroup: A 30-Year Follow-Up," *World Cultural Psychiatry Research Review* 2, (April-July 2007): 89; Larissa Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Identity, Integration, and Conflict* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2007), p.18.)

5 Or Chadasch has only some 150 members, not all of whom are halachically Jewish.

6 According to different estimates, there are between 9.000 and 20.000 Jews in Vienna.

7 IKG *Mitgliederservice, Mitglieder: Anzahl Nach Alter – Stand 28.07.2016* (private communication, 2016).

8 *Zentralwohlfahrtstelle, Mitgliederstatistik der jüdischen*

Gemeinden und Landesverbände in Deutschland für das Jahr 2015 (Frankfurt am Main: Zentralwohlfahrtsstelle der Juden in Deutschland, 2016).

9 Information received per e-mail (July 28, 2016) from the IKG Member Service, and confirmed by the IKG Rabbinate.

10 In the first eight years after World War II, the IKG leadership changed eight times, with six leaders who represented three ideologically diverse political lists (communist, Zionist, and socialist).

11 IKG president Ernst Feldsberg's statement that he "could not imagine any other country as his homeland

even after 1945" (Helga Embacher, *Neubeginn ohne Illusionen: Juden in Österreich nach 1945* (Vienna: Picus, 1995), p. 169) was typical of the *Alt-Wiener* Jews, but it was not shared by the general Jewish population.

12 For detailed information on both, see: Susanne Cohen-Weisz, *Jewish Life in Austria and Germany since 1945: Identity and Communal Reconstruction* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016), pp.273-276.

13 Anton Legerer, "Allgemeine Besorgnis auch unter den Juden: Österreichs Juden in der Doppelmühle," *haGalil onLine*, February 14, 2000. <http://www.hagalil.com/archiv/2000/02/austria-4.htm>, accessed July 19, 2016.