



## Austrian Jewry 70+ Years after the Shoah

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Despite their almost complete annihilation during World War II, the Jewish communities in Austria – and especially the Vienna Jewish community, which accounts for about 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, as this overview will show, thriving religious, cultural and economic entities that act 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 (both established by the Conference of European Rabbis) 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. Today, it has an expansive and constantly developing Jewish infrastructure – from eating to learning and praying – and a vital and visible Jewish life. The extent of infrastructure even exceeds significantly bigger 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 the end of World War II. 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 community<sup>1</sup> – 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, whose receipt of an annual state subsidy was set down by law. The Federal Law relating to the Financial Benefits due to the Jewish Religion Corporation (BGBl. Nr. 222/1960) stipulated that the Austrian state was to make to the Austrian Jewish communities a one-time payment of 30 million schillings (roughly 2,181,000 euros) and an annual payments of both a fixed lump sum, and the cost of the salaries of 23 employees, which was to be disbursed among all Jewish communities and religious institutions in Austria. After six amendments, the annual lump sum was set in 2009 to 308,000 euros a year. The communities are also entitled, along with the various Jewish organizations, to apply for financial aid from the Austrian government and their respective cities for specific projects, regardless of whether some of its sub-groups applied for state and municipal funding or of the amount they received. In addition, the communities collect membership fees.

The *Einheitsgemeinde* structure has remained unchanged until today. The by far biggest *Einheitsgemeinde* is the *Israelitische Kultusgemeinde Wien* (Jewish community Vienna, IKG), whose judicial district includes five out of the nine Austrian *Bundesländer* (provinces). All four Austrian *Kultusgemeinden* – 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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*<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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, 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 origins. 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 Chadasch*<sup>5</sup>).

Today 7,787 Jews are registered members of the IKG<sup>6</sup>, most of whom are under the age of 40. Until the 1980s, the Vienna Jewish community was doomed to simply fade away, because of emigration, low birth rates, and high mortality rates due to demographic ageing. Thanks to the 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 July 2016, 50.7 percent of IKG members were under the age of 40, and 62.7 percent under 50.<sup>7</sup> 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 50<sup>8</sup>). It is mainly due to the high birthrate among Haredi Jews (about 20-25 percent of the IKG members<sup>9</sup>), the relatively high birthrate among (traditional) Sephardi Jews compared to the non-Haredi Ashkenazim, and the increasing birthrate among the latter. Adding to this, the crumbling of the 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 Jewish population: While from the mid-1950s, the majority of community members were Jews from Central and Eastern Europe, all IKG leaders were *Alt-Wiener*. While religion played a major role in the lives of most members of the community, its political leadership was predominantly secular in attitude and behavior. While the Jews held involvement 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,<sup>10</sup> 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 IKG leadership. The 1998 elections marked the first time that someone born after 1945 (Muzicant) became president of the IKG. 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 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.<sup>11</sup>

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 reestablishment 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 surrounding. 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 (e.g. Muzicant filed several lawsuits against Jörg Haider, the leader

of the far-right Freedom Party). 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. Today's young adults are interested in both a stronger Jewish identity and a closer connection to local life. They want to stay and lead active lives as Jews and as Austrian citizens. They seek active involvement in Austria's economic, scientific, and cultural worlds, as well as in its public sector. However, they seldom seek electoral office, which may indicate that they do not really trust the Austrian parties.

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 Surrounding**

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.

Especially after the election of Paul Grosz as IKG president in 1987, the IKG became markedly more visible in the Austrian political and social arenas. Grosz did not shy from the public sphere, continuously took part in public debates, and, thus, reached an unprecedented extent of media coverage.

After Muzicant's election in 1998, the IKG's leadership style and public stance became even more self-confident and forthright. He openly sought to influence national elections, challenged Haider in court, and stood up for the IKG's right to greater autonomy in its internal affairs, for a redefinition of its relations with the state, and for getting the state's recognition of the authorities' responsibilities to protect Jewish religious life (which resulted in the amended *Israelitengesetz* described below).

Oskar Deutsch continues Muzicant's outspoken stance and highly visible external communal representation. Like Muzicant, he plays an active role in social and political discourses – especially, but not only, in those with a potential to influence Jewish life in Austria. The essential difference to his predecessor lies in Deutsch's efforts to open the community even more to the surrounding society. At the press conference following his appointment as interim IKG president, he declared, “we want to open the doors” to show the Austrian non-Jewish population that there is an active and thriving Jewish life in Vienna.

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).<sup>12</sup> 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 2000 call upon the "Austrian Jews living under persecution" to make *aliyah*<sup>13</sup>.

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. This eventually led to the Mauerbach Auction.<sup>14</sup>

Under Muzicant's leadership, the restitution issue was promoted more resolutely. In 1998, he asked the Austrian government to establish a commission of historians to investigate and report on the confiscation of Jewish property between 1938 and 1945 within the current boundaries of Austria, as well as on what Austria had done since 1945 with respect to restitution and compensation. The government acceded to the request. The commission began its work in October of the same year, and public institutions (museums and other collections) were, for the first time, instructed to conduct extensive provenance research. In December, Austrian Parliament adopted the *Kunstrückgabegesetz* (Art Restitution Law, BGBl. Nr. 181/1998), which stipulated the return of stolen art objects located in federal museums or collections to their former owners or their heirs. It was eventually revised in 2009 (BGBl. 117/2009) to include all "mobile cultural assets," whether or not they could be found in federal museums and collections or in other federal property.

Between 1999 and 2001, the IKG held negotiations with the Austrian government over compensation for the plundered assets, which it valued at 58 million euros, and launched separate direct negotiations with the Austrian provinces. By the end of 2001, the latter agreed to the payment of 18.2 million euros in compensation to the IKG. In 2004 the government and the IKG reached an agreement concerning the pre-1938 *Hakoahplatz* (Hakoah Sports Field), granting the latter a similar piece of land in the vicinity of the former location, and 8 million U.S. dollars for the construction of an appropriate sports facility. In 2005, the Austrian government announced a grant of 18.2 million euros in compensation to the IKG from unclaimed moneys in the Austrian Reconciliation Fund, and in 2009, it undertook to allocate 20 million euros for the restoration of the country's Jewish cemeteries, many of which were in

extremely poor condition. After long years of foot-dragging by the Austrian authorities, the battle for restitution is now nearing its end<sup>15</sup>.

As a result of state compensation payments, the IKG enjoyed financial stability for the first time since 1945, enabling it to close its deficit and undertake large-scale communal development.

### **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 reestablishment 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” has been underway since the late 1970s, and increasingly visible since the early 1980s. Thus the political and social changes in Austria, although they undoubtedly influenced Jewish communal reconstruction, were not the decisive factors in it.

More influential were inner Jewish developments – especially changes in Jewish group identity, which shaped not only the Jewish community itself but also its view of the gentile world and its interaction with it at the national level. Shifts in the centrality and roles of major elements in the Jewish group identity led to changes in communal strength and self-confidence, and, thus, its ability to cope with external challenges: 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.

The Shoah-based victim identity became a major aspect in the survivors’ Jewish group identity. For postwar-generation Jews, the Shoah memory continued to play a central role, although, since the 1980s, they no longer wanted to be confined to the victim/perpetrator dichotomy and sought to break down the wall that separated the

survivors from the surrounding gentiles. Among the Jews of the second postwar generation, the centrality of Shoah memory in their identity has declined even further, as they insist on forming a group identity that is based mainly on positive elements of Jewish life. For the Soviet Jews, the Shoah had never been a central identity element. Rather than Shoah memories, World War II memories arousing feelings of pride and triumph had been central elements in the formation of their group identity in the postwar decades – they perceived themselves as part of the nation that defeated the Nazis in the “Great Patriotic War” (the Soviet name for World War II).

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 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.

Moreover, a paradigm change has occurred: The connection of Vienna Jewry to Israel moved from that of dependence (Israel was the Jews’ source of pride, power, security, and self-confidence, and charity for Israel was seen as atonement for not living in Israel) to a sense of independence and even equality. As soon as the Jews felt “at home,” began to establish a viable communal life, and, most importantly, became self-confident as Jews in Vienna, financial support for Israel and its population transformed from a waiver for their bad conscience to the accomplishment of a mitzvah (good deed, or even religious obligation). In their eyes, Zionism is no longer connected exclusively to making Aliyah but to providing any support for the State of Israel, whether economic, moral, or political.

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.

Until the 1980s, the IKG set up only the minimum of social and religious institutions required to cater to basic physical and spiritual needs. It neither established Jewish schools nor planned to do so; it rather shipped all the equipment of the prewar community school to Israel as a gift for the Israeli Education Ministry. Closely connected to the SPÖ, and believing that the Jewish community would soon disappear, the IKG leadership sold or leased out for a pittance much of the community's real estate to finance immediate needs.

Upon entry into IKG politics in the late 1970s, the postwar generation was committed to reversing the Vienna community's self-perception as a *Liquidationsgemeinde*. They saw the necessity of strengthening the community infrastructure, in particular, the establishment of educational institutions. The opening of the Zwi Perez Chajes School, the community day school, in 1980 (private Haredi schools already existed since 1946) was perceived as a critical step in forming a Jewish identity and securing the future of Jewish life in Vienna.

Since then, reflecting Vienna Jewry's Orthodox orientation, cultural pluralism and increased interest in Judaism, several Haredi, Modern Orthodox, Ashkenazi, and Sephardi religious cultural and educational institutions as well as kosher facilities were established – the Progressive congregation remained very small, and there was no demand for further Progressive or other non-Orthodox institutions.

Today, Vienna Jewish infrastructure includes 18 synagogues and prayer rooms, five Jewish elementary and high schools (the community ZPC school, the Lauder-Chabad Campus, and three Haredi schools belonging to *Machsike Hadass* and *Adass Israel*), 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, 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*.

In 2008, the IKG established the "IKG Campus" with large and prominent buildings and state-of-the-art facilities housing the Hakoah sports and recreation center, a

nursing home, and the IKG school with space for some 600 students from kindergarten through high school. Open exclusively to Jewish students, Vienna's Jewish schools are attended by 80 to 90 percent of school-age Jewish children – the highest rate in Europe.

Together with establishing Jewish infrastructure, the IKG also began to open up toward the 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 non-Jewish students. The IKG organizes public events, such as the annual Jewish Culture Weeks – offering the general population a taste of Jewish culture and religion through music, films, lectures and, synagogue open houses – an annual Chanukkah market and a Chazanut concert. It recently established crash courses in Judaism for Viennese school children as part of the city's summer-holidays program. In 2011, the European Maccabi Games were held in Vienna, and for the first time the opening ceremony was held not in a stadium but in the open air in a central place: the City Hall Square.

### **Community Unity**

Religion was also the background for the developments in community unity. Communal disunity arose from great disparities in levels of observance or major divisions in religious orientation—whether between the various groups within the Jewry (the Haredi groups before the 1980s)<sup>16</sup> or between the leadership and a major group within the community (between the communal leadership and Haredi groups before 1981)<sup>17</sup>. Conversely, when community leaders and groups agreed on the place and role of religion in Jewish identity and shared a common religious ideology or orientation, community unity was attained and preserved. Until 1981, the IKG was shaken by major disputes between the observant part of the population and the secular community leadership; the break-up of the *Einheitsgemeinde* was avoided as a result of negotiations and concessions. Thereafter, the IKG became characterized by “unity in diversity” and an increased cooperation and community task sharing between the now more religious-oriented IKG leadership and the various observant groups within the IKG.

The integration of the Jews from the former Soviet Union, who since the late 1980s have constituted about half of Vienna's Jewry, turned into a success story after the IKG acknowledged their special religious, cultural, and social needs, and supported the establishment of various institutions run by the Bukharan and Georgian groups.

The 1977-1981 tensions between the Haredi group *Agudas Israel* and the IKG leadership over the establishment of religious institutions had even legal implications for the IKG. Following the petition of *Agudas Israel* to the Austrian Constitutional Court to abolish the compulsory *Einheitsgemeinde* principle, the latter invalidated it in 1981, and ruled that any group of Jews could constitute a Jewish community. Moreover, the court went on to define a “Jew” as “a person who declares himself to be a Jew according to his self-conception,”<sup>18</sup> which obviously is in no way compatible with the *halachic* definition.

The court's ruling had no immediate practical consequences, since the 1981 IKG elections laid the basis for a better cooperation with the Haredi groups. Yet the

ruling's overall effect remained, as was made clear with the eruption of conflicts in 2002 between the IKG and two groups not affiliated with it: *Or Chadasch* and *Chabad-Lubavitch*. In pressing their cases, both groups threatened the IKG that they would move to establish independent *Kultusgemeinden* (Jewish communities) in accordance with the High Court verdict should their demands not be met. The demands of *Chabad-Lubavitch* were of a financial nature. *Or Chadasch* requested that the IKG recognize it as religious congregation within the IKG framework – and thus enable it to receive IKG and state subsidies,<sup>19</sup> publish information in the IKG media, and, in keeping with the court's definition of a Jew, have its members, including those not *halachically* Jewish, granted IKG membership. All conflicts were resolved in negotiations. The IKG recognized *Or Chadasch* as a Jewish association – but not a religious congregation within the IKG. This cleared the way for *Or Chadasch* and the IKG to settle the disputes related to finance and publishing rights. However, the rulings concerning IKG membership and the Orthodox orientation of the IKG remained in their status quo ante.

To prevent further threats of secession and forestall possible state interference in internal Jewish matters, all the Austrian Jewish communities brought about changes in the legal status of the IRG. They adopted a new constitution, and in 2012 had the Austrian Parliament amend the *Israelitengesetz* of 1890<sup>20</sup> according to their own concept. The amended *Israelitengesetz*<sup>21</sup> gives the IRG, among other things, legal autonomy in decisions related to its membership, granting it the exclusive right to decide whether any given new Jewish community could be established (which until now was the decision of the Austrian Ministry of Education), and, through the definition within its constitution, to acknowledge who is recognized as a Jew – by the IRG and the Republic of Austria. According to the constitution, membership is open only to Jews according to “traditional Halacha.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, the amended constitution and law voided the Constitutional Court's understanding of “who is a Jew” and gave legislative recognition to the community's Orthodox orientation. In practice this means that only *halachik* Jews by birth and those converts who underwent Orthodox conversions that conform strictly to *halachic* requirements are eligible for membership.<sup>23</sup> The amended law also strengthened the position of the IRG vis-à-vis the state of Austria, legally securing the Jews' rights to perform religious practices, including circumcision and ritual slaughter.

In conclusion, in order to safeguard communal unity, the IRG/IKG leadership opted on the one hand for a legal framework that increased its power toward the Austrian state and potential rivaling Jewish groups, and on the other hand, granted greater autonomy on internal affairs to those groups united under the community's roof. Today, the Vienna Jewish community is characterized by a strong sense of solidarity and heightened awareness of the importance of internal cooperation and cohesion both to promote Jewish life and to present the Jewish community before the state authorities as a united and strong entity.

### **Conclusion**

The Vienna (and thus the Austrian) Jewish community is small. Although its majority is not strictly observant, it has a strong Orthodox religious group identity, so that after the decline of the centrality of Shoah memories and the State of Israel in Jewish group identity, religion could fill the gap. Due to this development, Vienna has today a united and flourishing community, which is constantly developing with regard to

kosher infrastructure, learning sites and cultural offerings. Also the IKG external representation has become more outspoken when Jewish interests are at stake, and its leaders foster good contacts with local politicians.

Metaphorically, before the 1970s, the majority of Vienna's Jews were sitting on packed suitcases and talked about leaving the country "tomorrow." By the late 1970s, the suitcases had been put aside, even so they were still packed. Vienna's Jews still envisaged emigrating "soon," or "after their children finished school," but had also started to countenance the possibility of staying. Today, they may have definitely unpacked their suitcases, yet the empty suitcases are still close by in case of an emergency. They have no doubts that if Austria again ceases to be a democratic country, they would immediately pack their suitcases and leave. They constantly monitor anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi occurrences, but for now, they feel comfortable in their local Jewish communities and as Jews among the surrounding society, are actively involved in the development of local Jewish and general life, and believe that they are there to stay.

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Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> 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, RGBI. Nr. 57/1890, *Israelitengesetz*).

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

<sup>3</sup> Estimated numbers for this immigration waves are not available.

<sup>4</sup> 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.)

<sup>5</sup> *Or Chadash* has only some 150 members, not all of whom are *halachically* Jewish.

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

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

<sup>8</sup> Zentralwohlfahrtsstelle, *Mitgliederstatistik der jüdischen Gemeinden und Landesverbände in Deutschland für das Jahr 2015* (Frankfurt am Main: Zentralwohlfahrtsstelle der Juden in Deutschland, 2016).

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

<sup>10</sup> 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).

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> In the fall of 1996, the Mauerbach Auction took place in Vienna. Christie's, on behalf of the Austrian Jewish communities, auctioned off 8,000 heirless works of art and other objects confiscated from the homes of Austrian Jews by the Nazis between 1938 and 1945. The Mauerbach Auction raised some 11.3 million euros for the benefit of the now-elderly Shoah victims and their families.

<sup>15</sup> For more details on the restitution battles of Grosz and Muzicant, see: Cohen-Weisz, pp.264-270.

<sup>16</sup> See: Cohen-Weisz, pp. 151-153

<sup>17</sup> See: Susanne Cohen-Weisz, "Internal Tensions Shadowing Jewish Communal Development in Austria and Germany," in Hochschule für Jüdische Studien Heidelberg (eds), *Diversity and Identity – Jewish Communities and the Future of Europe* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, forthcoming 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Verfassungsgerichtshof [Constitutional Court], G31/79, July 2, 1981

<sup>19</sup> *Or Chadash*'s establishment and development was made possible, to a great extent, due to financial support from the World Union for Progressive Judaism.

<sup>20</sup> See note no.1

<sup>21</sup> BGBl. I Nr. 48/2012: Bundesgesetz, mit dem das Gesetz betreffend die Regelung der äußeren Rechtsverhältnisse der israelitischen Religionsgesellschaft geändert wird, in: *Bundesgesetzblatt für die Republik Österreich*, (23.5.2012), pp.1-6.

<sup>22</sup> The components of which are specified as "entity of the laws of Judaism [...] based on the written and oral Torah (the latter written down in the Mishna and Talmud), later codified (Mishne Torah, Shulkhan Arukh) and applied according to the ongoing rabbinical interpretation" (Israelitische Religionsgesellschaft, *Verfassung der Israelitischen Religionsgesellschaft* (constitution of the Israelite Religion Corporation), December 4, 2012, 1, article 1, paragraph 1 (2).)

<sup>23</sup> See: Susanne Cohen-Weisz, "Joining the Jewish Fold: The Changing Conversion Policies in Austria and Germany since 1945," in Tudor Parfitt and Netanel Fisher, eds., *Becoming Jewish: New Jews and Emerging Jewish Communities in a Globalized World*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016).