

## Re-Emergence of a Diasporistic Jewish Identity in Europe

### **“Against All Odds, We Are Here To Stay”**

Throughout modern history, Jews have been the ultimate “other” in Europe, and they have constituted a symbolic reference baseline for all subsequent “others.”<sup>1</sup> This unique situation provides them with a set of duties, but also certain prerogatives. Neither migrants nor fully natives, the question of dual allegiance lingers unresolved, whatever the claim. As the standardized reference for European democracies’ governmental decisions regarding minorities, they receive frequent media exposure and privileged access to political leaders.

Today, in an era of mass migration of non-European newcomers and weakening collective identity, European Jews are often expected to behave as role model citizens, fully allegiant to the dominant ethos at the cost of their particularistic

self-interest. In this context, there is a difference between Western and Eastern Europe. In countries with large Muslim minorities, especially in West Europe and Scandinavia, Jews are routinely called on – for the sake of the public quiescence – to make sacrifices in order to avoid provoking resentful radicalized Muslim youth and fascism revivalists with conspicuous displays of their particularism. In Hungary, Poland and other post-communist states, in East Europe, the expectation of cultural conformity is implicit and most people with Jewish roots avoid disclosing their ancestry. Jews in North America, are open about their belonging to the Jewish people with their professional and friendship circles, but on the old continent, being a Jew is a freighted biographical element and Jews are careful with whom they share this information.

Existential discomfort, leads many Jews to adopt one of the well-known Jewish strategies: some,

with the means to do so, emigrate to friendlier environs; a significant population, not ready to pay the price of emigration, avoid the public sphere and settle into homogeneous enclaves. This is particularly true of those who follow traditional, stringent Jewish religious practices. But the vast majority, who are less committed and more secular, have no desire to positively affirm their otherness: They decrease their Jewish profile and adopt an assimilationist stance, which, based upon historical experience, leads in the end, to Jewish decline.

The last years have brought challenges, crises and a self-questioning atmosphere to Europe. The European Union and the various governments it comprises have been shaken by a wave of protests forcing them to examine and define their place within the continent, and within the world. The ramifications of these processes for the Jewish communities of Europe are numerous. We will describe them in the following paragraphs.

## Historical Background

Despite the fact that Jews have lived in Europe for 2,000 years, often settling there well before today's majority ethnic groups, the position of Jews in Europe has historically been precarious. The emergence of the nation-states in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries created a political context that demanded the full allegiance of Jews to the nations accepting them as citizens. Neither migrants nor fully native, their specificity placed them in an in-between situation and the only way to be considered fully part of the national community

was to present themselves as exceptionally loyal citizens, models for all future newcomers.<sup>2</sup>

Jews learned to prosper under these conditions. German Jews excelled in demonstrating full allegiance to the Kaiser and French Jews to the Republic. Similarly, Hungarian and British Jews were champions of patriotism. By the 1920s, despite the opposition of conservative elites, Jews in most European countries succeeded in making the most of the opportunities liberal nation-states offered, and many of them reached key positions in various fields.

European Jews achieved relative success despite the ambivalence and hostility of their non-Jewish counterparts. Despite their attempts, the issue of dual loyalty has never been resolved. Again and again, they were accused of playing a double game, of hiding their "true" affiliations (to capitalism, to communism, to international orders) while pretending to be good national citizens.

Following WW2, a rejection of the nationalistic discourse emerged and collective identities (either religious, ethnic, national) were regarded suspiciously. This new post-national worldview underpinned the construction of the European Union. Jews were, once again, a point of reference in this process: "Rising from the ashes," the European integration process, espousing a peaceful and hatred-free vision, took the fate of European Jewry and the Holocaust as one of its important symbols as they underpin the liberal order and the centrality of human rights.<sup>3</sup>

As the archetypal victims of nationalistic ethnocentrism, many Jews became the champions

of the European idea and the construction of a supranational entity, an ameliorating counterforce to the racial, ethnic and religious discrimination consubstantial to the nation-state. As the nation-state ethos was accompanied by xenophobia, antisemitism, conservatism and opposition to social mobility, Jews were among the most ardent supporters of the new ethos. In concrete terms, over the last seven decades, Jews have taken advantage of globalization and identified themselves with the post-war post-nationalist European ethos. If we, for just a moment, disregard the horrific Nazi period, European Jews over last two and a half centuries have successfully adapted themselves first to the emancipation, then the modern nation-state, and, most recently, European post-nationalism.

## The New Choice

Europe may be at a turning point in its history. Recent seismic events in European politics have shown two contrasting tendencies on the continent. On one hand, several signs point to a crisis of mistrust or outright rejection of globalism. Brexit is, so far, the most visible symptom of this, but other phenomena like the December 2016 constitutional referendum in Italy and the rise of the right-wing AfD party in Germany reinforce this idea. In Eastern Europe, many consider partnership with Russia a viable and attractive alternative to the European Union.

On the other hand, it would be premature to conclude that the European idea and its liberal orientation are dead. The failure of Geert Wilders

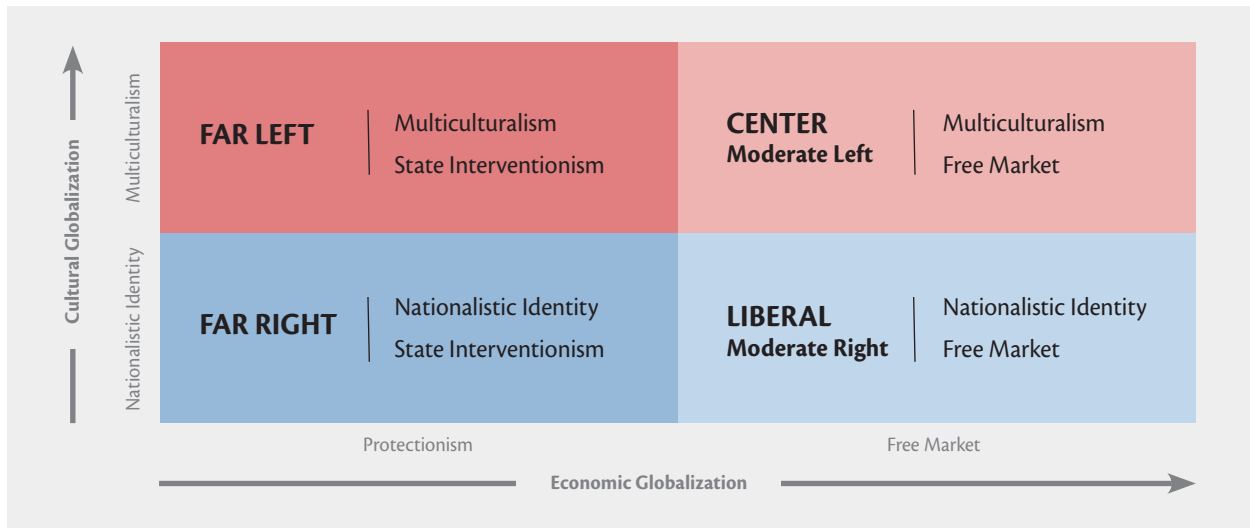
and his PVV party in Holland, whose campaign was based on opposition to immigration and the European Union, and the election of Emmanuel Macron president of France over the far right candidate Marine Le Pen, prove that the people of Europe are still attached to the European Union. Moreover, while the election of Donald Trump in the United States had been seen as the possible beginning of a nationalistic populist wave that would also sweep Europe, the reality appears, on the contrary, to be characterized by a sense of alarm at events unfolding in the United States and a rejection of the U.S. president's ideas.<sup>4</sup>

In short, last years' political and social developments in Europe reveal the complexity of the continent's situation, where opposing trends and projects face each other, without a clear dominance of any one of them. These changes in the European political world have led to a new balance of power in European politics.

## Economic Globalization Vs Cultural Globalization

Differentiating between two different facets of the globalization process – the economic and the cultural – is useful in both analyzing the new challenges and recommending directions for intervention. The political distribution in Europe is not anymore a continuous spectrum from far left to far right but a dual-axis map. As presented in the following matrix, the four main political streams can be arranged according to their support of economic and cultural globalization.

## Economic Globalization Vs Cultural Globalization



**Far Right:** All over Europe, and beyond, far right parties oppose both economic and cultural globalization. In the economic field, they support nationalistic economic protectionism in order to protect local traditional industries from international low-cost competition. Culturally, they want Europe to remain Christian, avoid international cultural influences, and keep the economic and political leadership in the hands of elites of ethnic European origin.

**Far Left:** Claiming that the economic competitiveness of the non-European industries results from the subjugation of local workers, the far left, ironically, supports economic protectionism similar to that proposed by the far right. However, the similarity does not carry over to the cultural realm. The far left camp advocates the acceptance and integration of non-European migrants, and believes the countries of Europe should become multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-faith societies.

**Moderate Right:** in line with the ethos of economic liberalism that made Europe a global actor, the moderate right supports economic globalization but opposes multi-culturalism and is reluctant to accept and integrate migrants.

**Center / Social Democrats / Social Liberals / Moderate Left:** both Macron and Merkel, who belong to this moderate camp are avid supporters of the E.U. and the Globalization. They wish to preserve national identities while also integrating cultural elements and promising elites of Muslim descent in the public sphere.

The European political history of the last decade can be seen through the prism of competition between these four camps. One could argue that the continent's fate will be linked to the outcome of this competition. The camp that ultimately claims power will determine the European outward strategy toward the world and the inward disposition toward its own minorities, including its Jewish communities. In Western

European countries, the far left has held a more dominant place in society than can be observed in Eastern Europe. At the same time, the far right, though present throughout the continent, has much more influence in the political discourse in Eastern European countries. However, despite these regional differences, every political actor in Europe falls into one of the four camps.

## The Social Implications Of The Globalization Process

Thanks to globalization, 1.5 billion people in underdeveloped countries have been lifted out of extreme poverty in the last two decades. The borderless world has brought unprecedented opportunities to individual and collective players. For various historical reasons, the Jewish people and the State of Israel were culturally prepared for and have greatly benefitted from this process. Yet, this rapid destabilization of the world order has been met with backlashes, and what appears to be a concomitant rise in anti-Semitism with the potential to harm Jewish life in Europe and elsewhere in the West: pauperization of Western working classes, social downgrading of the middle-classes, intrusive influence of international economic actors, inability of politicians to protect their constituents, and massive migration. Last but not least, populist backlash against elites and post-nationalists.

Among the four political camps, the far right and the far left are, from the point of view of the Jewish people and their institutions, the most problematic:

- The rise of fervent nationalism brings with it the potential for xenophobia, Christian and racist anti-Semitism, pressure for cultural conformity, and the rejection of Jewish exceptionalism. Jewish ritual practices (such as external markers of religious belonging, circumcision, Jewish slaughter) may be subject to prohibition, Jews may be expected to lower their Jewish profile and avoid expressions of solidarity with world Jewry or Israel.
- On the other side, the multiculturalists envision Europe as multi-ethnic society and question the hegemonic hold of the traditional Judeo-Christian heritage. As most migrants in Europe come from Muslim countries with non-democratic systems, and, frequently, institutionalized anti-Jewish/anti-Israeli attitudes and resentments, current immigration inflows have worrisome implications for Europe's Jewish communities.
- Proponents of both cases above, tend to associate the Jews with international finance and globalization in its different dimensions, and their ascendancy to power would pose significant threats for European Jews.<sup>5</sup>

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Today, European states are torn between two antithetical constitutional projects: either becoming a unified political entity or returning to the good old days of entrenched nationalism.

**Constitutional Project 1:** The implications for European Jews of a return to the nationalistic narrative are somewhat predictable. In such a scenario, while the most religious Jews will relocate to Israel or self-segregate in closed neighborhoods, we may expect that European Jews will re-adopt the well-known low Jewish profile, characterized by a very privatized, non-exteriorized and non-totalizing Judaism. While the ultra-orthodox Jews built self-segregated enclaves, socially and culturally integrated Jews adopted this strategy for two centuries in Western Europe prior to the Second World War. This strategy has been a slippery slope to assimilation, but in the new context of a vibrant Jewish nation-state in Israel we may imagine a new sustainable model.

**Constitutional Project 2:** On the other hand, the implications of a scenario in which European countries were to become one unified political entity with fewer national prerogatives are more ambivalent. Many believe that without national governments to protect them, in a context of increased presence of non-European migrant populations in a multi-ethnic scene, Jews' status may be at risk. However, others associate this scenario with possible positive consequences. Delving into the historical precedent of the ancient empires that often accepted Jewish particularism, the partisans of this perspective believe that such a multicultural entity may offer the Jews a kind of normality: to be one cultural group among a multiethnic project.

## The New Emerging Non-Totalizing Diaspora Identity

Milton Friedman is famous for his “pool player” analogy, according to which the player wins without knowing all the mathematical and physical theories that explain his shots. The economist uses this analogy to underline that economic agents act in accordance with economic theories without being aware of them. The same can be said, in our study, of European Jewish social agents. Without knowing the models explicated here, and only by reacting to their social environments, European Jews have built strategies enabling them to adapt to possible evolutions of the wider European societies.

In a context of fluid and post-national identities, geographical mobility and Jewish transnationalism, an interesting new kind of Jewish activist is emerging in Europe, one that teaches, launches innovative projects and breathes new life into centuries-old communities. Some are professionals and businesspeople, some are teachers in the hundreds of Jewish schools, and some are active in cultural and social Jewish and non-Jewish projects. Even if they are, at this point in time, small in number among the young generation, they inspire others and embody a new existential stand that can be described as a non-totalizing model of Jewish identification. Judaism and Israel constitute only part of their fields of interest. They support European multiculturalism and readily confront the daunting European challenges alongside their non-Jewish counterparts. They reject the view of some Israeli and American Jews that the old continent is a Jewish cemetery in the making and



that European Jewry is holding on blindly to a sinking ship.

Despite rumors of their imminent demise, they aren't going anywhere and are instead developing proud Anglo-Jewish, French-Jewish, Polish-Jewish, and Swedish-Jewish identities. Mostly well-educated and often the products of a highly affiliated upbringing who have experienced both Israel and America, they are well aware of the growing difficulty in affirming a strong Jewish identity in Europe. But still, they have consciously chosen to remain in Europe and establish their families there. They are aware of the unfavorable trends. They know about the demographic shifts, the continuing economic decline, the rise of far right and far left parties, the growing anti-Semitism and the anti-Israel stand of the local media. They know that this new model of identity will include compromises regarding their Jewishness, and that on many occasions they will have to adapt to the dominant assimilationist European ethos. Reductively describing this non-totalizing identity as merely "symbolic ethnicity" would be counterproductive.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike the assimilationists, they do not deny their interests in the Jewish heritage but, on the other hand, they do not want to be reduced to the Jewish part of their identity and see Europe ethos as full part of their DNA.

Unlike the old-model anti-Zionist diasporists who opposed Diaspora as an open society to Israel as a huge ethno-religious ghetto, the new European diasporists love to visit their "Jewish homeland" frequently and have many friends there. Some of

them even see Israel as the ultimate Jewish place to be but, reluctant to total commitment and responsibility, they are not sure they want to live in such a place and enjoy not being in charge. Furthermore, they feel better in the borderless fresh European environment and dislike the Israeli Jewishness that they see as too much a matter of sociological identity and too less a matter of positive content.

They try to set-up innovative cultural initiatives to provide Jewish content to their challenging existential position. In an effort to encourage and foster this positive trend, much has been written about these courageous but often limited-scope initiatives, the best known of which are the Limmud events, the Krakow's and Budapest's festivals of Jewish culture, the annual "European Day of Jewish Culture," the multiple Jewish films festivals, and the few programs launched in the non-Shoah oriented Jewish museums that have opened in most European capitals. Even if each initiative allows a significant number of unaffiliated Jews to rediscover their roots, reconnect to their identity, and this is therefore a noticeable accomplishment by itself, at the end of the day, from a strategic perspective, it is hard to see how these local limited initiatives may be able to reverse the European Jewry decline in the old continent. As Europe is in the middle of a political, economic, identity and demographic turmoil, the European Jews who may expect to maintain Jewish continuity in the next generations are mostly the ones who become religiously observant or the ones who have quitted the old continent.

## Conclusion and Perspectives

Most analysts who carefully read the different scenarios presented here will be pessimistic about the Jewish future in Europe. And this pessimism has been evident in several previous JPPI papers on Europe. Yet, as we have seen throughout Jewish history, reality sometimes defies the analysts and we observe instead the emergence of new and creative modes of Jewish engagement. Not surprisingly, the emergence of a new non-totalizing Jewish positioning which mixes selective attachment to Jewish identity, prominence of individual accomplishment and profound local patriotism, is in line with the socio-cultural tendencies which prevail in Europe.

Three game changing elements stand behind the emergence of this surprising renewal: (1) social networks that allow isolated Jews to establish and participate in support groups and mobilize their peers. (2) Israeli businesspeople, either commuters or full time residents, who run companies in Europe while remaining connected to Israel. We may add to them another population, composed of the few dozens of thousands of Israeli-born Jews who, for a variety of reasons, have relocated to European capitals. Even if they rarely interact with the local Jewish communities, whether they remain in insular groups or assimilate actively into the general society, they strengthen the population with some Jewish or Israeli roots. (3) The growing Israeli and American Jewish roots tourism industry, which makes Jewishness more and more part of the landscape. All over Galicia and Ukraine, non-European born Hassidim settle and re-open small Jewish nodes that collectively and interconnected

with the dozens of Chabad houses make Europe a tourist destination even for observant Jews. Thanks to this flow of visitors, many of the Eastern Europe communities that lack a demographic critical mass of engaged Jews can sustain a year-round Jewish life.

From a Jewish policy perspective, this renewal has to be encouraged and supported financially. It will probably not transform back Europe to the nurturing soil that it had been for centuries, but it will allow individual second- and third-generation disaffiliated Jews an entry point to reconnect to their heritage, and this is certainly valuable in itself.

*In many ways, these new types of European Jews prefigure an emerging type of Israel-Diaspora relationship: these new European Jews acknowledge Israel as the vibrant center of the Jewish life and decide for personal reasons to live their life in the Diaspora. Despite the fact that Judaism is peripheral to their daily life, when they want to reconnect to their heritage, they take a plane and jump to Ben-Gurion airport: Tel-Aviv is their most attractive JCC, Jerusalem is for them a kind of homeport and they get real-time news from Israel on their smartphones. More and more this new model of relationship resembles that of twenty-first expats with their core country. Without doubt, this was made possible because of the proximity of Europe to Israel but, who knows, we may imagine that in the coming years, with Israeli life becoming more and more vibrant, we will see such a relationship developing in more remote places such as South Africa, Canada and even Australia and USA.*



## Endnotes

1 In an article dedicated to the analysis of the function that anti-Semitism fulfils in the construction of Western collective identities, Henri Zukier highlights the fact that *The Other*, the “outsider”, is psychologically constructed as the projected image of the negations and repressions of every society. Once constructed on this basis, and having undergone a process of demonization, *The Other* becomes an emotionally charged object that may be “manipulated, preserved and called up at will” by the members of the dominant group, and also has the capacity to trigger powerful “mechanical” feelings and reactions. See Henri Zukier, “Transformation of Hatred: Antisemitism as struggle for group identity,” in *Demonizing the Other: Antisemitism, Racism and Xenophobia*, edited by Robert S. Wistrich, Harwood academic publishers, Amsterdam, 1999, p. 120. Psychologist Edward E. Sampson goes even further, asserting that the entire Western project is marked by the construction by dominant groups of “serviceable others”, whose lives are negated through control over how they are defined, as well as by the reality in which they live. See Edward E. Sampson, *Celebrating the Other: A Dialogic Account of Human Nature*, Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press, 1993, p. 4. Quoted in Martina L. Weisz, “Micro-physics of otherness: Jews, Muslims, and Latin Americans in contemporary Spain,” in *Antisemitism International* 5-6, 2010, edited by Robert S. Wistrich.

2 The statement of Comte Clermont-Tonnere in the National Assembly during the debate on the status of Jews in the French Republic (23 December 1789) is well known: ‘We must refuse everything to the Jews as a nation and accord everything to Jews as individuals’.

3 For an historical account see: Merte, M., “Rising from the Ashes: The Shoah and the European Integration Project,” *The Jewish Contribution to the European Integration Project*, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2013. [http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas\\_36349-1522-1-30.pdf?131211155732](http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_36349-1522-1-30.pdf?131211155732)

4 Stacy Meichtry, Anton Troianovski and Marcus Walker, “European Populists Who Aped Brexit and Trump Rethink Their Approach,” Wall Street Journal, August 21, 2017. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/europes-populists-back-on-their-heels-rethink-anti-eu-stance-1503334431>

5 Antisemitism is mainly present among Muslims, Far Right and Radical Left supporters. See Report on Antisemitism in 2016, overview, trends and events. Ministry of Diaspora. <Http://www.mda.gov.il/EngSite/Lists/HomePageBanner3Icons/Attachments/1/reportENG.pdf>

6 See Winter, J. Alan (March 1996). “Symbolic ethnicity or religion among Jews in the United States: a test of Gansian hypothesis”. *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 37, No.3. Connecticut College.