

First European Conference of JCC in Europe, May 28-30, 2003

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JTA E-MAIL EDITION

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At European JCC conference, it's time to shmooze and share

By Philip Carmel

PARIS, June 1 (JTA) - Riga's 9,000-strong Jewish community already has penciled in Aug. 16 as a central event on its calendar.

On that date - which corresponds to the 15th of Av on the Hebrew calendar - the 15th Jewish couple who met through the city's Jewish community center will get married.

Viktoria Gubatova is going to town for the occasion. Gubatova intends to have the women decked out in white dresses surrounded by a serenading troop of men, an attempt to recreate the talmudic festival of love marked on the 15th of Av.

Gubatova is the driving force behind Riga's JCC, and one of two delegates from the Latvian capital who attended last week's first European Conference of Jewish Community Centers that was held over three days at the Paris JCC.

Like the other 150 or so delegates from 22 countries, Gubatova has her own concept of what makes a JCC tick -- and she came to Paris to share it with other participants, as well as to pick up tips from them.

The former Soviet Union now boasts around 180 JCCs, more than three times the number in Western Europe.

"Now, though, we have a different problem," Gubatova said. "Many Jews left Latvia in recent years, and many that remained feel alone. These people were accustomed to being among Jews. Our job is to interact with these people."

Bulgaria, where the community is of a similar size as Latvia's, also is using JCCs to promote Jewish organization.

The Shalom umbrella organization has 19 branches throughout the country, each of which has a kindergarten and school. The organization recently set up a "leadership school" to prepare teen-agers to

act as counselors or advisers to younger members of the community, said Sara Cohen, Shalom's organizer in Sofia, Bulgaria's capital.

Jo Zrihen is equally proud of the Paris community center, though his model bears little resemblance to those in Eastern Europe and probably even less to JCCs in North America.

Located in the heart of the French capital, the Paris JCC serves the whole of the Paris community, which numbers at least 250,000.

The center's function is "to act as a place to meet and find Jewish identity," Zrihen said.

But the center also has a role beyond the Jewish community -- its events attract non-Jews as well, he says.

"This center is open, tolerant and pluralistic. It is community-based rather than 'communautariste,' " or sectarian, Zrihen said.

Jerry Spitzer, president of the World Confederation of JCCs, says the fact that Jewish community centers can play such different roles in different countries is symbolic of the centers' inherent pluralism.

"To form any kind of network between Jews of different backgrounds means that we need to be broad in our outlook," Spitzer told JTA. "Of all the Jewish institutions, the JCC is the one broad enough to allow for diversity. Whether you're Orthodox, Reform, intermarried or a non-believer, if you feel a part of the community and you want to mix with other Jews, the JCC is open to you."

Spitzer accepts that the role of the JCC has evolved greatly over the years.

Originally it was a North American phenomenon, he said. When immigrants came from Eastern Europe, "settlement houses" -- forerunners of today's JCCs "helped them to acclimatize to the new culture. People were taught English and how to settle in American society," he said.

Today, however, the focus has changed from acculturation to educating and bringing Jewish culture closer to Jews - - "putting the J back into JCC," in the words of Smadar Bar-Akiva, the world confederation's executive director.

She hopes that the Paris conference -- the first pan-European JCC venture -- will encourage Jewish peoplehood and pluralism, and encourage more JCCs to engage professional Jewish educators, Bar-Akiva said.

The idea of Associated European JCCs is a fairly recent concept in the movement. The Paris conference came about largely as an initiative of the American Joint Jewish Distribution Committee and the European Council of Jewish Communities.

The European conference was important for building links between JCCs across Europe, Bar-Akiva said, but also was a recognition that JCCs are entering a new era with new challenges.

That point was emphasized by Alberto Senderey, from the JDC's Paris office.

There is a need to identify JCCs' potential clients in the 21st century and adapt the centers to different community needs, he said.

"Our challenge is to identify what the post-modern Jew is looking for," Senderey said.

Jews today can't be easily pigeon-holed, he said, noting that modern Jews often pick and choose aspects of their identity from both Jewish culture and the wider society.

"There are Jews who eat kosher at home but not outside; there are mixed marriages where both cultures are practiced," he said. "We have to prepare for" people "for whom contradiction is not a problem."

JCC therefore must "create situations and not just buildings," he said. "We need to create living rooms" where "Jews meet other Jews to do something Jewish."

The conference also emphasized the bond between more established JCCs in North American and newer ones in Europe.

North American JCCs aren't looking "to impose our own model, but to showcase our laboratory structure," said Lester Pollack, former head of the North American JCC Association and a past chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

"It's up to them to pick and choose what works for them," he said.

Similar views were expressed by the current head of the North American JCC Association, Allan Finkelstein. Individual centers are shaped by their own society and community, he said.

But "one glue binds us together building people-to-people relationships with Israel," he said.

Ultimately, Finkelstein said, JCCs share a common goal and ideology and should always be aware that they are "larger than the local community."

Nowhere is that more evident than in the countries of the Former Soviet Union.

Eastern European delegates at the conference could benefit immensely from the experience of JCCs in western Europe and the United States, said Margarita Drozdinskaya, a delegate from Moscow.

The 1990s, when communities in Eastern Europe began to rebuild after the fall of communism, "were a romantic period for us," she told delegates.

"Now it's time for a period of analysis, to look back and learn from our mistakes," she said. "We adopted Western ideas, but we cannot copy them identically."

However, the base is strong, and JCCs are well established across the former Soviet Union, Drozdinskaya said.

In true JCC spirit, however, even within the former Soviet Union there are enormous differences between centers in the big cities and those in smaller Jewish communities, she said.

That diversity no doubt would please Spitzer.

"There are places which are not called JCCs but they have the same function," he said.

"The best way to describe people here is to take one of the c's from JCC and put it in front of the 'J,' " he said. "We are centers for the Jewish community and the best institution for Jewish continuity."

Summary of Paris Conference- May 28-30, 2003

Smadar Bar-Akiva

Over 150 participants from 22 countries gathered at the JCC of Paris, France for the First Conference of European JCCs. (An article written by Philip Carmel for the JTA and published on June 2nd describes well the main objectives of the conference and interviews some of the people involved.) The conference was initiated and organized by AJJDC and co-sponsored by: EAJCC, ECJC, FSJU and WCJCC. I would like to add some impressions from the point of view of the overseas delegation comprising 20 people from North America, Israel and India.

From North America the following people participated in the conference: **Barbara and Dan Drench, Allan and Bonnie Finkelstein, Geri and Lester Pollack, Martha and George Rich and Linda and Jerry Spitzer.** At their request, a special track on French Jewry was added to the conference program. This additional program was sponsored by FSJU and organized by Jean Charles Zerbib. It began with a pre-conference meeting at the Elysee Palace with **Mr. Roques- Olivier Mester**, a senior advisor to French President Jacques Chirac. Mester spoke very eloquently about the close ties to the Jewish community. He said Chirac is the first president to acknowledge France's responsibility towards the Jews during World War Two. The past two years have been very difficult with the rise in anti-Semitism. The government has taken sincere steps to fight it. The president declared that any act against a Jew is an act against France. He was also content that figures show a decline in the acts of

anti-Semitism this past year. There are compulsory studies in high schools on Holocaust education and a foundation for the Memory of the Holocaust was created. As for the relationship with Israel, our meeting took place when the French Foreign Minister Dominique De Vilpin visited Israel. Mester stressed the importance of the security of Israel and even said that Arafat and the Palestinians missed the opportunity to help their people. He was hopeful that the new "road map" will indeed be implemented. Our FSJU hosts, **David Saada**, Executive Director of FSJU, **Jo Zrihen**, President of EAJCC and vice president of CRIF and FSJU, and **Lucien Khalfa**, Director of Culture Department of FSJU confirmed that the relationship with the President is close and open. Just a short while before our meeting FSJU celebrated 50 years with a reception at the president's palace. Mester kept quoting from the president's warm words on that occasion. Participants then had a chance to ask questions and felt secure to ask about issues that were of concern: How does the government influence education in the Muslim circles? What is being done for Jewish security? How does France see future relations with Israel? A very open and lively discussion ensued. The delegation relayed a message supporting French Jews on behalf of WCJCC.

We then joined the rest of the conference participants and other members of the overseas delegation: **Moti Ben Dor, Esther Sela, Prof. Hillel Schnid, Arye Shnormacher, Eva Halachmi, Tova Pinto, Sara Bogen, Reshef Peleg, Prof. Armand Laufer and Elijah Jacob**. The conference opened with a festive reception at Hotel De Ville, the beautiful mayor's mansion in the heart of Paris. **Jerry Spitzer**, president of WCJCC, opened the gathering and on behalf of WCJCC congratulated EAJCC. **Jo Zrihen**, the President of EAJCC and vice president of both CRIF and FSJU added his own greetings and welcome. We were then addressed by one of the mayor's deputies who was very warm and welcoming in his remarks. An excellent musical performance of young Jewish French artists concluded this session and refreshments were served.

The conference then moved to the opening dinner and first plenary at the JCC of Paris on Lafayette St. **Alberto Senderay**, Executive Director of AJJDC Europe and Latin America, opened the first plenary and spoke about the need to address the changing realities of Jews in modern Europe. In his keynote speech, **Allan Finkelstein**, President of JCC Association spoke about common denominators of all JCCs and the need to put more emphasis on Jewish education and Israel. Responses to the speech were given by **David Saada** and **Rita Drozdinskaya**, the newly appointed executive director of the Association of JCCs in the Former Soviet Union. The different perspectives on the subject added a richer understanding of what it means to be a JCC in Europe.

After the morning plenary on "Jews in today's Europe". The conference broke into small group sessions where some of the overseas delegates participated and made presentations. **Tova Pinto**, JAFI Shlichah to Central Europe spoke about marketing to changing populations. **Sara Bogen** of AJJDC chaired this session. **Reshef Peleg**, the chair of WUJS, spoke about connecting students to the JCCs, **Prof. Armand Laufer** taught fundraising fundamentals, **Eva Halachmi**, director of JAFI's European Desk, spoke about the place of Israel in the JCC and **Elijah Jacob** introduced the very unique JCC of Bombay and some of their innovative programming ideas.

The North American lay leaders visited the Jewish Museum of Paris. The tour was led by a very interesting historian and the participants were very impressed with the content and quality of the displays. We all suggested adding this landmark to every visit to Paris. We then met with **Clement Weil Rynal**, a journalist at France 3 TV and chair of the Jewish Journalists Association. The meeting was over lunch at the Rashi Center hosted by FSJU. Weil- Rynal was very candid and provocative as he spoke about the underlying anti-Semitism in the French media. Rynal had researched the issue and reached alarming conclusions that leave a lot of room for action and change. The participants were very interested in what he had to say and the conversation lasted for a long time. We were then joined by our Israeli colleagues for a meeting with **Mr. Yitzhak Eldan**, Israeli Ambassador to UNESCO. Eldan who is a veteran diplomat was very worried about the situation of French Jews. He saw the anti Semitic incidents as alarming signs and did not see a great future for French Jews. Jo Zrihen, was very upset and did not agree with this projection. It was an important insight into the different views on the future of French Jewry.

The conference plenaries and afternoon sessions continued and the entire conference went on a night tour of Paris to the major sites of the city. On Friday morning, WCJCC led a workshop on "Connecting JCCs Worldwide". There was a very good participation of close to 20 people. Presenters were: **Prof. Hillel Schmid, Moti Ben Dor of Israel and Robert Djerassi** of Bulgaria. Smadar Bar-Akiva chaired the session. It was an opportunity to hear what kind of relationships JCCs are looking for and to hear what WCJCC and regional affiliates can do for them.

At the closing plenary the various partners outlined their vision for the future. In a symbolic gesture **Esther Sela** presented Jo Zrihen with a kiddush cup as a sign of Mazal Tov to the new association. After the conclusion of the plenary the WCJCC Annual Board meeting took place with a record attendance of close to 50 people. (Minutes of this meeting will be circulated shortly.)

The program concluded with Shabbat services and a lovely Shabbat dinner at La Victoire synagogue where we really had a sense of Jewish peoplehood as additional members from Sweden, Germany, Belgium and Switzerland joined us. Some of the Israelis: **Moti Ben Dor, Esther Sela and Arye Shnormacher** were accompanied by Jean Charles for a post conference program over the weekend. They participated in Shabbat morning services, Shabbat lunch at the home of a host family, and touring Jewish Paris for the rest of the time.

I would like to thank our co-partners express special thanks to Jean Charles Zerbib for doing such a fantastic job. We are looking forward to the next European conference scheduled for the end of May 2004 in Budapest.

Smadar Bar-Akiva

MEMO FROM JCC ASSOCIATION

June 13, 2003

**TO: JCC ASSOCIATION BOARD
JCC PRESIDENTS
JCC EXECUTIVES**

FROM: ALLAN FINKELSTEIN

Dear Friends and Colleagues:

Kol Yisrael Arevim Ze Bazeh. All of us are responsible, one for the other. This lesson became so very clear to me on a recent trip, first to Israel, and then to Paris.

I was in Israel for several reasons. It was the culmination of the Jewish Educators Initiative-the first program of our new Center for Jewish Education (CJE), sponsored by the Mandel Foundation. It gave me enormous satisfaction to share with this group of outstanding educators who enhance their JCCs every day, to hear their satisfaction about what they learned, and to witness the enormous potential for them to continue to impact the entire JCC movement. You will hear more about the next initiative of the CJE, which will assist all of our day and resident camps in the Jewish educational programs.

Len Rubin, Richie Juran and I had an important meeting with the leadership of Birthright Israel. It became clear that we as a movement are missing out on an incredible opportunity to get our young people to Israel. Our results to date in recruiting birthright Israel participants have been varied. This is a chance for your camp staff, JCC Maccabi coaches, professional staff under the age of 26, and others to experience the true gift of Israel. We will be contacting every JCC this summer, and talking about how we can work together to offer this free trip to every Jewish young person 18-26 who has not experienced Israel in an organized group. We encourage you to put together groups from your own JCC and work with our JMAX staff to participate either in the fall or spring in one of our Birthright programs. It is a wonderful resource for you, and can only enhance the connection of your local JCC to Israel at this very important time. We need every JCC leader-lay and professional-to personally invest in making this happen. Please let Michal Ben Dov or Michal Kaye know if there is any way that we can be of help in organizing groups from your JCC. Be assured that we will be in touch with you, your camp directors, and others who are directly connected to these young people.

We met with our partners at Maccabi World Union, with the staff of the education department of the Jewish Agency (who provide over 400 shlichim for our camps),

and with other partners who assist in the work of JCCs. Israel is an important resource for us, and must continue to be a part of the day to day fabric of every JCC.

We went on from Israel to Paris for the first conference of the European Association of JCCs. Over 150 delegates from 22 countries came together to talk about the future of the JCC and how it can impact Jewish community. While we didn't all speak the same language (the conference was in French and English), we managed to communicate in various ways about what we hold in common. From the developing JCCs in the Former Soviet Union, to such places as Rome, Stockholm, and Bombay, we learned that Jewish life flourishes in different ways in different places, but all because of the unique work that JCCs do. There was tremendous pride expressed by each of the presenters. Each, in a unique way, is making critical connections with individual Jews and their families. They may not do it in the same way as the typical North American JCC, but the goals are the same. There are several opportunities, which are evolving through the World Confederation of JCCs, for connection between your JCC and those in other countries. We encourage you to contact Smadar Bar Akiva in our Israel office if there is special interest on the part of your JCC. Or, if you are traveling in a foreign country and have interest in the local Jewish community, we can be helpful in making connections for you. I can personally attest to the fact that it is incredibly rewarding.

Last Friday night, those of us who were still in Paris, shared Shabbat together in a magnificent synagogue in Paris. A week before, I spent Friday night in an orthodox synagogue in Jerusalem, and Saturday morning at Hebrew Union College. In each setting, there were familiar melodies, and new ones. But the feeling of being together with other Jews, sharing common liturgy, even in foreign countries, served again to reinforce the importance of what we do every day in JCCs - connect Jews to their heritage and strengthen that continuum with history and with the future. It is critical work. Sometimes we take the programs themselves for granted, without realizing the intensity of the Jewish experience that we are creating for our communities. Being with Jews in foreign lands re-energizes me, and reinforces how good I feel about the work that we do.

If you haven't taken the time recently at a board meeting, or in the halls of the JCC, step back and look around at the richness of what we provide for the community. Take in the incredible diversity of Jewish life that is represented at the JCC. It's so easy to get caught up in the "business" that we don't always see the big picture. We should be very proud of what we do, and be more bold about sharing it!

With best wishes for a wonderful and enriching summer.

Regards,

Allan Finkelstein

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