

## *Rome Conference At A Glance*

### *June 19-23, 2002*

It is hard to top the enthusiasm and commitment of the twenty some executive directors of Jewish Community Centers in Europe who gathered at the IL Pitigliani Jewish Community Center in Rome for the First Conference of JCC Directors in Europe. Co sponsored by the European Council of Jewish Communities, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the World Confederation of Jewish Community Centers, the purpose was to begin activating the European network whose importance has been already validated many times. No doubt, Europe is comprised of many countries, languages and distinctive histories and realities of a wide variety of Jewish communities. However, standing behind a unified vision of a European Jewish community and servicing the JCCs by implementing several joint projects was a common thread for all. Executive directors represented France, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Russia, Latvia and Bulgaria in addition to the sponsoring organizations. The warm hospitality of the IL Pitigliani staff and lay leaders headed by their committed director Ambra Tedeschi was another proof of the added value of such a gathering- a chance for all participants to get to know better the Italian Jewish community and a chance for the staff and lay leaders of the center in Rome to get an exposure to a wide variety of Jewish Community Centers.

The conference opened with a festive reception at the impressive city hall of Rome. Franca Coen, the founder of the JCC in Rome who was elected recently to be one of the sixteen members of city council, welcomed the participants. Jo Zrihen, the president of EAJCC opened the conference and highlighted the importance of the conference and the need to reach out to all Jewish Community Centers. The key note speaker was Alberto Senderey, the Director of JDC Europe who spoke about the challenges for Jewish Community Centers in Europe and the great importance of establishing centers where Jews of all denominations and political inclinations can feel welcomed. He urged JCCs to become the "city halls" of Jewish life where debates, dialogues and social contacts can take place in an open, pluralistic and Jewish environment.

The program continued with a festive opening dinner at the JCC with guests from the community including, Emanuele Di Porto, General Secretary of the Jewish Community of Rome, Roberto Spizzichino, the president of IL Pitigliani, Rosella Veneziano, Vice President, Aviram Levy, Board Member and staff members: Ambra Tedeschi, Laura Mincer and Miriam Terracina. The delicious meal prepared by Daniel was the first in many we all enjoyed in the beautiful surroundings of the center. A musical concert of Ladino and Roman liturgy concluded the first day.

The next day began with a short sample of the a three day long "Leatid" leadership seminar led by Alberto Sendery and Andres Spokoiny. In the first part Alberto spoke about the need to service adults in our JCCs. Over 70% of European Jews are adults and our centers need to give this group more attention and better programming. Some strategies and examples were illustrated and a discussion followed. In the second part Andres led a leadership workshop and a workshop on web resources. Andres introduced a new web site which will be launched by JDC and is called: [www.jccenters.org](http://www.jccenters.org). The "preview" showed a great tool to post programs, contacts, resource materials and anything that has to do with JCC work. It is believed this will be a good tool for all.

In the afternoon we delved into the main issue of the conference by discussing how to continue moving forward in our work. Smadar Bar-Akiva, the Executive Director of WCJCC, spoke about the importance of creating the "European" voice so that connections with other regional networks can flourish. Smadar presented two models that were developed in North America that can be a

basis for a discussion in Europe as well. One had to do with the core Jewish concepts of JCCs and the other with the process of creating a new vision for the JCC.

Lucien Khalfa, the General Secretary of EAJCC and Director of Culture and Community Centers Department for FSJU, France urged us to get into action and suggested some very good projects that can be adopted by the participants such as professional training, cultural exchanges, music festivals, book fairs and others. Many participants agreed and welcomed these initiatives. Gabi Taus, the Executive Director of ECJC, concluded the session with some good insights on the practical sides of moving forward.

After a group Kabbalat Shabbat where Sephardic and Ashekenazi liturgy intertwined the group convened for a Shabbat dinner. On Shabbat morning the participants attended Shabbat services at the beautiful synagogue of Rome. After services, the group was led on a walking tour of Jewish Rome by Laura Supino, a charming woman who lived in Rome during the Second World War and shared enchanting stories on the history and present life, in addition to being an architect and pointing out interesting buildings. After a lunch break the workshops continued despite a record heat wave of over 40C!

In the workshop "Sharing Success Stories", some very innovative examples were presented. Ambra Tedeschi, the director of the Rome JCC presented a staff development model and change in management and skills as exemplified by her center. The center used to be an orphanage and when it was turned into a community center it had to recreate itself and its programs. Victoria Guatova, the director of the Aleph Center in Riga presented a program where the ancient Jewish custom of celebrating Tu Be'Av, the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month of Av, the day of love was reinvented and implemented in Riga, thereby connecting the new generation to Jewish roots in an attractive way. Martine Yana, the director of the Edmond Fleg JCC in Marseille, described a "Week of Tolerance" a large-scale project that brought together Jews, Christians and Moslems for joint programs. Martine also described a new project of dressing Barbi dolls in Jewish costumes. She offered other centers to participate and send clothes, materials and sketches for an exhibit that could then be rotated around Europe. Rita Drozdinkaja, the Director of the JCC in Voronez (500 km south of Moscow) presented a project of addressing domestic violence and violence against women which went beyond the center and was adopted by the local authorities, thereby positioning the JCC as a center of community work citywide. Apparently more than 10,000 women are killed in Russia every year in incidents of domestic violence and the JCC was the first institution to address the issue in Voronez. All these models were inspiring and showed the common thread of work: JCCs addressing the needs of the community. The meeting was chaired by Robert Djeragassi, JDC director of Sofia, who, in conclusion, presented a project initiated by Shalom center whereby seniors knit the traditional Bulgarian embroidery on Kipot and sell them abroad, thereby enabling the community to buy winter coats for elderly Jews in need.

The next workshop "JCCs in Europe during changing times" was chaired by Mario Izvcovich, JDC Director of Pan European Programs. Raphy Marciano, the director of the Jewish community center of Paris presented a paper on the topic that will be distributed shortly and then focused on the addressing the changing cultural needs of the community. He invited participants to take part in a Jewish Music Festival that will take place in March 2004. Enrico Modigliani a board member from Rome presented a model of assessing the changing community. A questionnaire was distributed to members in order to help identify the needs of the various target populations and help better serve the community. The questionnaire is being analyzed now and already several important changes have been implemented. Beni Witztum, the director of the Jewish Community Center in Zurich presented a model of taking the JCC out to the community and addressing anti Semitism and ignorance in the public schools by going out and speaking to different audiences. In conclusion, Irina Scherban, the president of the Association of JCC in the FSU ( a network with over 140

JCCs!) presented programs for children with special needs. She presented the unique art work of some deaf and autistic children that was exhibited. This is another type of program that can travel to other communities as the promotion of young Jewish talent was also raised as a common theme. She also invited participants to join an Art Festival in solidarity with Israel that will take place in Ranana next Purim.

Important discussions ensued on how to use the last workshops and coordinate efforts, learn from each other and help each other. Mario reminded the participants of the "step by step" approach and the need to take very concrete actions in order to implement some of the wonderful ideas presented.

In the evening, the group had a chance to tour the beautiful IL Pitigliani Center where the conference took place and learn about the different activities. After Havdalla the group had a chance to tour the historic city of Rome.

During the last morning several projects were presented and the group spent some time on focusing the agenda of the association and deciding on the main action steps, which can be summarized as follows:

1. Responsibility for more active communication among the members of the association and members taking upon themselves active roles.
2. Taking a "step by step" approach whereby working on a few specific projects will help build up the association hoping that in the future it will have a structure of it's own and hopefully a financial basis as well.
3. Creating a directory of European JCCs and taking responsibility for supplying all relevant information.
4. Convening a conference in Paris in May 2003 for staff and leadership of Jewish Community Centers that will be the first grand scale conference of that sort.
5. Working in sub committees on: culture exchange, exchange of programs and twining.

Finally, on a personal note, as an Israeli, I was very much encouraged by the support and solidarity expressed by all towards Israel and its people. As one of the participants said: "We now feel that we are the guardians of Israel and need to defend it on our home front." Indeed, many activities on behalf of Israel are taking place around Europe. Once again, the true sense of Klal Israel was exemplified in the every day work of JCCs around Europe.

Submitted by Smadar Bar-Akiva  
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