

WCJCC delegation and hosts in front of Frankfurt city hall.



Jews in Germany Seek to Connect Past, Present and Future

By Smadar Bar-Akiva

“I want my children to feel that they are proud Jews living in Germany today. I want them to know their heritage, and to feel that the Jewish community is relevant to their lives. Germans wanted the country to be *Jude rein*, free of Jews. We are a living testimony that this did not and should not happen,” said Sara Singer, a senior board member of ZWST, the Central Board of Jewish Welfare in Germany. The ZWST hosted a World Confederation of JCCs study seminar in Germany in June, which gave members the opportunity to see Jewish life in Germany firsthand.

“The purpose of the visit was to better connect Jews in Germany with the worldwide JCC Movement,” said Jerry Spitzer, the president of WCJCC and a JCC Association board member. Members of the delegation from North America, Israel, JAFI and the Joint Distribution Committee had to shed many preconceptions when they encountered members of the German Jewish community. To the question of why should a Jew live in Germany today, Abe Lehrer, the dedicated president of ZWST, bluntly responded, “We don’t want to defend why we are here; the fact is that we do live here!” He then



Shabbat songs at a Jewish kindergarten in Frankfurt.

added, “In the mid-nineties, when the Jews arrived from the former Soviet Union, we did not ask them that question. Instead, we quickly mobilized all our efforts to absorb them and help them.”

The most striking aspect of Jewish life in Germany today is its sheer scope. A post World War II Jewish community of some 20,000 Jews has been augmented since the early nineties by an influx of Jews from the former Soviet Union. In many European countries, religious minorities affiliate with a central body. Today, the official Jewish community has about 120,000 affiliated members and another estimated 80,000 Jews who have chosen not to be officially registered as Jews. The German federal government provided generous economic incentives that enabled FSU Jews to immigrate and integrate, but they dispersed the Jews (and other immigrants) to many small

communities. Hence, the 120,000 Jews live in almost ninety different communities. The larger cities of Berlin (12,000), Frankfurt (7,000), and Munich (9,000) have several thousand Jews living in them, but the smaller ones may have only a few hundred or even less than a hundred Jews.

To add to the challenge, many immigrants come with neither strong Jewish traditions nor a will to actively belong to the community. This was apparent when WCJCC delegation members visited Dresden. Once a flourishing Jewish community, Dresden today is home to only 600 Jews, the majority of whom are from the FSU. There is a striking contrast between the beautiful buildings reconstructed by the government and private donors and the realities of Jewish life. Only a handful of Jews are active; such small numbers make any attempt to create community life almost impossible. ZWST is trying to confront this challenge by providing country-wide programs such as summer camps for Jews of all ages, training programs, and other activities that will keep Jews in such small communities connected. “In addition to providing welfare services, especially to the elderly, ZWST’s aim is to strengthen Jewish identity, develop a sense of Jewish belonging and love of tradition,” ZWST Executive Director Benny Bloch said. “Our wish is that the new immigrants learn about the rich Jewish heritage in a more traditional way, and then decide how they want to live their lives.”

A state religious tax is the core of funding for the Jewish community, and federal and municipal funds provide additional sources of income. Although the needs are enormous, and there’s never enough money, government funds do provide for a wide array of activities,



WCJCC delegation at the Frankfurt Jewish Community Center.



Jerry Spitzer addresses the reception hosted by the mayor of Frankfurt.

Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. Michael May, the executive director of the Jewish community, shed some light on recent developments in Germany. "Today there are strong undercurrents of anti-Israel feelings. There is a feeling among young Germans: let's stop atoning for the past and be only responsible for the future. This is more troubling than the deeds of the extreme right wing activists, which in my mind are weak."

Perhaps as a response, Jews in Germany wish to strengthen their ties to the Jewish world. They do not want to feel that they are outcasts. They ask the Jewish world not to

judge them for living in Germany. Instead, they want to find ways to strengthen their Jewish identity and connections to the Jewish world. Bloch said, "We cooperate with many Jewish institutions such as JAFI and JDC and would like to expand connections with other Jewish communities. We believe there is a lot we can teach, but we can also learn from others."

Jewish life in Germany, by necessity, will have to be one of engagement, if it is to survive and flourish. Alexa Brumm, the charismatic executive director of the Jewish day school of Frankfurt, said, "We want the next generation to be part of a new Jewish German society. We want the youngsters to be able to struggle with the history, to be sensitive to politics. The only way to live here is to be very involved." ✡

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programs, and services, which are on the same level as those in many of the best Jewish communities around the world. But building Jewish life in Germany is not an easy task. First, one has to confront the burden of the grave Jewish history, which literally speaks to you on every corner. As Dr. Dani Krantz, a senior member of the ZWST staff and a former Israeli explained, "We feel that we are Jews living in Germany, not German Jews. In fact, for many years Jews in Germany were sitting on their suitcases, feeling that this is just a transit community." In Berlin, a city in the midst of an enormous build up, the delegation visited the Jewish Museum and the newly opened



מזל טוב!

Congratulations to the World Confederation of Jewish Community Centers on the 7th World Conference of Jewish Community Centers, taking place in Haifa, September 19-22, 2005.

JCC Association is represented by a delegation of 40 professionals and lay leaders from across the USA and Canada.

Linda and Jerry Spitzer visit a Jewish kindergarten.