

## **Jews in Today's Europe: Writing New Pages in the Jewish History Book**

Jerry Makowsky, WCJCC President, and Andrea Solow, WCJCC Board Member, led two delegations to JCCs in France, Latvia, Lithuania and the Ukraine in an attempt to better understand European Jewry (estimated today at close to 2 million Jews,) and plan for future partnerships with JCCs worldwide. WCJCC also co-sponsored the Second Conference of JCCs in Europe that took place in Vilnius, Lithuania, June 8-11, where 100 delegates from 20 countries met and participated.

### **France**

When the family of Pierre Besnainou arrived from Tunisia to France in the early '50s, the first Jewish organization that reached out to them was FSJU (an umbrella organization for welfare, education and culture in France.) In 2001, after becoming a highly successful businessman, Pierre decided it was time to give back to the community. He quit his work and now devotes all his time and many of his resources to the Jewish community. Recently elected as FSJU president (in addition to serving as president of the European Jewish Congress and leading many other Jewish organizations), he met with us in his Paris office to present his vision for France's 600,000 Jews. Pierre would like to promote the healthy balance of preserving a strong Jewish identity while being full French citizens. It is not an easy task in a country where "laicite" (secularism) is a sacred principal and the word "community" may allude to separatism. Pierre sees great value in JCCs as they open doors to all Jews and especially to the wide majority of Jews who are not observant.

From the more affluent Paris suburbs, where we met with many Jews who feel confident about being full French citizens and seeing recent Muslim tensions and growing anti-Semitism as a French problem, we went to visit the suburb of Sarcelles. It made the headlines when Muslim youngsters rioted and fears of growing anti-Semitism raised concern (in a French society of approx. 60 million citizens there are an estimated 6 million Muslims.) We found a large Jewish community that maintains a close-knit structure of synagogues, JCCs, kosher restaurants and schools. Indeed, the recent tensions affected this community. Those Jews who are able to leave the neighborhood to better locations are doing so at a faster rate; still, most of the Jews are staying. Some of them are turning inwards into the Jewish community and becoming more orthodox and even ultra orthodox. Others are still vying for an open society and are trying to continue living peacefully with all ethnic groups.

Living among various ethnic groups is the norm in the southern French city of Marseilles, where we visited. As a port city it has a tradition of tolerance, but La Pen's far-right party is gaining votes. Clement Yana, a state senior official, believes that the only viable future is integration, thus he diligently works to promote it in this region. In the face of all these challenges, David Saada, the Executive Director of FSJU, sees great value in connecting with the worldwide JCC movement. David believes that a strong and vibrant Jewish community will stay in France, hence the five new JCCs that are being built around the country. Some Jews are leaving, but FSJU must service the majority that is here to stay.

## **Vilnius, Lithuania**

It was once called the "Jerusalem of Lithuania", boasting a Jewish population of 80,000 Jews, comprising 40% of the city's population, 100 active synagogues, Jewish schools and numerous *yeshivot*. It all ended with two tragedies: the Holocaust and Soviet rule. However, from the remnants, Jewish life has sprung again. Today, some 4,000 Jews congregate around the JCC and bring to life old traditions: choirs singing in Yiddish, Jewish studies, sports and recreation, youth programs and more. Led by Simon Gurevich, a charismatic 26 year old, it is an inspiring example of Jewish life in Europe today. The ECJC Conference discussions in Vilnius therefore focused on how to rekindle the impressive Jewish traditions that once permeated world Jewry, how to reach out to adults, how to better cooperate with city institutions and how to cope with recent nationalistic tendencies in various countries. In the words of Andrea Solow: "We learned and grew from one another. One candle lighting another brought illumination to us all. "

## **Kharkov, Ukraine**

Jana Maistrenko, the Executive Director of Beit Dan JCC, had no Jewish education when she grew up in Kharkov. She knew her grandparents were Jewish but the family did not practice Judaism in any manner. Then, after the fall of communism, food packages sent by JDC Kiev were received in Kharkov and Jana was asked to work as a case worker for Hessed, the center for elderly Jews. This move changed her life and for over a decade she has been working for the Jewish community in different capacities. Appointed as a JCC Executive Director some three years ago, she was glad to participate in the WCJCC- JDC Professional Exchange Mentoring project. Jana was teamed with Neil Taylor, a senior professional from Jewish Care, London and a former Executive Director of the Redbridge JCC. Together with Shira Genish, the JDC Kharkov representative, they have established a close relationship, discussed the most sensitive questions and brought about major positive changes in the JCC. From a new focus on youth and opening a new center for youth - Beit Atid, - to introducing fees for services and fundraising opportunities, employing new staff and working better as a staff team. The project, now in its third year, is expanding to include professional exchange between senior staff members of both JCCs. Jerry Makowsky was very excited when he addressed some 500 members at a JCC "end of the year" ceremony. "Walking into the Beit Dan JCC", he said, "one could immediately feel the warmth and excitement of a Jewish home, just like in Memphis."

So where is European Jewry heading? Alberto Senderey, JDC Director for Europe and Latin America, summarized our visits by saying that Jews in Europe are asking today what they can bring to the Jewish world. During 2,000 years of a rich Jewish history, that terminated tragically during the Holocaust, they have developed the most interesting and creative tools. It is time to add new pages to 'Jewish History in Europe'.

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