

The Renewal of Jewish Life in France After the Holocaust

David Weinberg

In comparison with other European Jewish communities the situation of French Jews after the liberation seemed far from hopeless. French Jewry was in the unique position of having experienced the Holocaust, yet having survived in large enough numbers to reassert itself after the war. It is estimated that there were 180,000 Jews in France in 1946 - 160,000 former residents and 20,000 refugees from central and eastern Europe. Of the surviving European Jewish communities outside the Soviet Union, only that in Romania was larger. The continuous influx of Jewish refugees fleeing DP camps and emerging from hiding - over 35,000 in the first three years after the war - ensured that France would become the second most populous Jewish community on the continent.

It is a generally accepted notion that the immigration of North African Jews to France in the 1950s and 1960s revitalized the French Jewish community. Little is known, however, of the community's struggle for survival and self-definition in the first few years after the war, when the very future of French Jewry seemed to hang in the balance. Burdened with the massive tasks of physical reconstruction and psychological rehabilitation within, French Jews also faced significant challenges from without: first, from the larger French society, whose attitudes toward its Jewish residents both during and immediately after the war raised serious questions concerning the historical symbiosis of "*Israelite*" and "*Français*"; and secondly, from the State of Israel, whose creation in 1948 transformed the Jewish presence in France from an imposed exile to a freely chosen dispersion. The uncertain attempts by French Jews to respond to these challenges reflect both the vitality and the problems of European Jewish life in the immediate post-Holocaust era.

Of the many pressing problems facing the newly reconstituted community in the early days after the war, three consumed most of its time and energy: the restoration of plundered property, the care and feeding of the refugees, and

the plight of orphaned and “adopted” children. Many Jews who had fled to southern France or who had been deported during the war found when they returned to cities such as Paris and Strasbourg that their business, furniture, and apartments had been expropriated by the Nazis and sold to Frenchmen. Others who had entrusted their shops to French neighbors were now asked to reimburse the latter for having kept their businesses going. To compound the damage, the provisional government seemed more concerned with courting the thousands of bourgeois who had enriched themselves under Vichy than with helping returning Jews.

In addition to the thousands of dispossessed French Jews without homes and means of support, the community was also burdened with the care and feeding of close to 40,000 displaced persons and refugees who found asylum in France. As in the case of the dispossessed Jews, the French government proved less than helpful.

Despite these difficulties, the French Jewish community, with the aid of American-sponsored relief agencies, such as the Joint Distribution Committee, was generally successful in integrating refugees. Under the guidance of the Comite Juif d’Action Social et de Reconstruction (COJASOR), nearly three-quarters of the Holocaust survivors who sought refuge in France were housed and fed. Over one-third received vocational training in the schools and camps established by ORT.

Another urgent need in the immediate post-war period was the rescue and rehabilitation of French Jewish youth. It is estimated that 5-15,000 Jewish children in France had lost their parents during the war. Countless others had been hidden with Christian families and now had to be sought out. Within days after the liberation, a special office was established in Paris to collect information on abandoned and orphaned children and to defend their legal and property rights. Thanks to the efforts of organizations such as the Oeuvre de Protection des Enfants Juifs (OPEJ) and the Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants (OSE), nearly 100 institutions - children’s homes, summer camps,

vocational centers, and medical facilities - were created to care for orphaned children and to reintegrate them into the community.

While the French Jewish community was able to provide foster parents for orphans, it had little success in recovering Jewish children who had been “adopted” by non-Jews. Many Christian parents had baptized Jewish children entrusted to their care during the occupation. When efforts were made by Jewish relatives to regain custody of the orphans, many such parents argued that it would be unfair to tear the child from a family environment in which he felt comfortable. In some cases they were supported by Jewish leaders who claimed that returning the children would be a slap in the face of non-Jews who had risked their lives to save them. Church leaders generally echoed the sentiments of their parishioners, arguing sophistically that Jews who had handed their sons and daughters over to Christians for safekeeping during the war had clearly wanted them to be baptized.

The antisemitic outbursts surrounding the efforts to regain lost property and to rescue orphaned children aroused fears of another Holocaust and led many Jews consciously to attempt to hide their identity. The pages of Jewish journals between 1944 and 1950 are filled with articles denouncing conversions, mixed marriages, and name changes on the part of French Jews. Similar concerns were to be found among East European refugees who refused to speak Yiddish when non-Jews were present and who avoided circumcising their children for fear of the return of an antisemitic regime to power. Administrators of relief efforts in the community bemoaned the fact that it was impossible to conduct a census because so many people were afraid to sign forms and to have their names appear on lists.

In contrast, however, to the thousands of Jews who concluded that the only antidote to antisemitism was the disappearance of Jewry, there were far more who emerged from World War II with a renewed sense of Jewish commitment. Jewish identity in post-war France was a complex weave of internal tensions born of contradictory memories of deportations and the contributions made by

Jews to the Resistance effort. The result was an embryonic new consciousness, which combined the hesitancy and self-effacement of the *Francais Israelite* with a growing pride in the dual heritage of Frenchman and Jew.

Source: Gutman, Yisrael and Saf, Avital (eds.), *She'arit Hapleta 1944-1948, Rehabilitation and Political Struggle, Proceedings of the Sixth Yad Vashem International Historical Conference*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1990, pp. 169-174.