

CONSISTOIRE CENTRAL DES ISRAELITES DE FRANCE

(Central Consistory of French Jews) The hierarchical religious organization of French Jewry, established in 1808. During the 1930s, in the face of rising antisemitism, the Consistoire cautioned against overt public demonstrations and tried to curb the political activism of immigrant Jews. With the fall of France, the Consistoire's leadership relocated from Paris to Lyons, in the unoccupied zone. Slow in responding to the catastrophe befalling French Jewry, the Consistoire began to function under the new circumstances in the spring of 1941 under the presidency of Jacques Helbronner, a sixty-eight-year old member of the Conseil d'Etat (Council of State). Following closely the Consistoire's traditional course of diplomacy, Helbronner advised the Jewish community to observe the anti-Jewish restrictions and thus to maintain the honor of French Jewry. On the community's behalf, the Consistoire filed numerous solemn protests against the Vichy racial legislation, and Helbronner intervened with Marshal Philippe Petain on many occasions. In this vein, the Consistoire led the campaign against the creation of the *union generale des israelites de france* (UGIF) and tried to uphold its own unique position in French Jewry. Not disbanded by the Vichy law establishing the UGIF, the Consistoire remained responsible for Jewish religious life, maintaining open synagogues until the end of the war and involving itself in welfare projects through the work of the Aumonerie Generale Israelite (Jewish Chaplaincy) and the Chief Rabbi's Fund. As the historical representative of French Jewry, the Consistoire continued to advocate moderation even after the deportations of the summer of 1942, although it registered a most vehement protest to Vichy.

After the German occupation of the south in November 1942 and the mass deportations from Marseilles in January 1943, the Consistoire withdrew its opposition to the UGIF, and on several occasions they jointly determined Jewish responses. However, a major change in the Consistoire's orientation ensued only after Helbronner was deported in October 1943, during the all-out effort of the SS to round up French Jews. Under the leadership of

Helbronner's successor, Leon Meiss, the Consistoire undertook discussions with all elements of the community, including the Communist factions, in an effort to establish a united Jewish position against the renewed German drive. Resistance groups and official representatives of established Judaism eventually set up the *conseil representatif des juifs de france*, an all-encompassing Jewish organization that was to direct French Jewry from early 1944 until the liberation of France. At the head of this unique body was the president of the Consistoire, Leon Meiss.