

BERNARD WASSERSTEIN

VANISHING DIASPORA

The Jews in Europe since 1945

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Preface

The Jews are vanishing from Europe - and not only because of Hitler. In 1939 there were nearly 10 million Jews in Europe; during the war more than half were murdered. By 1994, emigration and a surplus of deaths over births had reduced Europe's Jewish population again by more than half, to under 2 million. Demographic projections for the next two or three decades vary greatly, depending on such factors as the rate of emigration from the former Soviet Union; but the range of possibilities extends only downward - at best the Jews in Europe face slow diminution, at worst virtual extinction. Here and there pockets of ultraorthodox Jews, clinging to the tenets of the faith, will no doubt survive – a picturesque remnant like the Amish of Pennsylvania. Perhaps too some Europeans of the twenty-first century may point with pride to strands of Jewish ancestry as some white Americans today boast of partial Amerindian descent. Since the dawn of the modern era European Jews, as individuals shaped by a common spiritual and cultural tradition and as communities moulded by a shared historical destiny, played vitally important political, economic and intellectual roles in all the major European societies; a realistic forecast now is that within a few generations they will disappear as a significant element in the life of the continent.

Yet although the Jews are disappearing, the Jewish question has not gone away. On the contrary, it has re-emerged in different forms in the politics of most European countries since the war. Even in countries such as Poland and Austria, where there are hardly any Jews left, it has been a significant theme in public

Table 1: Jewish Populations in Europe

	•	•	•	
	1937	1946	1967	1994
Austria	191,000	31,000*	12,500	7,000
Belgium	65,000	45,000	40,500	31,800
Britain	330,000	370,000	400,000	295,000
Bulgaria	49,000	44,200	5,000	1,900
Czechoslovakia	357,000	55,000	15,000	7,600†
Denmark	8,500	5,500	6,000	6,400
Estonia	4,600	\$	\$	3,500
Finland	2,000	2,000	1,750	1,300
France	300,000	225,000	535,000	530,000
Germany	500,000	153,000*	30,000	55,000
Greece	77,000	10,000	6,500	4,800
Hungary	400,000	145,000	80,000	56,000
Ireland (Republic)	5,000	3,900	2,900	1,200
Italy	48,000	53,000★	35,000	31,000
Latvia	95,000	\$	\$	18,000
Lithuania	155,000	\$	\$	6,500
Luxemburg	3,500	500	500	600
Netherlands	140,000	28,000	30,000	25,000
Norway	2,000	750	1,000	1,000
Poland	3,250,000	215,000	21,000	6,000
Portugal	-	4,000	1,000	300
Romania	850,000	420,000	100,000	10,000
Spain	-	6,000	6,000	12,000
Sweden	7,500	15,500	13,000	16,500
Switzerland	18,000	35,000	20,000	19,000
$Turkey\P$	50,000	48,000	35,000	18,000
USSR/CIS¶	2,669,000	1,971,000	1,715,000	812,000
Yugoslavia	71,000	12,000	7,000	3,500‡
TOTAL	9,648,100	3,898,350	3,119,650	1,980,900

Note: These figures, collated from many sources, are of varying reliability and in some cases are subject to a wide margin of error and interpretation. This warning applies particularly to the figures for 1946, a year in which there was considerable Jewish population movement. It must also be borne in mind that the boundaries of many European countries changed between 1937 and 1946.

^{*} Includes 'Displaced Persons' † Total for Czech Republic and Slovakia ‡ Total for former Yugoslavia § Baltic States included in USSR between 1941 and 1991 ¶ Excludes Asiatic regions

discourse at critical political junctures since 1945. In the Soviet Union, home of the largest Jewish community to survive Hitler, the Bolshevik claim to have eliminated the Jewish question was proved to be bogus; indeed, the Soviet failure to solve the problem was one of the factors that galvanized opposition to the regime in its last two decades. In the Eastern European lands dominated by Soviet imperialism between 1945 and 1989, the large pre-war Jewish communities have all but disappeared, yet antisemitism remained and remains a live force. In Western Europe the emancipation of the Jews, first achieved in France under the Revolution, seemed to provide a secure position for Jews within liberal democracies. But during the Second World War the collusion of the administrations of occupied countries in the deportation of Jews to the death camps, the indifference of most Germans and many (though not all) occupied populations to the fate of their Jewish neighbours, as well as the inaction of the British and other Allied governments in the face of Nazi mass murder, revealed holes in the effectiveness of the liberal umbrella as a protection for Jews. With the establishment of Israel in 1948 a new ideological pole of attraction was created, as well as a new, apparently successful formula for resolving the Jewish problem. To a considerable degree it did provide such a solution - both for its own Jewish citizens and for Diaspora Jews threatened by persecution. But the establishment of the Jewish state, while stimulating a sense of collective pride and self-confidence, also gave rise in the 1950s and 1960s to new accusations of double loyalties or of disloyalty and in the 1970s and 1980s exposed Jews in the Diaspora to bloody terrorist attacks.

Why will the Jewish question not go away? Why is it that neither Hitler's 'Final Solution' nor the communist, liberal or Zionist prescriptions for grappling with the problem succeeded in eliminating it from the political and social agenda? Why is it still today a disturbing element in the politics of many European countries? The main purpose of this book is to address this cluster of questions and to suggest some new answers.

The passage of half a century since the end of the war, the collapse of communist rule in Eastern Europe and the movement towards a comprehensive Arab–Israeli peace settlement furnish a convenient vantage point for thinking about these questions afresh and assessing how history has answered them in the post-war period.

First, some problems of definition.

Who is a Jew? According to Jewish religious law, a Jew is a person born to a Jewish mother. This definition, however, is too restrictive to satisfy contemporary social realities. Another definition was offered by Jean-Paul Sartre in his Réflexions sur la question juive, published in 1946: the Jew was quite simply a man whom other men took for a Jew. By 'other men', Sartre meant particularly antisemites. 'If the Jew didn't exist,' he wrote, 'the antisemite would invent him.'1 While the definition has the merit of being almost all-inclusive, it obviously fails to satisfy the desire of most Jews to define their own collective identity – not to mention the desire of a few to hide it from others or from themselves or to secede from the collectivity. In most West European countries the question may be resolved for most people on a purely voluntary basis: within certain limits they may choose whether or not to be Jews. A person of Jewish ancestry may decide to merge totally into the larger society - in the nineteenth century the process commonly involved conversion; in the secular societies of postwar Europe no such rite of passage is required. Many assimilate implicitly, some explicitly; thus, for example, in Britain some years ago, the Liberal MP for Ely, Clement Freud, bearer of one of the most illustrious Jewish names of the century, let it be known that he did not wish to be included in counts of Jewish MPs drawn up after each election by the Jewish Chronicle. In general, in liberal societies, no particular advantage is gained, nor any significant odium incurred by such actions which are viewed as matters of private preference. As for choosing to become Jewish, this is a matter of little public import. The would-be convert must meet the necessary conditions (stringent for entry to the orthodox community, much more lax in the case of Liberal and Reform congregations) but the state takes no interest in the matter. Elsewhere, particularly as one moves east, however, matters are rather different. In the countries of the former USSR, for

example, Jews have always been regarded as members of a national as well as a religious group and are registered as such on their identity documents. Once so registered, ethnic status is not easily changed. In the case of Soviet Jews, through much of the post-war period such public registration and ready official identification provided a basis for thinly disguised policies of discrimination – for example, in access to higher education. On the other hand, in the 1970s, official recognition as a Jew provided a basis in the USSR for possible emigration – a goal of many besides Jews – so that what was a disadvantage in one way might become an asset in another. The problem of definition is thus of more than linguistic import. This book is concerned in the broadest sense with all those who considered themselves or were considered by others as Jews.

What is the Jewish community - that vague and fleetingly discerned entity whose very existence is denied by some writers? The word community implies some shared collective life which may or may not approximate to social reality. In some countries the Jewish community has a legal definition. In the Federal Republic of Germany, for example, members of the community are formally registered as such by public authorities and a proportional share of their taxes is paid towards communal expenses. In other countries, for example Great Britain, the community is a purely voluntary body although recognized under the law for certain purposes, such as the registration of marriages. Yet other countries occupy a middle position - France, for example, although a secular state, in some senses militantly so, nevertheless recognizes the Consistoire, the main synagogal authority in France, as having a legal status. In all the secular societies (which is to say all the societies) of contemporary Europe, however, there are large numbers of people on the fringe. A study of Dutch Jewry around 1960 estimated that about a third of the Jews in the country 'do not desire to be considered members of a Jewish religious community'.2 Although such persons may not be formal members of any Jewish institution, they may still consider themselves in some sense Jewish - perhaps in an ethnic or cultural sense, sometimes for some residual religious purposes such as burial. Some sociologists and demographers distinguish between a 'core' Jewish community whose members actively identify as Jews and a 'larger aggregate of all current Jews, former Jews, other persons of recent Jewish descent, and any other related non-Jewish persons who share household ties with Jews'.³ Here too this book adopts, for most purposes, a broadly inclusive rather than a narrow definition — but the reader should bear in mind throughout that 'community' is, in most cases, a convenient shorthand rather than an accurate description of social reality. Most Jewish populations in Europe in the recent past were divided — by political ideology, by geography, by social class or economic standing, or by religious commitment — into discrete and sometimes mutually hostile elements. Community should not, for the purposes of this book, be held to imply unity. As a French Jewish writer noted in the summer of 1945: 'Jewry of the Diaspora is a body perpetually torn apart. It cannot find a single direction.'⁴

What is antisemitism and who is an antisemite? The very spelling of these words has aroused controversy. Yehuda Bauer, the noted historian of the Holocaust, has suggested that they should not be hyphenated; to do so, he argues, involves a conceptual error since, after all, there is no such doctrine as 'semitism'. The centre for the study of antisemitism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, founded by Bauer, accordingly deletes the hyphen. This form no doubt has the merit of logical consistency and might also help counter such absurd pseudo-semantic notions as that presented by some anti-Zionist controversialists who have occasionally maintained that Arab 'anti-semitism' is impossible since, after all, Arabs, like Jews, are 'semites'. For the purposes of this book antisemitism is understood as both an ideological doctrine and a set of prejudicial attitudes. The doctrine combines disparate features from many sources: traditional Christian teaching and Nazi neo-paganism, integral nationalism and populist demagogy ('the socialism of fools'), hostility to Jews as capitalists and to Jews as communists. As a set of attitudes it fulfils a variety of psychological needs both collective and individual, generally of a psychopathic nature. The antisemite, consequently, may be a sophisticated intellectual or a boor, a militant atheist or a Christian crusader, a communist or a reactionary. All these types appear in what follows. This is not, however, a study of antisemites - though sadly

they repeatedly force their way on to the stage – but of Jews. And in spite of everything it is not, taken as a whole, the story of Jews as victims of the hatred of their neighbours but rather as victims of their kindness – of the processes of integration and assimilation that have succeeded, at least in Western Europe, to such a degree as to threaten the collective survival of Jews on the Continent.

What, in the context of a discussion of the Jewish question in modern Europe, is assimilation? The late Maurice Freedman, one of the pioneers of contemporary Jewish sociology, pointed out that the term can have many meanings. For example, he wrote,

To be an Englishman and a Jew, which is probably the aim of a very large proportion of Jews born in England, depresses Judaism to the level of one faith among many in a predominantly secular society. Here assimilation implies the state in which Jew, Protestant and Catholic stand in similar relationship to the social entity which comprises them all. It is debatable whether Jews have in fact reached this kind of position . . . ⁵

That was written in 1955. Since then Jews, at least in England, have moved much closer to such a position – for better or for worse. Many Jews, particularly the orthodox religious and Zionists, would say for worse. Such Jews, indeed, often use the word 'assimilation' almost as a term of abuse, as in 'he's totally assimilated' (meaning 'he has lost his Jewish identity'). For that reason I emphasize that my use of the word carries no opprobrious connotation.

One might proceed further to attempt a definition of such terms as 'Diaspora', 'Zionism', 'Holocaust' and so on. But in these cases, as with the terms already mentioned, even to raise the question of definition immediately involves broaching critical problems of substance. It seems more sensible, therefore, to address these issues at appropriate points in the narrative. As an aid, however, to the understanding of a few other such terms and non-English expressions I have provided a short glossary.

The primary themes of this book are social and political: the evolving shape of the Jewish problem in different national or ideological contexts, the impact on attitudes towards Jews of

collective memories of the Second World War, the revolutionized collective imagery of the Jew arising from the creation and growth of Israel, the rapidly changing social character of the major Jewish communities, the impact of new Christian approaches to Jews and Judaism, and the reactions to all these developments of European Jews themselves. Let me also say what this book is not: it is not concerned with Jewish 'contributions', whether to European cultures or economies; I deal only to a limited degree with the internal communal histories of European Jewries and hardly at all with their inner spiritual and intellectual currents - save in so far as such discussion is necessary for my central argument.

To the best of my knowledge this is the first attempt to write a history of European Jewry in the post-war period. In writing about the very recent past I have had to rely to a considerable degree on published sources, first and foremost the Jewish press. The great period of Yiddish journalism in Europe ended in 1939 but there are still dozens of lively Jewish newspapers appearing all over the continent, among which the London Jewish Chronicle, the oldest Jewish paper in the world (it was founded in 1841), approaches the status of a newspaper of record. I have also made use of some archival materials for the early part of the period and have had access to valuable unpublished analytical reports and memoranda prepared by various research bodies and organizations (all listed in the Notes and the Bibliography). Perhaps my most important source, however, has been personal observation over the past three decades.

A great deal of what has been published hitherto on various aspects of the subject has inevitably had a certain polemical thrust arising from the emotions of the post-war period, the ferocity of the Arab-Israel conflict and the pervasive context of the Cold War. As the Second World War generation dies out, as the Middle East conflict winds down and as the Cold War recedes into the black hole of memory, it becomes possible, perhaps for the first time, to write on this subject sine ira ac studio (a momentary lapse from this impossible ideal may be observed in the footnote on p. 64). Much of the book is about conflict - between antisemites and Jews, Zionists and anti-Zionists, assimilationists

and those who placed some value on collective Jewish survival, and so on. I do not pretend to a neutrality in any of these disputes. Nevertheless, I have tried, no doubt with only limited success, to jettison the implicit assumptions and special pleading characteristic of much of what has previously been written on the subject. This book is conceived in neither the spirit of Job nor that of Cassandra. It draws its inspiration rather from the example of the first generation of Jewish sociologists, demographers and contemporary historians such as Arthur Ruppin, Jacob Lestchinsky and Emmanuel Ringelblum. The world they delineated was dead by 1945. Its heirs form the subject of this book.

Jerusalem November 1994

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Abbreviations

AJDC American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee

(the 'Joint')

AJYB American Jewish Year Book

CBF Central British Fund for World Jewish Relief

records

CRIF Conseil Représentatif des Israélites de France (later

known as the Conseil Représentatif des

Institutions Juives de France): the main French

Jewish representative body

DP 'Displaced person', refugee

FSJU Fonds Social Juif Unifié: the main French Jewish

welfare organization

HIAS Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society: American Jewish

welfare organization

IJARR Institute of Jewish Affairs Research Report

IRO International Refugee Organization

JC Jewish Chronicle

JJS Jewish Journal of Sociology

JTADNB Jewish Telegraphic Agency Daily News Bulletin

NYT New York Times

PRO Public Record Office, Kew

SJA Soviet Jewish Affairs

UNRRA United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation

Administration

USNA United States National Archives, Washington,

DC

Glossary

Agudas Yisroel (Agudat Yisrael) Anti-Zionist political party of orthodox Jews, founded in Kattowitz in 1897. Hence Agudah, Agudist, etc.

Ashkenazim Jews of German origin: more generally, all Jews of Central or East European origin except those of the Balkans.

Bund Jewish socialist-autonomist party, founded in Vilna in 1897. Strong in inter-war Poland but virtually destroyed during the Second World War.

Diaspora The dispersion of the Jews outside Israel.

Hasidim Followers of the revivalist hasidic movement, founded in the eighteenth century, generally adhering to a specific rabbinical dynasty (Belzer, Lubavitcher, Satmarer, etc.). Hasidim are strict observers of Jewish religious laws. Most hasidim today live in the USA or Israel, although some are found in London (Stamford Hill and Golders Green), Paris, Antwerp and a few other European cities. Male hasidim generally do not shave, cover their heads at all times and wear distinctive dress — most commonly wide-brimmed black hats and long black coats.

'Joint' American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee: the major charity involved in distribution of relief to European Jews.

Knesset The Israeli parliament.

Ladino Also known as Judaeo-Spanish: language of the Sephardim (q.v.) in Turkey and the Balkans. Basically fifteenth-century Castilian written in Hebrew characters (in modern Turkey in Latin characters).

Mizrachi Religious Zionist political party founded in Vilna in 1902.

Revisionists Right-wing Zionist party founded by Vladimir Jabotinsky.

Sephardim Jews of Spanish or Portuguese origin: descendants of Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal in 1492 and 1497 respectively. The main Sephardi settlements were in Turkey and the Balkans (particularly Salonica). Old Sephardi families also lived in Amsterdam, London and Hamburg. By extension the term is often applied also to all Jews of non-European origin, especially Middle Eastern and North African Jews.

Yeshiva College of talmudic learning.

Yiddish Language of the Ashkenazim (q.v.). Basically Middle High German written in Hebrew characters with an admixture of vocabulary from Hebrew, Slavonic and some other sources. Widely spoken in Russia, Poland, Lithuania and much of East—Central Europe until the Second World War; its use is now largely confined to ultra-orthodox communities.

Yom Kippur The Day of Atonement, a fast, the holiest day of the Jewish year; also date of the outbreak of the 1973 Arab—Israel war.

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