

## **Jews in Europe are alive and well...**

If you ask the average Jew in Israel or North America what is the status of Jewish life in Europe, you will probably hear that “they suffer from growing anti-Semitism”, “their communities are shrinking” and “the young people are not affiliated”. While there is no doubt that keeping the Jewish flame alive in today’s Europe is a challenge, the 350 participants from 31 countries singing at Shabbat dinner during the recent Pan European Conference of Jewish Community Centers and Communities in London (October 21-24) left no doubt that Jewish renewal in Europe is alive and well. The conference was organized by the relatively young European Association of Jewish Community Centers (EAJCC) in partnership with JDC, the World Confederation of Jewish Community Centers (WCJCC), the Jewish Federation of France (FSJU) and additional local and European partners.

“We speak about engaging the next generation” said Allan Finkelstien, President of JCC Association of North America who attended the conference as a member of a WCJCC overseas delegation, “Several communities in Eastern Europe have Presidents and Chairs in their 20s. These are bright, passionate, and exciting young leaders who clearly have a vision for the kinds of communities they want to create or, in some cases, re-create. We saw in action what we have only talked about in North America. It was heart warming to engage with these young leaders who dream big and articulate so clearly what they wish for. We must follow their lead in our own communities.”

Without taking away from the uplifting feelings described above, some serious concerns were debated:

- The issue of “who is a Jew” and Halachic conversion is tearing apart communities and harming efforts of outreach and inclusion. Dr. Alek Oscar, the President of the Jewish Community of Sofia, Bulgaria, gave an example of two young friends who were about to celebrate their Bar Mitzvah. One boy whose family name is Cohen is the son of a non Jewish mother while his best friend whose family name is Ivanov is the son of a Jewish mother. Guess which one could not celebrate his Bar Mitzvah at the Sofia synagogue, Cohen or Ivanov? And why both of them, who were good friends from birth, could not celebrate it together?
- Roy Grahm, the Director of Strategy for the new JCC for London, challenged the assumptions of engaging the young generation, wondering whether the current leaders are equipped to address the changing trends of socialization, technology, self identity and use of time. Clearly a global Jewish concern.
- “Jews in Europe need a critical mass in order to move foreword and that can only be achieved through cooperation among communities” declared Sam Bengio, President of the Jewish Community of Madrid. This is easier said than done when many of the rejuvenated communities are less than 3000 strong, when other communities have age old, conservative and particular traditions and when Europe, in general, is home to so many diverse societies, cultures and languages.
- The Israeli delegates could soon observe that the issue of the relationship with Israel was the “hot potato” of the conference. While the warm sentiments are not denied, the ambivalence towards Israel, especially in light of the current political circumstances ran as an undercurrent. Israeli delegates from the Israel Association of Community Centers- Gaby Bar Zakai, Dorit Rom, Sara Tesler, and Lea Balas-realized that Israel is more in the

background rather than in the forefront and that there is a great need for Israelis to confront this new reality and together with Europeans address these alarming trends.

If anything, the conference proved the need for an all European forum that can openly raise poignant issues and down the road provide some practical tools for implementation. “We are creating a central address for JCCs in Europe” concluded Dr. Jo Zrihen, the President of EAJCC, who is also Vice President of FSJU, France, and promised to translate this unified vision into action.

WCJCC sees great importance in conveying this European Jewish voice and including it in the often exclusive North America-Israel conversation axis. We promised the participants to bring back home to our own communities the impressions of Jewish renaissance in Europe that we witnessed first hand and work harder towards developing stronger ties with the Jewish communities of Europe.

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