

Europe's Jews not sitting on packed bags ready to leave, says prof

At JCC Global conference in Jerusalem, French academic Diana Pinto tells of a return to pre-Holocaust culture and thought in a community that stays because it wants to

BY AMANDA BORSCHEL-DAN | November 10, 2015, 2:37 pm |

After series of horrific terrorist attacks against Jews in Paris and Copenhagen last winter, Jewish media was filled with commentators wondering out loud whether 2015 will “finally” be the year that European Jews leave that “cursed” continent. Speaking at the Jewish Community Center’s world conference in Jerusalem last week, however, European historian Dr. Diana Pinto assured the 500-strong crowd from 24 countries across the Diaspora that neither in 2015, nor in the foreseeable future, will Europe’s 1.4 million Jews be packing their “cardboard suitcases” and fleeing.

Through a mix of ironic humor and on-the-ground observations, in a plenary session at the JCC Global 2015 entitled “Building Community Resilience in Times of Political and Social Unrest — the European Perspective,” keynote speaker Pinto dispelled the notion of a dying European Jewish community plagued by unending anti-Semitism and just waiting for a ticket out.

According to Pinto, American and Israeli Jews see Europe as the land of “the last reckless Jews who didn’t learn the lessons of the Holocaust.” This is hardly the case, said the Paris-based Harvard-educated academic, who was born in 1949 in post-war Italy.

Granted, said Pinto, there is an undeniable abundance of anti-Semites in Europe today — individuals who adhere to either “new” Islamist anti-Semitism or the well-known old guard European racism. But to compare what is happening today to 1930s Europe is “an affront” and “insult” to the memory of those who suffered and died in the Holocaust, said Pinto.

“From Portugal to Russia, Jews are not experiencing any state anti-Semitism,” she said. There is no place in Europe where Jews are persecuted and hounded specifically as Jews by the state and elites. And without this state infrastructure, there can be no widespread implementation of individuals’ anti-Semitic views, she said.

Quite the contrary. Already there is legislation against anti-Semitism in most European Union

countries and earmarked funding for their Jews' protection. And this increasing awareness is ongoing: Just last month the European Commission Vice President Frans Timmermans announced he would appoint a special coordinator for combating anti-Semitism in Europe.

For example, France, where Pinto has lived for decades, has "one of the best security mechanisms for protecting its Jews," she said. The country is massively funding the effort and there are soldiers in full battle gear posted in front of every possible Jewish communal institution. To "perverse effects," she added wryly, for now the public clearly knows where the Jewish institutions are.

There are a large number of Jews who are increasingly uncomfortable in a France ridden by anti-Semitic harassment — "the insults are unbearable," said Pinto. That, and poor financial opportunities, has the Jewish Agency for Israel expecting some 10,000 new Israeli citizens from France this year.

"But that means there are 575,000 Jews still hanging around France," said Pinto.

'There are no trapped Jews in the European continent. If they don't want to be there, Israel is here'

Pinto spoke to the rise of the far-right nationalist parties sweeping Europe. In the question and answer period of the session, a Greek JCC delegate said Golden Dawn, her country's third-largest party, is a "scary reality" due to its ability to garner seven percent of the vote. Pinto added that France's Nationalist Front could capture up to 24% in certain regions. The Hungarian delegate said that in parts of Hungary, the ultra-nationalist Jobbik party is powerful, which makes the country's Jews think of the rise of Fascism in the 1930s.

Pinto rejected what she described as "a lachrymose vision of history," which would describe the situation of Jews today as just another chapter in the downtrodden Jewish saga.

"There are no trapped Jews in the European continent. If they don't want to be there, Israel is here. It makes a mind-boggling difference as compared to the 1930s," said Pinto.

The most extreme political parties of Europe have another target today: the Muslims.

"We as Jews are no longer the prize target. It is the Muslims or the other minorities," said Pinto.

Somewhat proudly, she described how European Jewry, remembering its own post-war refugee status, is on the forefront of welcoming the influx of largely Muslim migrants and refugees — "one of the greatest wagers of the coming decade."

'It doesn't matter where you come from, what matters is where you're going'

In this interface with peoples holding "historically laden identities," European Jewry is saying, "It doesn't matter where you come from, what matters is where you're going," said Pinto.

Post-session, the polyglot professor energetically switched from English to French to Spanish to address concerns from delegates from Britain, South America and France before they rushed off to the packed conference's next activity.

Later, sipping water on a couch in the Yehuda Hotel lounge during an interview with The Times of Israel, Pinto's message was one of soft-spoken careful optimism. Visibly pleased, she told of a revival of pre-Holocaust Jewish thought from European Jewish roots that were previously abandoned in the effort to strengthen the new Jewish state.

But today, with disagreement with Israeli policies on the rise, European Jews are returning to their "Jewish ethnicity" and the philosophy of the progressive rabbis of the 1920s and 1930s. The rise of interest in Berlin-born Rabbi Regina Jonas, the first ordained Jewish woman, is an example of this new trend.

"What was considered dead and buried is coming back," she said.

Also in Europe, "Jewish spaces," a topic of particular interest for Pinto, are continuously evolving as the site of interfaith encounters. Take for instance the new POLIN museum of Polish Jewish history, which is widely toured by Poles who learn about the country's rich Jewish culture that was decimated in the Holocaust.

Non-Jews are increasingly addressing their countries' shameful World War II past, said Pinto, with monuments now marking mass graves that were unrecognized for decades. For many Europeans, she said, the very existence of Jewish communities — that are in many places flourishing — serves to calm a stricken non-Jewish populace.

"The Holocaust is a burning daily problem, in Israel and in the US as well. Europe is the only place in which the Holocaust happened, but people continue to conjugate their verbs in the future," said Pinto.