



BY DIANA PINTO

The Third Pillar?

Toward a European Jewish IDENTITY

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

The Third Pillar? was written in 1999, and so does not discuss the period when many European Jews (and American and Israeli Jews) were confronted with the "New antisemitism." Fortunately that trend has since abated because Europe's governments have taken a very firm stance against it. As a result, the themes and arguments in *The Third Pillar?* are once again relevant.

In early March 1999, three weeks before the war in Kosovo began, I attended an international conference in Budapest on “Southeastern Europe: A New Agenda For The Twenty-First Century.” The conference brought together leading representatives from the United States, Western Europe, and every country of the Balkans, including representatives from Kosovo. There were, of course, no Jewish topics on the program, for Europe no longer possesses a burning “Jewish Question,” and Israelis were not present. Yet the Hungarian keynote speaker at the conference, the leading spokesperson in the world of Balkan think tanks, and an equally impressive Turkish businessman involved in regional confidence building, as well as many NGO activists from the region, were all Jewish. These activists working for transnational dialogue, borderless harmony, and a more civilized European space would of course have recoiled in horror if someone had identified their initiatives as “Jewish” or sought to define them as “Jews” as a way of relativizing or perhaps even disqualifying their statements. A commanding Jewish presence thus remained invisible on the continent, as though the very idea of saying publicly “as a Jew in Europe, I would like Europe to be, or to do, such and such” continued to be as an impossible proposition after Auschwitz, as it had been before—an identity sacrilege in our universalist and highly individualist democratic societies.

The presence/absence of so many Jews at the Balkan conference begs the two central questions of this essay. The first is internal. *Can Jews in Europe today come together to constitute*

a significant “third pole” for a post-war Jewish world mainly established in Israel and America? The second is external and more fundamental for our concerns. *Can Jews in Europe today assert their active presence in a democratic continent coming to grips with pluralist and multicultural challenges?* In brief, sixty years after the Second World War and the Shoah and at the dawn of the twenty-first century, can one speak of or even imagine the contours of a new European Jewish identity, one that would be enriching and useful to Jews and non-Jews in Europe and around the world?

The answer in my opinion is “yes,” qualified by the proviso that identities take shape only if there are people who incarnate them, in this case Jews who feel equally at home in their Jewish and European roots. It is my belief that only now, in the context of a democratic (or aspiring democratic) and reunited pan-European continent, do we have the premises for such a new Jewish identity. The road pointing to such a future European Jewish identity is still fraught with controversy, however. It is highly complex (both within and without), and even counterintuitive. For a European Jewish identity to emerge a series of major conceptual obstacles have had and still have to be lifted, including a profound (and not wholly unjustified) antipathy for the very concept of “Europe” in a post-Shoah Jewish world. Yet only with the lifting of these obstacles, however, can one begin to delineate the contours of any future-oriented European Jewish identity and can Jews calmly confront the challenges ahead—both as Europeans and as Jews.





In the immediate post-war period, the setting seemed strikingly clear: Jewish life in Europe was finished. Israel constituted the future, along with America even though the two poles of world Jewry lived in an uneasy balance. American Jews had the security and the clout, Israelis the historical legitimacy and the universal “meaning.” After the near extermination of European Jewry, most Jews in the world were convinced that Europe had become, after Auschwitz, the equivalent of post-1492 Spain: a continent with a spent Jewish past no longer harboring significant Jewish life.

On this count, ideology seemed to back history. Zionism, well before Nazism and the creation of the state of Israel, delegitimized a Jewish presence in incurably antisemitic Europe and prodded the return of all the Jews to their historic homeland, Erets Israel. The very term “European Jews” was associated in Zionist minds with Jews who had all but forfeited their identity through the folly of assimilation, or with curbed, at times sycophantic, ultra-religious Jews who had gone to the gas chambers as sheep to slaughter. For Zionists, Europe and the Jewish people were incompatible.

American Jews shared, along with so many other immigrants to the New World, a similar reading of Europe as a continent of intolerance and injustice. They considered instead America as an exceptional land of tolerance and harmony, the equivalent of a “terrestrial Jerusalem.” As citizens of the most victorious and powerful country in the post-war period, American Jews did not consider themselves to be living in Diasporic exile, for Jews and Jewish life thrived freely in America. Zionism

was for the “other” Jews of the world, including all those of Europe, not for America’s. Thus, the two poles of post-Holocaust Jewish life shared a common revulsion to Europe and a common belief that Jews had no business being on the continent of death.

This anti-European vision was also shared by most Jews in Western Europe. While many felt personally at home in their respective Western European homelands, this did not prevent them from condemning “Europe” as a concept and value, and failing to see how Jews could possibly live in the other countries of the continent. Furthermore, across Europe, the majority of Jews also perceived themselves (through Zionist eyes) as a disappearing species. They justified their presence in Western Europe as a passing but vital phenomenon for the economic and political buttressing of a tiny and threatened Israel, and were confident that their children would settle there.

Thus, the traditionally unsolvable “Jewish Question” had been answered. Jews could not be integrated into Europe’s nations while still keeping their identities. Beyond a religious identity, there could no longer be any significant collective Jewish life in Europe.

This rather comfortable state of mind came to an end, as so much else linked to the post-war period, with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. While many Jews assumed this would lead to the departure of all Jews from the Communist bloc—and thus the final closing of

accounts in the painful chapter of Jewish life in Eastern Europe—something quite different happened, as supposedly assimilated Jews and their post-war children re-embraced their Jewish roots and identities. Eastern Europe was suddenly aglow with a numerically small but qualitatively vital revival of Jewish life; and thus, the demise of communist regimes across Europe set the ground for an emerging European Jewish identity.

At precisely the same time, a second major transformation—this one cultural rather than political—was also taking place. Jews in Western Europe (who were “dis-assimilating” just like their Eastern European counterparts) had begun taking on a more confrontational attitude toward their countries’ respective pasts during the Holocaust. The Holocaust had long been a forbidding, almost taboo subject, but today, a slow coming to terms with its legacy is finally becoming possible. From Norway to Turkey, from Portugal to Russia, the specificity of what happened to the Jews during the Holocaust is finally standing out with respect to the far more classical stories of war suffering, resistance, anti-fascist struggle and national liberation. Integration of the Holocaust into the pasts of all nations is continuing, as the roles played by neutral countries, most notably Switzerland but also Sweden, in helping indirectly the Nazi war effort has changed previously favorable evaluations of their wartime record. The Holocaust is expanding from the confined realm of Jewish grief to become a tragic chapter of Europe’s own history, Europe’s own genocide.

The “coming home” of the Holocaust to Europe has had only beneficial consequences for its Jews, lifting an oppressive silence and permitting long needed national debates to take place. It also has important implications for a future European Jewish identity. If Jews can live voluntarily in Europe, *as Jews*, it means that there is no essential historical and unwashable European “evil” for which the only response can be Zionism. European Jews in this context offer the living proof that the Holocaust, while never being forgotten, can be transcended, and this stance, more than any other, may set them apart from their Israeli or American cousins.

Yet positing a European Jewish identity entails addressing a multitude of challenges. First, it necessitates abolishing the old pecking order within European Jewry, which gave the highest status to the Zionists and, to a lesser degree, to the Orthodox, even though they were essentially perceived as guardians of a spent world. A future European Jewish identity also implies—paradoxically—retracing one’s steps backward and re-entering the lost world of humanistic European Jewry supposedly killed at Auschwitz to look for living embers rather than ashes. This is a major challenge: Post-war American Jews are convinced that they carried off the last spark of European Judaism into the terrestrial Jerusalem of the New World, far from spent Europe; and for most of the post-war period, it seemed undoubtedly so. Yet any future European Jewish identity will be

anchored instead in the transcending of the Holocaust, by interpreting the pre-Shoah Jewish world in a positive manner, and not as simply a prelude to Auschwitz.¹

There are other challenges, as well. (Here I refer to political and cultural challenges, not spiritual ones: Jewish religious life interests us only insofar as its manifestations succeed or fail in espousing the leading values of our age, pluralist democratic tolerance.) The next two major challenges are the *multicultural challenge* and the *pluralist challenge*. As European societies increasingly take into account the many different types of “others” in their midst, whether they be older ethnic minorities or more recent immigrants, Jews will increasingly have to decide how they define themselves on a transformed continent. Should Jews become “outsiders” prodding a new multicultural tolerance for their traditions and rituals? Should they invoke the same tolerance instead as “insiders” dismantling from within millennial prejudices but in the name of equality rather than in that of special (as though “exotic”) treatment? Meeting the multicultural challenge implies confronting links to Judaism’s “others”: Judaism cannot close itself off from the world in the name of a hallowed specificity. But it also means embracing Jews’ own multicultural heritage, accepting internal differences of class, ethnicity, lifestyle, and religion, and refusing a uniquely religious definition.


Meeting the pluralist challenge implies—similarly—finding an equilibrium between the

pluralist ideals of the outside world and the manifold incarnations of an often traditional and hierarchical Judaism, a Judaism whose internal equilibrium had been greatly facilitated in the past by the external unifying pressure of often hostile surroundings. Post-Holocaust Jewry in Western Europe huddled around their respective communities in a self-protective stance that privileged tradition over innovation in what was basically a traumatized collective survival. Unity was more important than internal pluralism when pursuing the only “legitimate” post-war Jewish tasks, combating antisemitism and supporting Israel. Now that most of Europe is no longer under the sway of ideological regimes, Jews must confront the question of how to develop in their communities the same pluralist tolerance that they have come to expect of the outside world.² For if Jews are accepted with their multiple loyalties outside, they must now in turn accept multiple ways of being Jewish inside.

That challenge is far more internal than external. Yet the final challenge is both internal *and* external: creating a *Jewish Space*. Unlike Israel, which is its own vast Jewish Space, or America, in which the Jewish Space is filled by the Jews themselves in what can be called a sociological and cultural triumph, Jews in Europe are only one part of the Jewish Space. In Jewish study programs at the universities, in museums, in the realm of publishing, as well as in every other Jewish manifestation (except for religion), non-Jews will constitute the majority of the “users”

1 Additionally, the spotlight placed on Jewish themes throughout Europe has had one primordial consequence for Europe’s Jews. It has in a sense freed them from the existential burden of being the vestals of the Holocaust in the name of the murdered and on behalf of the survivors.

2 Put slightly differently: after millennia of discrimination and exclusion, followed by the maelstrom of emancipation and its apparent traumatic finale of the Holocaust, Jews in Europe have yet to come to terms with their condition as fully-fledged citizens of their respective countries able to pursue the Jewish identity of their choice in the freest possible manner.



and even implementers of this space. Rather than perceiving this reality as an impoverishment, Jews should consider this structural condition as a major positive challenge, indeed as a challenge unique to Europe. For it is only here that Jews must confront historically charged “others,” whose ancestors were very much present, if not always responsible, during the Holocaust and before that during the centuries of European antisemitism. Yet if Jews now live in Europe in a voluntary manner it means that they share a series of complex affinities with these “others” and it is this link which must be deepened and turned into a creative dialogue, beyond the current wars for memory that have made the headlines of all the Western press in the last decades.³ The coming to the fore of Jewish themes in our pluralist democratic societies has thus opened the way for ever larger Jewish Spaces, in particular in countries that carry the “presence of the absence” such as Spain, Portugal, Poland and above all Germany. There the Jewish absence is an integral part of the national histories and as such can easily lead to a museum type vision of dead or expelled Jews, the equivalent of putting so many menorahs on a shelf. Jewish Spaces across Europe need to be predicated on the past, but a *living past* that is no longer read as so many steps on the road to Auschwitz. Only living Jews can turn the Jewish Space into a locus of creativity, one that can powerfully contribute to a future oriented Europe.

The difference is quite simply that between taxidermy and biology.

TOWARD A EUROPEAN JEWISH IDENTITY?

Whether such an identity will really crystallize depends ultimately on the continent’s own Jews. The internal and external challenges are all there waiting to be seized creatively. However, no amount of American and Israeli intervention and funding can make such an identity exist if it does not possess and develop its own dynamic. During this past decade, as Europe embarked on its own sea change, international Jewish support was crucial to the establishment of new communities, to the rebirth of Jewish life especially in Eastern Europe, and to the financing of encounters. Now that the Jewish actors of the new Europe are gradually putting themselves in place, the ball will be increasingly in the European camp, a camp defined in the largest possible sense, one that by no means excludes but instead welcomes Jewish contributions from elsewhere. In this context it is significant to see that the heirs of the old German Jewry to be found mainly in the United States but also in Israel are increasingly attracted to the growing Jewish Space in Germany. They come to it not only for the sake of their own past, but very much as an international Jewish stake for the future. The past is now coming back to life in Germany whereas it had been preciously preserved in exile, whether in New York or Jerusalem, most notably through the Leo Baeck institutes. The prognosis so far seems good. Everywhere throughout Europe “new Jews” from Portugal to Russia are developing their own symbioses, agendas and cultural life.

³ ... and in the last five years in particular, around such burning topics as Swiss banks and Nazi gold, reparations, spoliations, etc.

These Jews are qualitatively different from those of Europe's pre-war past, in part thanks to the important migrations of the post-war period, but also because a younger generation of Jews is more historically aware, while lacking the unconditional patriotism of the old, assimilated Jewries of Western Europe. To this mix must be added two other categories of Jews not from Europe: American Jews living as expatriates in Europe who played a crucial role in helping to set up voluntarist communities often of a liberal sort and taught the notion of grass-roots community organization; and Israelis abroad who have brought with them their own national culture but also a renewed interest in Hebrew literature beyond the religious texts.

Never has the timing been more propitious both in terms of the interest of the outside world and the possibilities of the world within—but with one proviso. Jewish life can fully blossom in an open Europe only if Jews learn to master the fear of freedom in order to develop a Judaism that no longer has to face debilitating external

constraints. If European Jews are to flourish they must not, above all, be guardians of a static and finalized pre-Holocaust heritage. They must not become the museum keepers of world Jewry. They must cease to think of themselves as a dying species, obsessed with declining numbers. Rather, they should infuse Jewish life in the numbers they have and welcome inside the Jewish ranks those who want to join the Jewish people. By spreading Jewish values, history, philosophy and ethics, and culture, Jews should take on a leading role in Europe's coming to terms with itself. The invisible voices at the conference on the Balkans should at last feel free to express their own multiple identities and values. The ultimate victims of yesterday have become Europe's most impressive post-war success story. They are increasingly towering over the crossroads of the continent's past, present and future, very much on center stage. May we, Europe's "new Jews," have the collective wisdom to use this symbolic power with openness, modesty and justice.

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The Third Pillar? Toward a European Jewish Identity was first published in 1999, and later appeared in *Jewish Studies at the Central European University: Public Lectures 1996-1999* (Budapest 2000, pp.177-201.) It was adapted with permission of the author.