6-1987

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NEW PERSPECTIVES FOR THE JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN THE GDR*

by Reinhard Henkys

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In the GDR, a change in the official attitude towards the Jewish religious community and Jewish tradition becomes increasingly noticeable. Political decisions as well as the tone of the media suggest that a new sensibility is replacing the wooden officialese which used to characterize reports on Jewish life. Behind all of this is probably a fundamental political decision made by Erich Honecker himself. A series of measures taken and promises made by the government illustrate this change.

Upon Honecker's initiative, the cemetery of the former orthodox community "Adass Yisroel" in East Berlin was restored and rededicated in June. At approximately the same time, it was announced that the destroyed "New Synagogue" in the Oranienburger Strasse was going to be reconstructed by 1988 and would then house a museum installed and administered by the Jewish community. Finally, Honecker ordered the abandonment of plans for the construction of a road through the large Jewish Cemetery in the East Berlin district of Weissee containing some 115,000 gravesites. The plans for the road date back to the twenties and had practically already been accepted by the Jewish community. Thus, this move has been understood as a special message.

At the same time, GDR media reports on the present situation and the history of Jews in the GDR have become increasingly frequent. For the first time, a GDR delegation was permitted to participate in the meeting of the Jewish World Congress in Jerusalem. Another delegation, also for the first time, was permitted to take part in a consultation of the International Council of Christians and Jews in Madrid in July 1986. It is also remarkable to note that the GDR showed an urgent interest in an exhibition on the orthodox Adass Yisroel, a community which has been destroyed by the Nazis. The exhibition, which was put together in West Berlin, was prominently displayed in the "Kommode"-building of the Humboldt University in the central part of the city.

As usual, there is no reliable information as to the reasons for this new and forceful interest in Jewish history and tradition in the GDR. The feelers the Soviet Union recently extended in the direction of Israel might have made this new orientation easier but could hardly have inspired it. Already in the past, the GDR had attempted to steer its own course with regard to the treatment of Jews in their own country and did not follow every Moscow move. Jewish circles point out that, as in Bulgaria, there were no show trials against Jewish citizens for high treason or Zionist activities in the early 1950s. Such trials had taken place in other Eastern European countries such as the Soviet Union (the Moscow trials against Jewish physicians) and Czechoslovakia (the Slansky trial in Prague).

Nevertheless, the SED\(^1\) then asked most of its Jewish members to leave their communities. The leading representatives of the communities left for the West and, in 1953, the Berlin community was separated completely. Since that time, the number of the members of the Jewish communities in the GDR has been dropping steadily and has today bottomed out at approximately 350. Of those, 187 are part of the community in East Berlin.

Possibly it is the foreseeable demographic death, the impending "helpless expiration of Jewry in the GDR" which has inspired governmental and party leadership not just to continue to tolerate the well-shrunken Jewish community and to assume financial responsibility for its work. Rather, an active, future-oriented interest in an increased awareness of Jewish history and tradition becomes visible which is made part of the reception of the historical Erbe.\(^2\)

The only Jewish community in the GDR that, judging on the basis of its membership, is still somewhat intact is that of East Berlin. Its fifty-year-old president, Peter Kirchner, still relatively young, and other members of the board, attempt to ensure the continued existence of institutionalized Jewry which means to create conditions for the survival of the community, at least for the next two decades. This commitment towards future-oriented work is also reflected by the decision to administer the Jewish museum in the "New Synagogue" autonomously and not to abandon it to government control and organization, even if the financial support will have to come from the State. At the same time, there are strong efforts on the part of the community to recruit new members among GDR citizens of "Jewish background" but with no religious affiliation.

This seems to have become possible ever since children and grandchildren of Marxists and other GDR citizens coming out of a Jewish tradition flock to the library of the East Berlin Jewish community and participate in community events in search of their identity. Kirchner estimates the number of those who are interested in becoming
acquainted with Jewish traditions at approximately one-hundred. This attempt to ensure the survival of the Jewish religious community through members without religious motivation presents, of course, difficulties, especially since the East Berlin community considers the Sabbath service as its central task. This is the only location in the GDR where the Sabbath can still be celebrated in the synagogue on a regular basis. In the other seven Jewish communities of the GDR, services are held only on high holy days.

Even the community of East Berlin has not had a rabbi since 1956. Now there is a new perspective. Kirchner claims to have grounds for hope that a rabbi will move from the U.S. to East Berlin in the summer of 1987 and be available to the community. This is presently a matter of negotiations with the authorities. The community does not require a confession of faith for new members but a readiness to guarantee the continued existence of the service. A minimum number of ten males is required for Jewish services.

An institutionalized community is not only necessary for services but also in order to keep alive cultural traditions. In the GDR as well as in the other countries formerly making up Nazi Germany, survivors of the Holocaust and the subsequent generations have the task to keep alive the memory of the persecution. "Each Jew is a survivor or a child of survivors. We are here in spite of Hitler," said sociologist Irene Runge who, although not religious, opted for membership in the community ten years ago and who is now a member of its board: "Each Jew in this city represents hundreds, thousands of those who did not have a chance to survive. This is the reason for my activity, this is why I am for unity and against fragmentation of the community. I am for the attempt to practice Jewish life within the framework of this community and not to allow to go to oblivion what our parents and grandparents no longer wanted to learn and what they could no longer teach us."

Of course the Nazi regime of terror is not forgotten in the GDR, nor are its victims, even without a Jewish reminder. But the singularity of the genocide committed against Jews is given little room in the public presentation of the Nazi period and the fight against Hitlerite fascism. One example of this is that the memorials for the victims of concentration camps emphasize the nationality of those killed: Dutch, French, Germans, Poles, etc. However, visitors are not informed that up to 90 percent of these victims were Jews who suffered this fate because of their Jewishness.

Carefully but clearly, Kirchner stated in an interview for the West Berlin Tageszeitung, 3 that the GDR has "a few difficulties" to admit that the wrongs suffered by Jews exceed many times those suffered by the individuals fighting against the system for political
reasons. "We would like to see a bit more emphasis in the classrooms on the racist prejudices as a basis for Nazi antisemitism and the annihilation of six million Jews, more of a balance compared with the prominence given to the political activities of the communists."

In the recent past, GDR officials seem to be willing to take a more balanced point of view. Historians again turn to the questions of antisemitism and Holocaust. Following November 9, 1986, the media stressed the memory of the Jewish victims of the Nazi regime. It seems as though the GDR leadership wants to bring about an awareness also for this aspect of history and make it a part of the traditions of the country. This leads to increased notice and recognition of those Christian organizations which want to support the Jewish communities in their efforts to keep alive Jewish traditions. On November 10, 1986, the SED national party daily, Neues Deutschland, reported for the first time on the memorial sessions, which the working group, "Church and Jewry," has organized in memory of the pogrom night of 1938. And also the efforts of the "Aktion Sühnezeichen" [Sign of Repentance] and East Berlin theologians for the care of Jewish cemeteries meet with increasing official recognition.

Translated from German by Walter F. Karl
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Endnotes

1 SED is the abbreviation for Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands or "Socialist Unity Party" which emerged from the unification of Socialdemocrat and Communist parties in East Germany following World War II. [Translators note.]

2 The term "Erbe" (heritage, tradition) is a widely discussed concept in the GDR at the present time. In search of positive traditions anteceding its own existence, the GDR attempts to reevaluate a number of historical movements and events in order to claim them for their country. The most remarkable change that has taken place as a result of the Erbe discussion is the new attitude towards Luther and the Protestant church as a whole expressed in the GDR's support of events commemorating Luther's anniversary in 1983. [Translator's note.]

3 A West Berlin independent leftist-green paper. [Translator's note.]