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Jewish life and anti-Semitism manifestations in Finland

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The small Jewish community of Finland has through its history of 180 years been a curiosity rather than a minority. In numbers we have always been very few, highest 2000 souls.

Finland was for centuries part of Sweden who in 1809 lost that part of land in a war to Czarist Russia.

Under rules of Sweden and Russia Jews were either kept away from the Finnish territory or many restriction were imposed on them.

The Jews of Finland have their roots in the Russian empire, mainly in the Baltics, Belarussia, Ukraina and Poland. This is due to the fact that our forefathers were cantonists, ie. soldiers who during Czar Nikolai I reign were as youngsters by force taken to the army. As Finland was under Russian rule, some these Jewish soldiers ended up in Finland and after serving the army up to 25 years, they were allowed settle in Finland. In the beginning they were without civil rights and could stay only with temporary residence permit. This way the Jewry in Finland got started.

The former soldiers were orthodox Jews and that shaped the future spirit of the community. Since then we are considered to be an orthodox community with all services needed.

Finland got her independence from Soviet in 1917 and the Jews got their legal rights the following year from the Finnish authorities.

Twenty years later, ie. already in the Second World War more than 300 Jewish men fought for their homeland against Soviet. That happened when Finland in 1942 became ally with Nazi-Germany. That meant that Finnish-Jewish men fought side by side with the Germans against the mutual enemy. But there was no conflict with the German soldiers as the Finnish army pointed out that the Jews were citizens of Finland and they had full protection of state.

In that spirit the Jewish soldiers were allowed to establish a frontline prayer tent, which was located near a German batallion. Jewish men gathered there for prayers without any objections from the Germans.

Germany was then a military superpower in Europe and Finland as a small but important ally was under hard pressure. Despite strong German pressure, the Finnish government refused to take any actions against Finnish Jews who throughout the war continued to enjoy full civil rights.

But things were not always rosy and in the mid-1930's the rise of Nazism had attracted some interest also in Finland but gained very little support. That can be explained by the nature of Finns who usually stay cool and do not easily get overly excited of new ideologies as Nazism or Communism.

Anyhow, within the State Police there were pro-Nazi symphatisers who worked against the Jews, mainly against the refugees who had come to Finland in summer of 1938.

On November 6, 1942 State Police succeeded to deport eight Jewish refugees to Gestapo in Estonia. In year 2000 the Prime Minister of Finland asked the Jewish community for forgiveness and a memorial was erected in Helsinki.

On November 6 we gather at a memorial to commemorate the fate of the eight.

Today, there are ca 1300 Jews in Finland. We are an active community which serves the members from kindergarten and school to old-age home. We are well intergrated into the society and we are highly respected. Members of our community have kept high positions such as member of parliament, member in the High Court, ambassadors, top academics, lawyers, doctors and cultural personalities.

But we don't live in a bubble of vacuum and so we are influenced by various racist expressions and activism coming mainly from our Nordic neighbors and from elsewhere in Europe. But we have been saved from hostile and violent antisemitism. The main expressions are from marginal groups which get their support and model mainly from Sweden.

We can see them sometimes marching under heavy police observation or read their opinions in the net. Lately, a client publication has been spreading antisemitic articles which have their origins in North America.

As Jews we follow carefully these expressions and we keep good working contact with the national security and other authorities who try to understand our worries and needs.

But our own security needs at the community center and synagogue we have to deal ourselves with, as the authorities have not agreed to cover our heavy security expences.

This is due to the fact that there has not been any physical attacks against Jews or our properties. We have stressed that waiting that to happen could be fateful.

But we do our best to lobby MPs behind our needs and hope that we might soon reach a positive solution.

I see the traditional antisemitism being replaced with hostile attitudes towards Israel. The bias media is mainly responsible for that but hostile attitudes are also brought by the Moslem refugees from the Middle East. More than 30.000 refugees have during the last years arrived in Finland and that has troubled especially the security authorities but in some extent also the Jews.

The refugees come with the view that Israel is their enemy and in their vocabulary Israel is *Yahud* meaning a Jew and so we might become their enemies and targets.

So far that has not happened. But this August Finland experienced the first terror attack when a refugee killed two Finns and wounded eight others in a knife attack in a marketplace. Since then in Finland we are aware that there will be more attacks.

As Jews we are satisfied that Israel enjoys strong support from devoted Christian population. They speak, write and march in defence for Israel and in urgent situations they have come out in our defence and even managed to influence the politicians. In this respect Finland differs from many other countries.

But Israel's conflict with the Palestinians and her neighbors occasionally cause eruptions and hostile anti-Israel media which spills over to become antisemitism. And so, Israel is in our time being treated as a global Jew.

Various boycott campaigns against Israel are echoes from the past.

Just two generations have passed from the Holocaust and the mankind has to admit that nothing has been learnt from the past.