

German Jews ride renaissance against tide of assimilation

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LUEBECK, Germany (RNS) Yelizaveta Paliy arrived in this northern port city from Ukraine in 1995 on the second day of Hanukkah. After years of celebrating the Jewish festival of lights behind drawn curtains in her homeland, Paliy went to Luebeck's historic synagogue and lit the candles in freedom for the first time.

"I cried like never before. The tears came like a flood," said Paliy, 55, who today is a social worker for the city's Jewish community, mainly helping to resettle Jewish immigrants.

"The lights, the singing, the warm welcome we received, the friendship, it was wonderful."

A few days later, she bought a copy of the Torah and has been immersed in her faith since.

In many ways, Paliy and her adopted city's synagogue tell the story of German Jewry -- nearly destroyed but still intact, and now enjoying an immigrant-fueled resurgence while battling, at the same time, a latent sense of apathy.

Twenty years after Germany opened its borders to more than 100,000 Jewish refugees from the former Soviet Union, Jewish life is once again flourishing in the country that nearly exterminated it.

Although their numbers are still less than half of Germany's pre-war population of a half-million, Jews in Berlin, Frankfurt, Hamburg and other major cities are reanimating synagogues with the sound of Hebrew prayer and song.

The transformation is most obvious during Hanukkah, an ancient tale of victory over threatened extermination that mirrors, in small detail, the resilience of Germany's Jewish community after the devastation of the Holocaust.

But unlike the ancient Jews of Hanukkah lore who refused to bow to the culture around them, today's German Jews are buffeted by a strong tide of assimilation that now threatens to sap the Jewish renaissance of its vitality.

To be sure, Judaism is thriving in Germany in ways that could have hardly been imagined at the end of World War II. Next to Berlin's Brandenburg Gate, once the site of Nazi rallies, a 20-foot tall menorah has burned brightly every Hanukkah since 2003. Since 2009, the Jewish Museum of Berlin has held a monthlong Hanukkah market that mimics Germany's traditional Christmas markets, and draws thousands of visitors in search of menorahs, dreidels, and kosher mulled wine.

Jewish life in Germany is doing well, "but only in comparison to what it was 20 years ago," said Myriam Halberstam, who last year launched Ariella Books, a Jewish children's book publisher in Berlin. "We still don't have the normalcy that we want to have."

In smaller cities like Luebeck, the revival of Jewish life has been less successful, at least partly because of the urge to assimilate.

On Tuesday (Dec. 20), the first night of this Hanukkah, barely 25 of the city's estimated 800 Jews showed up at the synagogue. The candle-lighting ceremony was held in the lobby, not in the main prayer hall, and most attendees were Russian-speaking seniors who passed over the Manischewitz wine in favor of vodka.

The exceptions were Etti Prinz, an Israeli immigrant who came here 20 years ago, and her daughter Nina, 17. Nina Prinz said while some of her immigrant peers come to the synagogue, it is only to speak Russian and not because they have an interest in Judaism. The synagogue has not had a full-time rabbi since 2005.

"When I come to the synagogue, the services are not so nice like in Israel. There are no other young people, and it gets boring," said the teen, who visits Israel about once a year. "I know young people who are Jewish, but they don't want to live like Jews. They want to be like Germans."

In his Hanukkah message this year, Dieter Graumann, head of Germany's largest Jewish organization, said German Jews need to retain young people and find something besides the Holocaust to bind them if Judaism is to thrive.

That is easier said than done. Most Soviet immigrants came to Germany either as atheists or with very little Jewish knowledge. Many were more interested in finding work and assimilating than learning about religion. Paliy, however, doesn't buy the excuse that the burden of adjusting should get in the way of learning about Judaism.

"It's a matter of being proud of belonging to these people," Paliy said. Still, she acknowledged that her sons, now 29 and 23, don't have the same enthusiasm for Judaism as they did when they arrived 16 years ago.

The Luebeck synagogue was the only synagogue in north Germany that was not razed by the Nazis -- perhaps, some say, because it sat next door to the St. Anne Church Museum, which holds priceless Christian artifacts. On December 6, 1941, the Nazis sent most of Luebeck's Jews to the death camps. The Nazis used the building as a sports hall, which was closed after the war, and reopened in 1993 as a synagogue.

It's a story of resilience that fortifies the younger Prinz's faith, but not her desire to

stay in Germany. Instead, she wants to move to Israel after graduating from high school or university.

"I feel more at home there than here," she said.

Paliy, meanwhile, worries about the future of her small city's Jewish community if younger generations remain uninterested, or leave for bigger cities in search of work, as many do now.

"It's a hard question. I always think my generation and our elders' generation, what will happen when we are gone?" she said. "What will happen if the youth go?"