

## **A Deal for German Jewry - Liberal Judaism continues to fight for Equality in the Country of its Origin.- LJS News Mai 2005**

In our occasional series of articles highlighting the challenges facing Progressive Jews around the world, Rabbi Dr. Walter Homolka describes how the relationship between the progressive Jewish community in Germany and the German federal Government has turned the spot-light on an age-old Jewish issue – identity. Rabbi Homolka is a member of the Governing Body of the World Union for Progressive Judaism and Principal of the Abraham Geiger College at Potsdam University. He also serves as a Professor of Jewish Law at the Canonical Institute of this University. President Chirac has recently conferred upon him the knighthood of the Legion of Honour of France.

Once again, Jews are fighting for their place in German society. This time, however, the battle is internal – Jew vs. Jew, with the identity of the world's fastest growing Jewish community hanging in the balance. In one corner stands the Central Council of Jews in Germany, the longtime champion of communal interests and official representative body for German Jewry. In the other corner stands the Union of Progressive Jews in Germany, the organization which has represented the country's 4,500 affiliated liberal Jews in 16 congregations since 1997. At issue is the same question that has long polluted communal politics: Who is a Jew? This being Germany, though, the debate features an added twist that has elevated the rancour and threatens to split a Jewish community that has only recently come of age. In 2003, the Central Council negotiated an agreement with the government that involved significant federal funding for the Jewish community, including money for the Progressive movement, Germany's equivalent to the Reform movement in the United States and the RSGB or Liberal Judaism in Great Britain. But Progressive Jews – traditionally not part of the Central Council's constituency – have yet to reap the benefits of the agreement. In a bid for inclusion, the Union of Progressive Jews engaged the services of a renowned expert in ecclesiastical law, Axel von Campenhausen. Claiming that the state is not allowed to intervene in conflicts between religious communities, the Progressive Union was threatening in March 2004 to bring the Central Council of Jews before the Federal Constitutional Court. For the last half century, the organized Jewish community has been patterned after Germany's association of Christian churches. The Central Council of Jews has served as the accepted representative in all matters with the state, an arrangement that until recently was rather convenient for all players involved. For Jews, it has meant a certain corporatist protection after the trauma of the Holocaust. For the German government, it has provided a kind of institutional protection in a highly sensitive relationship. But as post-reunification Germany has transformed into an open society, individualism has pushed for a process of decentralization. The increasingly complex German Jewish identity has outgrown the shallow, patchwork religiosity that for decades had primarily defined the community and its representative body. A solid segment of German Jewry defines its Jewishness ethnically rather than religiously, and many of the 190,000 Russian immigrants that have swelled Germany's numbers of Jews so far are at best marginally affiliated. Assimilation, a longtime taboo in the wake of the Holocaust, once again has become an option. With a sizable amount of government funding at stake, the "Who is a Jew?" debate has invited questions that extend far beyond the intra-communal power struggle. Is the German government's responsibility toward the Jewish community of the past – as implied by the 2003 agreement with the Central Council – accepting historical responsibility for the devastation of the Holocaust? Or should the government involve itself in the affairs of today's German Jewry, given that federal funding has played a leading role in dividing the community? The Central Council has held Progressives at arm's length out of concern that a second umbrella body

would dilute the religious identity of German Jewish institutions – and out of somewhat less lofty motives, namely local power politics. The Progressive movement, for its part, and its recognized leaders have long lacked the government's attention until the legal threat last year hammered it home to Germany's executive that progressive Judaism is also an authoritative arm of the Jewish world. International pressure from progressive Jews all over the world, namely the U.S., Canada and the U.K. has immensely helped. German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder has so far avoided taking a position on the issue, preferring instead that a settlement be reached outside the courts. But a public debate on German Jewish identity is nearly inevitable, given that the new individualism manifesting itself in the community has ramifications for the traditionally close relationship between church and state – the centuries-old Prussian arrangement of “throne and altar.” Today there is a trend toward liberalization and Americanization, a trend that eventually may lead to the dramatic separation of church and state. Although a large church tax is still raised and government-funded public television still features weekly sermons from members of the Christian, Jewish and Muslim communities, traditional religious movements are losing members – and political weight. In modern-day Germany, the ethnic ghetto is no longer a sustainable model. Concern about assimilation alone will not keep the faithful in the flock. Christian churches are facing a similar problem, as the traditionalists among members demand a return to dogmas of purity and salvation for the chosen few. Germany's Muslim leadership is also struggling with secularization, as it seeks to ensure that the country's mosques do not become insular homes to the propagation of fundamentalist Islam. Today there are once again Jews who are comfortable to be Germans, Jews for whom Israel is a symbolic state – much as the Vatican is for many German Catholics. In embracing their transformed identity, however, the Progressive Jews also must fight to maintain a moral high ground. Our cause is one for much more than money and political access. We fight for our interpretation of the Jewish tradition as a valid and authentic reading of our relationship with God. So far the courts have all ruled in our favour and made it clear that progressive Judaism has every right to be treated equal when it comes to the distribution of public funding. What is needed now is a clear access to this funding and an equal share in running the Jewish institutions of Germany, on federal as well as on state level. Also, the rabbinical seminary of Germany, the Abraham Geiger College, needs to be financially secured to fulfil its important task for Central and Eastern Europe. Here, much attention will have to be given to the details of a new deal between the German authorities and Judaism. The next months will be crucial when we all work towards a visit of Ruth Cohen, the President of the World Union of Progressive Judaism, to Berlin. Her delegation will arrive May 2, 2005 to look into the legal and financial situation of progressive Judaism in Germany and hold negotiations with the German government. For everybody involved, the conflict within the Jewish community has the potential to breathe fresh air into the debate over ethnicity in Germany. Less pathos, less moral pontification and more egalitarian dignity for citizens free of the burdens of religion and descent would bring Germany one step closer to being a modern civil society. It would not be the first time in its history that Germany would owe such a step to Jews.