

Speech of Dr. Josef Schuster at Aug. 24th on WFJCSH&D reception

In the name of the Central Council of Jews in Germany I would like to extend a warm welcome to you. I'm pleased that you chose Berlin as the place for your 26th conference.

For some of you this might be the first time that you came to the country responsible for the murder of six million Jews and for infinite sorrow. You have experienced and suffered the Shoah as children and youth. And now you are at the place, where the terror of the Nazis against the Jews and the Second World War emanated from: Berlin.

You are returning to a different Germany now, to a democratic society, whose government and institutions protect and guarantee the civil rights of its citizens, a country in which Jews feel at home again for decades.

This doesn't mean there is no more anti-Semitism in Germany. That is, what we had to experience in the last weeks on occasion of pro-Palestine demonstrations. A disquieting alliance of resident Islamists, right-wing extremists and old leftists disparaged us with anti-Jewish, anti-Semitic paroles and insults.

We are concerned, how easy it was for the anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish forces of German and non-German origin to present themselves publicly with their hate of Israel and the Jews. The government has acted promptly, also the jurisdiction. Because anti-Semitism, when voiced publicly, is indictable in Germany and is not covered by freedom of speech, which is a fundamental right in every democracy.

But the Jewish community in Germany feels safe and accepted as well as respected by the majority of the non-Jewish Germans. Working with socially relevant groups like political parties, churches, cultural institutions and others is intensive and good.

Until the early 1990s the Jewish community in Germany was very small: only 28,000 members strong were all our communities together, and in addition highly overaged. In the former German Democratic Republic live only a few hundred Jews, who professed to their communities. In comparison: until the national-socialistic reign more than 600,000 Jews lived in Germany.

This changed in 1991. Then the Federal Government – and every Federal Government after it – granted a permanent right of settlement to Jews fleeing the states of the former Soviet Union.

The immigration enriched the German communities immensely, but also brought major challenges with them. We needed more rabbis, teachers, social workers. We needed kindergardens and schools. We built new synagogues and enhanced our community centers. Communities were founded or re-founded. The integration of our new members into the Jewish community was not easy. Many of them knew, that they were Jews only because they were discriminated as such in the Soviet Union. Today, most of them found their Jewish roots again.

The Jewish community today has more than 100,000 members, organized in their local communities. In all 16 federal states the communities unite to one state association, whose chairmen are delegated to the directorate of the Central Council of Jews in Germany. It the elects the presidium from its midst. Its chairmen and the two vice presidents represent the Jewish community in Germany. This makes the

Central Council the umbrella organization of the communities and their state associations in Germany.

Under the sponsorship of the Central Council of Jews in Germany the Academy of Jewish Studies in Heidelberg educates teachers and cantors for communities since the 1980s, with the possibility of a subsequent rabbinic education at international institutes.

With 12,000 members, Berlin is the biggest community in Germany and a good example, how Jews of every schools of thought have organized themselves under one roof. Traditionally orthodox, liberal and Chabad have their own synagogues and are represented as a whole by the Jewish community of Berlin. Religious and cultural life in Berlin – as in all communities – is manifold and intensive. In Berlin is the Lauder Foundation with its education for orthodox rabbis and cantors and at the gates of Potsdam is the Abraham-Geiger-Kolleg, which defines itself as liberal.

After this quick foray into the topography of Jewish life in Germany I want to bid you welcome again and wish you a good conference, to which success we could also make our little contribution.