

The Great Jewish Exodus

by Roger Cohen¹

LONDON — They were gone, as completely as from Baghdad or Cairo, Damascus or Alexandria. They had vanished from Budapest and Brussels, from Frankfurt and Padua, from Paris and Manchester, from Antwerp and Stockholm.

As in the Arab world, Europe wondered what it had lost. The texture of life was thinned, the richness of exchange diminished, the flowering of ideas curtailed. There was an absence.

They did not say much. They packed and left, wheeling their suitcases, carrying their bags and bundles and babies, a little wave offered here and there. Rich and poor, religious and not, they sold what they had and went on their way. People looked askance, as their forbears once had in crueler circumstances, a little uneasy at the exodus, unsure what it meant but certain it was the end of a very long story.

Was Europe not the Continent of Disraeli and Heine and Marx (all baptized, but still), of Freud and Einstein, of Rothschild and Bleichröder, of Dreyfus and Herzl, of Joseph Roth and Stefan Zweig? Was it not the home of Yiddish, once the first tongue of millions, a language perhaps unique, as Isaac Bashevis Singer noted, because it was never spoken by men in power?

Was it not the scene of a great 19th-century struggle for emancipation beginning in France and stretching across the Continent to the pogrom-stained Pale of Settlement, a battle that in

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many instances ushered this stubborn people, with their eternal covenant of ethics entered into with a faceless God, to the summit of the professions, only for this progress, threatening to some, to end in the Nazis' industrialized mass murder?

Was Europe not, against all odds, the place liberalism triumphed over the deathly totalitarianisms? The land of Isaiah Berlin who quoted Kant: "Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made." The Continent where this people survived after the attempted annihilation (in which the majority of Europeans were complicit), forming new communities, even in Germany; a Continent of crooked timber, of every expression and experiment in their identity, their partial loss of identity, their embrace of merged and multiple identities?

Yes, there was often a sense of otherness, a self-imposed discretion, but there was also reassurance in being part of a great European convergence that over many decades dissolved the borders across which countless wars had been fought and affirmed the right of every European of whatever faith or ethnicity to equal rights, free expression, and the free practice of their beliefs.

Yet now they were gone. Europe, without the Jews, had lost part of itself. It had lost the very right to a conscience. It had been defeated in its essence. It had rebirthed itself after the 20th-century horror only to surrender.

Jewishness had lost one of its constituent elements, the European Jew of the diaspora. As for humanity, it had lost all hope. Humankind had succumbed to the tribal nightmare, to the darkest of tides. Tribal war loomed.

The strange thing was that the prime minister of Israel, the Jewish homeland established in 1948, the certain refuge at last, the place where belonging could never be an issue, had wished it so.

It was the Israeli leader who suggested it was time to abandon the European Jewish experiment. He had been in office many years. He saw himself as the visionary defender and gatherer of his people, the man for every threat (and they seemed to multiply endlessly).

After the shootings of Jews in Brussels and Paris and Copenhagen, as European soldiers and police fanned out to protect synagogues and as he faced a close election, the Israeli leader said this: “This wave of terror attacks is expected to continue, including these murderous anti-Semitic attacks.”

He continued: “We are preparing and calling for the absorption of mass immigration from Europe” of Jews. He added, “I would like to tell all European Jews and all Jews wherever they are: Israel is the home of every Jew.”

Israel is indeed the home of every Jew, and that is important, a guarantee of sorts. It is equally important, however, that not every Jew choose this home. That is another kind of guarantee, of Europe’s liberal order, of the liberal idea itself. So it was shattering when millions of Jews, every one of them in fact, as if entranced, upped and left their homes in Milan and Berlin and Zurich.

The leader himself was overcome: Where was he to house them? Many of the liberal Jews of Europe, long strangers in strange lands, knowing statelessness in their bones, mindful of Hillel’s summation of the Torah — “What is hateful to yourself, do not to your fellow man” — refused to be part of the spreading settlements in the West Bank, Israeli rule over another people.

The prime minister awoke, shaken. It had been such a vivid
nightmare. Too vivid! To himself he murmured, “Careful what you
wish for.”
