

## Switzerland

By Simon Erlanger

Looking back on 2013, it seems at first to have been a rather quiet year for Switzerland and its 18'000 strong Jewish community. At least this seems to be the case for the German speaking part of the country. In its annual report, which it publishes together with the NGO "Stiftung gegen Antisemitismus und Rassismus (GRA)" the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities or "Schweizerischer Israelitischer Gemeindebund (SIG)" states that in 2013 antisemitic incidents have been on a new low, while the extreme right has been finally confined to lonely and diminishing fringe groups.<sup>1</sup> With only 22 antisemitic incidents recorded in 2013, the Swiss German situation runs counter developments in the rest of Europe.<sup>2</sup> There were no violent physical attacks. Most incidents concern letter and emails mostly to the SIG or other Jewish institutions.<sup>3</sup> There were fewer antijewish graffiti and verbal assaults on Jews, the SIG states. However, with just 22 antisemitic cases reported overall, the sample seems to be rather small to draw any significant conclusions concerning overall trends.

### No Island

In 2013 Switzerland was also spared any renewed controversy concerning Shechita and Circumcision as in 2012. Nevertheless, the SIG argues, despite the positive first impression, Switzerland should not be considered an Island, the introduction to the report states.<sup>4</sup> Antisemitism does not stop at the Swiss borders. While not constituting an immediate existential threat, antijewish currents still run deep. At the same time the old and the new Antisemitism of the right and the left in all its current incarnations is well and alive in Switzerland and growing, as is islamist fundamentalist Antisemitism,

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<sup>1</sup> See: Antisemitismusbericht des SIG und der GRA für die deutschsprachige Schweiz Ausgabe 2013, Zurich 2013; <http://www.swissjews.ch/de/index.php> (last viewed on March 25 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.: p. 16ff. and SIG press release, Zurich, March 14 ([http://www.swissjews.ch/pdf/de/medien/2014/MedienmitteilungABericht2014\\_def.pdf](http://www.swissjews.ch/pdf/de/medien/2014/MedienmitteilungABericht2014_def.pdf)) (last viewed on March 27 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.: p.16.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.: p.8.

so the SIG states, without giving many examples.<sup>5</sup> Despite the present relative calm, Swiss Jews should therefore be watchful and not harbor illusions to what is happening elsewhere on the continent.

Looking to the French-speaking part of Switzerland, the Romandie, a very different picture emerges. CICAD counted 151 antisemitic incidents, 75% more than in 2012.<sup>6</sup> Most incidents concerned comments on the Internet especially in the French speaking Swiss media. The situation in the Romandie of course also reflects the situation in France, due to great cultural and political closeness.

The different numbers come from different approaches and methodologies. While the SIG counts almost exclusively verbal and physical acts of aggressions and only occasionally takes into accounts antisemitic utterances in the media, CICAD emphasizes antisemitism in the internet and for example counts comments on talkbacks. As a matter of fact, both organizations do not give anything resembling true numbers, as most antisemitic incidents go unreported. For example a 2012 attack on a Basel synagogue, where the perpetrators were caught, tried and sentence never was recorded in any statistics and reports.

### **No recent study or poll**

Anyway, one might well argue that in 2013 antisemitism in its incarnation as excessive criticism, delegitimization and hostility to Israel has become common at all levels of Swiss society and is regularly expressed in public and in private. While there might be less physical attacks in eight million strong Switzerland than in neighboring France and Germany, verbal and social antisemitism have now been on the growth for years, there is no reason to assume that it has abated in 2013.

Unfortunately there is no current poll or study into Swiss attitudes on Jews and on antisemitism. A poll undertaken by the institute Demoscope into Swiss attitudes to

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<sup>5</sup> See press release and Antisemitismusbericht: p.5-9 and p.16-18.

<sup>6</sup> CICAD (Coordination Intercommunautaire Contre l'Antisémitisme et la Diffamation): Comunique Rapport sur l'Antisémitisme en Suisse Romande 2013.

Jews and Judaism was stopped by the pollsters after it was made public by the Swiss media in August 2013.<sup>7</sup> However current attitudes may be assumed from past studies. In 2000 poll by the gfs Research Institute in Berne found that 16 percent of the Swiss population harbored intense anti-Semitic feelings.<sup>8</sup> Although this was about European average, the number constituted double the percentage that earlier polls had found. A 2006 study by the University of Geneva's Department of Sociology found that 20 percent of the Swiss were «affected by anti-Semitism.»<sup>9</sup> The methodology of the study was openly questioned, and the gfs Research Institute responded with lower numbers in 2007. While in the 2007 study only 10% of respondents were openly antisemitic, up to 53% were highly critical of Israel. 50% of the 2007 respondents were thinking that Israel is leading a “war of annihilation” (Vernichtungskrieg) against the Palestinians. A full 13% of respondents stated that Israel has no right to exist.<sup>10</sup> A new poll is now overdue and - as the SIG states in its 2013 report - much desired.

### **The current situation**

In any case, the unreliability, inadequacy and incompleteness of collection methods leave questions to be asked as to what the real picture for 2013 really is.

While in 2013 Switzerland has indeed been spared antisemitic violence on a grand scale, verbal transgression does abound, as does the use of antisemitic stereotypes in the media, especially when reporting on Israel is concerned. Unfortunately there is no media watch to speak of and also no study into schoolyard antisemitism, which again goes largely unrecorded.

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<sup>7</sup> See: Umstritten Fragen. Demoscope stoppt Juden-Umfrage; Blick August 22 2013; <http://www.blick.ch/news/schweiz/demoscope-stoppt-juden-umfrage-id2415301.html> (last viewed on March 27 2014).

<sup>8</sup> [www.gfs.ch/antsemkurz.html](http://www.gfs.ch/antsemkurz.html) (last viewed on March 20 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Sandro Cattacin, Brigitta Gerber, Massimo Sardi, and Robert Wegener, Monitoring Misanthropy and Rightwing Extremist Attitudes in Switzerland: An Explorative Study, Department of Sociology, University of Geneva, 2006, 70.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.gfsbern.ch/publikationen/fberichte.php?showid=216&lang=de&sub2> (last viewed on August 18 2010)

Contrary to the situation in other European countries Islamic antisemitism seems not to be widely spread in Switzerland. In 1970 the Swiss muslim community counted some 16'300 souls.<sup>11</sup> Today it is estimated at 433'000.<sup>12</sup> Demographers predict, that within the next 20 years the young and ascendant Swiss muslim population will grow to some 663'000 souls, comprising some 8% of the overall population.<sup>13</sup> The community is extremely diverse. Especially in the Northwestern part of the country most member of the fast growing Muslim population consist of Albanian and Bosnian Sunnite and Kurdish and Turkish Alevites which practice a liberal version of Islam or - as in the case of most Muslim from former Yugoslavia - are somewhat traditional but largely secularized. Seeking compatibility with modern liberal democracy, Alevites, for example, actively emphasize good relations with the Jewish community. The situation is somewhat different in the French speaking part of Switzerland where most Muslims are more traditional and originate in the Middle East and North Africa. Therefore many of the tensions emerging in France today are also being felt.

A case of concern is the "Islamischer Zentralrat der Schweiz (Islamic Central Council of Switzerland). This fast-growing organization is largely led by young Swiss converts to Islam. Salafi in orientation it seeks to promote its aims by public campaigns, demonstrations, and measures of initiative and referendum. While it lacks the demographic mass to do so effectively, it has gained a following among some younger estranged Bosnian and Albanian Muslim immigrants. Many of the Zentralrat's followers move to the city of Biel, where the Muslim population has grown rapidly in recent years. The Zentralrat is actively opposed by more established Muslim bodies and basically by all Swiss political parties.

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<sup>11</sup> Matteo Gianni: Muslime in der Schweiz; Eidgenössische Kommission für Migrationsfragen, Bern 2010; [http://www.ekm.admin.ch/content/dam/data/ekm/dokumentation/materialien/mat\\_muslime\\_d.pdf](http://www.ekm.admin.ch/content/dam/data/ekm/dokumentation/materialien/mat_muslime_d.pdf) (last viewed January 29 2014).

<sup>12</sup> See: <http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/de/index/themen/01/05/blank/key/religionen.html> (last viewed on January 29 2014).

<sup>13</sup> See: Auslandschweizerstatistik 2013 nach Wohnländern und Konsularkreisen ; <http://www.eda.admin.ch/etc/medialib/downloads/edazen/recent/media.Par.0109.File.tmp/2013%20Auslandschweizerstatistik.pdf> (last viewed on March 24 2014).

While antisemitism of the extreme right remains a concern with some of the incidents recorded by SIG and CRIF organized groups of the extreme right have been on the retreat in 2013. The reason maybe that much of the xenophobic and anti-European agenda has - at least in part - been adopted by mainstream populist and rightwing movements such as the Swiss Peoples Party (SVP), which in early 2014 gained a victory at the polls, limiting the immigration and the free movement of EU citizens to Switzerland. However, the SVP has taken in the last few years an explicit pro Israel and pro Jewish position and argues for fairer reporting and better relations between Israel and the Jewish state, thereby mirroring populist movements all over Europe. On the other side of the political spectrum the Socialdemocratic Party (SP) and especially the Greens regularly attack Swiss-Israeli links in parliament and generally support systematic anti-israeli policies, such as the BDS movement. In 2012 the Green leadership tried to include a ban on Brith Milah in their platform, but dropped this after protests. After several efforts in 2012 the boycott and divestment movement (BDS) in 2013 failed to gain much momentum in Switzerland. BDS so far has been confined to circles of the left and the greens aided by the protestant Christian relief organization HEKS. Nevertheless in the political left in all its groups and subgroups the discourse of delegitimization concerning Israel has become all-pervasive.

### **Dieudonné and the antiracism law**

At the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2014 two incidents involving antisemitism shook Switzerland. First was the appearance of the French antisemitic comedian Dieudonné in Nyon. While the CICAD tried to intervene against the six planned performances, authorities estimated the freedom of speech to be the higher good, than the prevention of antisemitic incidents. Dieudonné's performances took place under the watchful eyes of CICAD, Jewish organizations and the media. Allegedly no violation of Switzerland antiracism code (Antirassismgesetz) was noticed. However at the beginning of 2013 Jewish musician David Klein implied the antiracism law against italo-Swiss comedian Massimo Rocchi, who in 2013 had on television rooted Jewish humor in usury, thereby echoing Richard Wagner's classic antisemitic work "Judentum in der Musik". A furious public debate erupted in the course of which the antiracism code was applied against David Klein himself, because of comments he made on Facebook

against Palestinians after an attack perpetrated by Palestinian youth in Jerusalem in 2013. In both cases in early 2014 inquiries by state attorneys are under way.

## Conclusion

2013 has once more demonstrated the urgent need for systematic data collection and analysis. A new study into Swiss antisemitism and present attitudes towards Jews and Israel is overdue. While data is rare, it can safely be assumed that Switzerland is not an island. While violent attacks are very rare, antisemitic incidents do happen, verbal slurs occur, antisemitic stereotypes and attitudes are being felt. While the extreme right seems to be on the retreat, and Islamic antisemitism is less rampant than in France or Germany, the antisemitism and anti-israelism of the left has become all pervasive. The Dieudonné affair and the current debate around Massimo Rocchi have become tests into the effectiveness of Swiss antiracism legislation in combatting antisemitism. Official Jewish reaction is all over rather feeble while Jews react with their feet and leave. Emigration from Switzerland to Israel has always been high for an affluent Western country. In 2013 it seems to have reached a new record. According to the Swiss Foreign Ministry, the number of Swiss citizens and their descendants still holding Swiss passports in Israel now stands at 16'913 in 2013. This constitutes a notable rise from 14600 just a couple of years ago.<sup>14</sup>

*Simon Erlanger is a journalist and historian. He was born in Switzerland in 1965 and educated in Basel and Jerusalem. A former employee of the Yad Vashem Archives in*

*Jerusalem, he teaches Jewish history at the University of Lucerne and works as an editor and producer for Telebasel, a regional television station in Switzerland.*