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## **PERSPECTIVES**

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The Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry publishes commentary and analysis on Jewish identity and culture. You are welcome to share your thoughts on our Perspectives with us: [cst@tauex.tau.ac.il](mailto:cst@tauex.tau.ac.il). We are glad to share with you the thirty-first issue of Perspectives.

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### **Midsummer Darkness**

**A visit to the Jewish community of Stockholm, where everything  
changed**

*Peter Lebenswerd*

On the morning of February 2, 2024, a Swedish news flash appeared on my phone containing the surreal information that my friend and chairperson of the Council of Jewish Communities in Sweden, Aron Verstånding, together with two other Swedish Jews, had been the targets of a planned terror attack by Iranian agents operating in Sweden.

The plan was for the three Swedish Jews to be murdered, and their lives had been monitored in detail by the terrorists, but, luckily, the police managed to stop the attacks in time.

Although the conspiracy was plotted already in 2021, the news sent shock waves through the local Jewish community, especially since Swedish police claimed similar plans are probably still in the making.

Moreover, it added an additional layer to an already very tense atmosphere that I experienced first-hand in Sweden in the aftermath of the attacks of October 7, 2023.

The current situation made me think about the old practice in one of the synagogues of the Swedish capital of Stockholm to recite a special prayer for the king's well-being.

This prayer has been part of Jewish prayer services for centuries all over the world and is partly rooted in the idea that the well-being of a country is historically connected to the well-being of its Jewish residents. What was somewhat peculiar about the way it has been recited in this synagogue was that it was often sung to the tune of the Swedish national anthem.

For many, this was not so much an expression of patriotism or even loyalty as of the striving and, indeed, the success of Jewish integration into Swedish society almost 250 years after the arrival of the first Jew.

After some disturbing facts were revealed about the conduct of parts of the royal family during the years of the Holocaust, it was decided in a stormy board meeting to stop saying the prayer altogether. Those who had been in favor of keeping it in place were upset. What signals, they asked, will this send to society and to us? Are we not an integral part of Swedish society?

Perhaps, in an unintended hint of future changes of attitude, the prayer for the State of Israel and the IDF remained in place.

All of this has become highly symbolic since October 7. I arrived for a visit to my native community a month into the war between Israel and Hamas. My hosts wanted me to speak about the situation in Israel and help deal with its effects on local Jewry.

I was born and raised in Jewish Stockholm and, for years, worked in a central position in the community, among other things, as an educator. There are about 20,000 Jews in Sweden and around 10,000 in the Swedish capital. An estimated 4,000 of these are affiliated in one way or another with the central Jewish community organization of Stockholm, as well as with synagogues, youth movements, summer camps, cultural institutions, and more.

In addition to being a son of the community, I have had the privilege to teach and lead its members throughout the years in various contexts, and after having moved to Israel, I still frequently go back to run activities.

I mention all of this because never before had I experienced an atmosphere like the one I experienced visiting again in October and November 2023, only a month after my previous visit. One month, but a world apart.

The people I met before October 7 were the same people I grew up with. I don't mean that only literally but also in the way they used to relate to Jewish life as part of Swedish society.

Like almost every Jewish diaspora community, its members had their differences of opinion on what Jewish life should look like, what the relationship to Israel should consist of, what strategies would secure a Jewish future in the country, and how to remain an integral part of society. This last point, the importance of being an integral part of Swedish society, was shared by the vast majority of Jews.

This could perhaps be illustrated by the arguably most exotic of Swedish holidays: “Midsummer.”

Being a pagan-rooted holiday, it is celebrated around the longest day of the year and carries a mix of old traditions, like dancing around a maypole, and modern customs, such as enjoying a feast of herring, potatoes, and strawberries. It is often perceived as exotic both because of its obvious pagan roots as well as the way it is celebrated in the wondrous Swedish nature, often at summer houses on some of the country’s thousands of islands.

Despite its origins, it has, however, evolved over time to represent the celebration of “Swedishness” par excellence.

Due to Sweden’s more than 200 years of absence of war and having never been occupied by a foreign nation, not even during the Second World War, there has never really been a Swedish day of celebrating independence like many other countries have. It would take until 2005 to officially institute such a holiday, the “National Day,” out of a wish by some political leaders to boost national sentiments. However, the National Day failed to attract the masses, possibly due to its somewhat artificial nature.

The “real” Swedish national holiday, people would tell you, already exists: Midsummer, and it is indeed sometimes referred to as the unofficial National Day of Sweden.

Despite its rather un-Jewish nature, the vast majority of Swedish Jews celebrate Midsummer and have done so for generations.

I even personally know of quite a few Holocaust survivors who arrived in Sweden in the 1940s and, within a few years’ time, made sure to acquire a modest Swedish summer house and to celebrate Midsummer with all their, almost exclusively Jewish, friends.

It was a strong symbol of belonging in their new home, Sweden. That the holiday always falls on a Friday-Saturday creates a challenge if one observes Shabbat. To solve this, numerous Midsummer Shabbat gatherings were initiated, which integrated ingredients of both worlds.

The integrated occasions symbolized how Swedish Jews have perceived themselves for generations in relation to Sweden. Sweden, their homeland.

That is, I would dare to say, until October 7, 2023.

If anything may symbolize the sudden transformation I witnessed, it is a building, a physical space.

I am referring to one of the greatest projects of the Jewish community of Stockholm in decades, its new Center building, called the “Bayit.”

The building was to be integrated into the structure of the Jewish elementary school and kindergarten. It underscored the main purpose: to serve as a “bayit,” Hebrew for “home,” for the Jews of Stockholm of all ages and backgrounds where cultural events, sports, educational, and religious activities would take place under one roof.

But there was also an additional explicitly stated purpose to the new Center: it was to be open, even in a literal sense, to Swedish society.

No more should the Jews hide their identity and culture; it was time to share it with society and thereby help normalize Jewish life and culture in that society. It was as if to say: it is not enough anymore that Jews celebrate Midsummer; we must enable the reverse; Jewish culture must be open and contribute openly to non-Jewish society as well.

This second purpose created a lot of heated internal debate about to what extent the Center would reflect Jewish tradition. But there was also the concern that it would be hard to maintain a high level of security if the Center was to be open to the public.

At the core of the debate, though, was the possible tension between the two purposes: would it be possible to both be a “Bayit,” a home for the Jews, and, at the same time, be a space of interaction with non-Jewish society?

The “Bayit” was eventually inaugurated, and a number of compromises were reached on the issues of controversy. It became clear relatively fast that it truly was a success story. The vast range of activities for the Jewish community members, combined with open cultural events, was impressive.

During my visit a few weeks after October 7, however, the character of this physical space had undergone a radical transformation.

Instead of being a center of Jewish culture open to Swedish society, it now more resembled a fortress.

Already, when approaching the street where it is located, one could discern security guards and Swedish police guarding the place, visible from afar.

Parents of school and preschool children rushed in and out of the building to avoid staying on the street for too long. The street seemed all of a sudden a great danger. The expression on their faces cannot be described as anything other than fear.

On the inside, however, it seemed that the original, first purpose of the building paradoxically had reached its ultimate peak: it had truly become a “bayit,” a home for Jews. Or perhaps even a perceived safehaven.

The building was designed so that the cafeteria and the open library are surrounded by balconies where the day school classrooms are located. In the morning hours of the pre-October 7 days, the place was usually quiet and empty except for the schoolchildren and their teachers. Now, this was not the case anymore.

Apart from the Israeli flags, the huge signs with the words “Am Yisrael Chai” (the people of Israel live), the paper hearts created by the pupils in the day school with the names of the kidnapped Israelis, the most striking sight was that suddenly Jews of all ages were present at almost all hours of the day, seemingly, for totally different reasons.

Working people seemed to have found reasons to sit and “work from home” in the Bayit cafeteria instead of at home or at the office. Elderly people seemed to have realized a sudden need to visit the kosher food shop and then decided to stay and drink coffee in the building for hours. In the afternoon, teenagers who learn in public high schools (there are no Jewish ones) decided to hang out in the Bayit instead of somewhere else.

I asked some of the people doing their everyday work on a laptop why they chose to be there. Some answered that they wanted to be close to their children learning in the school and that it made them feel more in control in case “something would happen.”

An elderly lady told me she spent a large part of the day in the building just to “be among your own.” Another woman explained that the atmosphere “outside” was unbearable and that only inside this building, surrounded by Israeli flags, Jewish children, and friends, could she “breathe normally.”

It seemed like what, at first glance, looked like many different reasons. Yet they were actually one and the same: to just be in the “Bayit,” to be “at home.”

What happened? How is it possible that what just weeks before had been a completely normal existence for the Jewish minority was suddenly perceived as so unbearable that one had to come to the Jewish community center just to “breathe?” Was this view even representative among local Jews?

It turns out that it was.

In the wake of the attack by Hamas in Israel and the subsequent war, Sweden, like many other countries, experienced a sharp increase in expressions of antisemitism in public spaces, social media, schools, and workplaces.

To learn how Swedish Jews experienced the situation, the Jewish Central Council commissioned a survey among adult members of the Jewish congregations in the main cities of Stockholm, Gothenburg, Malmö, and Helsingborg.

The survey was based on responses from 690 members and was conducted in mid-November 2023. Among other findings, 71 percent of the respondents felt that it had become much more unsafe to live with an open Jewish identity in Sweden during the past month.

More than four out of five claimed they felt insecure about wearing Jewish symbols. Eighty percent stated that there are areas in Sweden that they felt were unsafe specifically because of antisemitism.

Arguably, the most dramatic result, especially in relation to the history of Jews in Sweden, is that close to 80 percent stated they believed that the insecurity and unsafety involved in living with an open Jewish identity would worsen in the coming years. As many as 46 percent of the respondents stated that they had recently discussed the possibility of moving from Sweden, antisemitism being the dominant reason.

Antisemitism and threats against Jews are not new to Sweden, and neither are expressions of hatred against Israel. In fact, one of my earliest memories is from when I had to evacuate the Jewish day school in first grade due to a bomb threat.

But the latest events contained some new ingredients that could perhaps help explain what, to some extent, looks like a sudden collapse in the confidence of the very future of Jews in Sweden.

The people I spoke to, regardless of age, expressed the same basic feelings of shock or rather a series of shocks, the first shock being the scope and brutality of the attack against Israel itself and the following were related to local phenomena that created fear, a sense of insecurity and maybe above all a deep disappointment and mistrust in the civil society they call theirs.

While politicians strongly condemned the attack against Israel, citizens of Sweden, initially almost all with an immigrant background from Middle Eastern countries, took to the streets in major Swedish cities in large celebrations of the Hamas slaughter, kidnappings, and rapes, such as were seen in other countries at the same time.

These acts of mass celebration in Sweden were condemned by government officials, but the mental damage was already done.

Following the celebrations came the mass demonstrations, with tens of thousands of people calling, among other things, for the destruction of Israel. In the context of the psychological impact on local Jewry, these other rallies were not at all confined anymore to the population with an immigrant background but included thousands of Swedish activists, often on the political left but not only.

In one of these early demonstrations in Stockholm, I witnessed some of the classical paradoxes of antisemitism in front of my very eyes when a neo-Nazi party and a party on the left involuntarily happened to line up next to each other, both holding signs stating: "crush Zionism." Only the party symbols differed.

Some of these large demonstrations began even before Israel had started its operation in Gaza. As a leader of the Jewish community put it: "It was as if the very slaughter of Jews in Israel itself was enough to trigger more antisemitism."

The psychological effect of being in deep pain and fear following the attack on Israel and, instead of social support, witnessing these reactions was devastating for some members of the community.

As one Jewish mother put it: “All of these people who either celebrated or condoned the slaughter of Jews in Israel are the people my children in a few years might study with, have as their colleagues at work and who I will have to trust with my life when visiting the doctor. They are part of the future of Sweden.”

Another shock and apparently equally psychologically devastating was the disappointment in the silence of non-Jewish friends and colleagues in the face of the events of October 7.

One man related to me in a sad voice that “in the wake of all other catastrophes and terror attacks, people put up flags on their social media in support and reach out to friends who are affected. I always do it myself. But now, when I would need that support – utter silence.”

Adding to the shock of disappointment in society was a very early public declaration of support for “Palestine” and against “genocide” in a leading Swedish newspaper by hundreds of Swedish cultural workers and celebrities, including beloved singers and actors, who had not with one word condemned the attack against Israel.

The impact on local Jews on seeing these acts by people who minutes before had been not only admired artists and performers but who were part and parcel of shaping the cultural identity that made many Swedish Jews what they are cannot be underestimated.

A sentence I heard repeatedly was: “Who would have known that all that antisemitism was there, hidden under the surface all this time.”

Some people I spoke to even talked about an emerging identity crisis as a result.

When I offered to arrange meetings with local Jewish teenagers to discuss the situation, the demand was beyond anything I could imagine.

I had to arrange many separate events for there to be enough space, and they went on for hours. Their need to talk about everything from perceived indifference from non-Jewish friends to horrifying expressions of antisemitism in schools and on social media was enormous.

In December 2023, a major Swedish newspaper published interviews with 30 Swedish Jews about the antisemitism they had experienced since October 7.

It was a very sad read. A theme that repeated itself in these stories was a new sense of not feeling “safe” anywhere anymore, not even in your own home, after several incidents where local Jews had been threatened and sometimes even assaulted in their homes.

One of the interviewed persons said: “I myself have been lecturing about antisemitism for years, and I realize I didn’t even know what it was – until now.”

Deeply affected by all my encounters, I left Sweden with a heavy heart, and sadly enough, the situation did not seem to improve.

In January 2024, more than 1,000 Swedish singers signed a public petition calling to prevent Israel from taking part in the European Song Contest set to take place in the southern Swedish city of Malmö, infamous for its problems of antisemitism for years.

Adding to all the sentiments mentioned above among local Jews, it is impossible not to note the irony and tragic symbolism of these calls to forbid expressions of Israeli culture in the very city Jews have been departing from for more than a decade, in large part because of its failure to handle local antisemitism.

On a very concrete level, the feeling of insecurity also increased after a hand grenade was thrown into the Israel Embassy of Stockholm in late January, after which police tightened security measures even more around Jewish institutions.

Those who have delved into Jewish history often recognize the unsettling blend of shock on the one hand and a chilling familiarity on the other when confronted with new dramatic events.

The deep core questions the Jews of Stockholm and Sweden are now asking themselves about what it all means in terms of their sense of identity, their relationship to Swedish society, to the state of Israel, and the future of their children are questions that have all been asked before.

Next year, the Jewish Community in Sweden is about to celebrate 250 years. My main fear is that for at least some of my friends in that community who plan their future, there will not be enough time to wait for the answers to these questions.

And the newly stationed armed police force guarding the entrance to the “Bayit,” the Jewish home, is there as a reminder of that fact every single day.

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