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## *Being Jewish in Scotland*

By

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In June 2016, the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities published the results of a government-funded small-scale inquiry entitled, *What's changed about being Jewish in Scotland?* This was a follow-up to a previous small-scale inquiry, *Being Jewish in Scotland*, published in June 2012 (also government-funded). *What's changed about being Jewish in Scotland?* describes a disturbing intensification of antisemitism in Scotland and an escalation of 'insecurity, discomfort and vulnerability' among Jews in Scotland in a short period of time. This article will examine the rise in antisemitism within the context of the history and contemporary position of the Jewish community in Scotland.

There are historical records of individual Jews living and working in Scotland from the seventeenth century before the first Jewish community was established in Edinburgh in the early nineteenth century. This community first opened a place for worship in 1816. While small Jewish communities were founded in Aberdeen, Ayr, Dundee, Dunfermline, Falkirk, Greenock and in the Highlands and Islands, the Glasgow community was to become the largest and arguably most influential. The Glasgow community in 1823 was initially small and formed of traders and merchants. They established a synagogue in the city centre in the 1850s and opened a grand Victorian *Cathedral* style synagogue in Garnethill in 1879. The numbers of Jews in the city were considerably increased by the arrival of Jews from Eastern Europe in the 1880s, fleeing antisemitism and pogroms. The new arrivals settled in the Gorbals and were to create a vibrant Jewish street life and culture. Yiddish was spoken in the streets and there were Jewish bakers, grocers, butchers and even a Jewish hotel and restaurant (Geneen's). A smaller number of Jews arrived from Germany in 1933, fleeing the rise of National Socialism. The Jewish population in Scotland peaked at over 15,000 in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Jewish life in the Gorbals came to an end with the redevelopment of the Gorbals in the 1960s and the Jewish population has diminished through emigration and intermarriage. According to the 2011 Census, there are 6,000 Jews in Scotland (0.1% of the overall Scottish population). The majority of the Jewish population lives in the Glasgow area: Glasgow (897) and East Renfrewshire (2,399).

Up until recently, Jewish writers and academics have tended to focus on the positive aspects of living in Scotland for the Jewish community and the good relations that have been established with other religious groups and the wider community. It is important to note, however, that there have been some serious incidents of antisemitism and discrimination. The German Jews who had fled to Scotland were discriminated against at the outbreak of World War II because they were German. There was serious rioting in the Gorbals in August 1947 in anti-Israel reprisals for the hanging of two British soldiers in Israel. There was similar rioting in Liverpool, Manchester and London.

*Being Jewish in Scotland* used a national survey, focus discussions in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen and Jewish-themed events in other parts of Scotland such as

Dundee, Inverness, Dunoon and Dumfriesshire. There are a number of key points to emerge from the project findings. There was a strong feeling that Jews were keen to meet each other, especially those who lived in more isolated parts of Scotland. Participation in the project allowed Jews to articulate their experiences but also to meet other Jews and establish links. There were concerns about the dwindling numbers of Jews in Scotland and the challenges in maintaining a Jewish lifestyle, including following the dietary laws. In this regard, there were anxieties about the availability of Kosher food in Scotland and the provision of Kosher food in hospitals and schools. While many of the participants initially stated that they had never experienced antisemitism in Scotland or that it did not exist, they were able to recount examples of antisemitism, though these antisemitic incidents were not occurring on a daily basis. The incidents reported to the Police and the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities in 2011 consisted of assault (1 incident), damage and desecration of Jewish property (9 incidents) and abusive behaviour (10 incidents). Not all incidences of antisemitism were reported to the Police or the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities. There was further anxiety about the increasing levels of criticism of Israel. While it was acknowledged that it is legitimate to be critical of the actions of a government, there was a damaging conflation between Israel and Jewishness and there was a growth in antizionism. Nevertheless, many Jews stated that they feel comfortable living in Scotland. There was agreement that there should be more education about Judaism in schools and for the general public.

The follow-up study *What's changed about being Jewish in Scotland?* was prompted by an upsurge in antisemitic incidents in the summer of 2014 following the war in Gaza. In the ten weeks after the beginning of July, more than 50 antisemitic incidents were reported to the Police and 60% of these were classified as crimes – figures that are disproportionate to the number of Jews in Scotland. The methods in the follow-up survey were similar to the previous study: survey, focus groups and cultural activities. The breadth and balance of the views expressed in the 2012 report was replaced by a strong focus on feelings of ‘insecurity, discomfort and vulnerability’. A number of people stated that they are more likely to conceal their Jewish identity. A significant number of participants commented that events in the Middle East impacted on their treatment in Scotland and there was a serious concern about the increase of antisemitism being disseminated in social media. The conflation between Judaism and Israel had increased and antizionism had intensified. There was some concern about the high number of motions concerning Israel in the Scottish Parliament and the Palestinian flag being flown by some Councils. Worryingly, there was a growing lack of confidence in the impartiality of the authorities and the support of the Police (though this may be as a result of the move to the centralised Police Scotland). There was a number of troubling new developments including a significant number of Jewish students being the victims of antisemitism. One of the most striking new developments was that some Jews were talking about leaving Scotland. The report provides a series of suggestions for public bodies and the Jewish community that would improve the lives of Jews in Scotland. These call for a greater awareness and sensitivity in the public forum to the demands of religious practice for Jews and support for greater security. The report provides concrete suggestions for Jewish education, culture and community life that would enhance the Jewish experience in Scotland. Perhaps the most important suggestion, consolidating a point raised in the previous report, is for ‘more and better education about Judaism and other religions in schools and for the general public’. Many of the statements reported in the project

findings indicate alarmingly high levels of stereotyping of Jews, ignorance about the complexity of Jewish identities and, in some cases, criminally offensive statements and behaviour. The (relatively new) annual collation of religiously aggravated offences highlights those cases that are reported to the Police and lead to criminal proceedings. The project findings have revealed that there are other instances of antisemitism that are not reported to the Police and are reported to the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities or not reported at all. The two inquiries have provided a forum for the silent voices, and the beginnings of a greater understanding of the nature of contemporary antisemitism in Scotland.

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