World Jewish Population: Trends and Policies

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I shall outline past, present and future trends of the world Jewish population, and then discuss policies which might mitigate undesirable trends, as well as ways for ensuring better knowledge of the world Jewish population. As the scope is large and time is short, I shall use broad generalizations without qualification or quotation of sources.

Between 1800 and 1915, the world Jewish population underwent an enormous increase, from 2½ million to over 13 million. It continued to grow, at a slower pace, between the two world wars, and in 1939 reached its historical peak of over 16.5 million. Then it lost over one-third of its size in the Holocaust. After the tragedy, it recovered only a little. Today, the Jewish population is below the size it had 70 years ago, and its Diaspora component is quickly decreasing in size. What are the main reasons for these changes?

In the 19th century, the majority of the Jews still lived in segregated traditionalist communities in Eastern Europe, Asia, and North Africa. Retrospective statistical research regarding Eastern European Jews in the second part of the 19th century and Asian and African Jews at a much later date indicates the following demographic characteristics. The tendency to marry was so universal that the proportion of women remaining single was extremely small, even smaller than in surrounding populations. Marriages occurred virtually only within the Jewish fold, most marriages were contracted at young and often very young ages, remarriage following divorce or widowhood was frequent, childlessness was rare, and the average number of children per married woman was presumably around six–seven.

These traits are typical of a Jewish society in which observance of *mitzvot*, including those regarding sex and family life, was rather common, especially under the impact of rabbinical and social influence on private behaviour. The dispersion of Eastern European Jews in a very large number of communities and small clusters could have made

it difficult to find locally suitable partners for persons reaching marriageable age. However, marriage was not based on mutual selection or love betwen mates. Generally, the match was made by the families with the help of intermediaries; often, the newly wed were supported by their families, and poor brides sometimes received dowries from benevolent institutions.

Child mortality, though high in comparison with that of our times, was often lower among the Jews than among the surrounding populations. The modern decline of mortality was earlier and stronger among the Jews. High nuptiality and fertility accompanied by comparatively low mortality explain the strong natural increase found first in Eastern Europe and later in North Africa and Asia.

Large numbers of surviving children presumably created economic difficulties for Jewish families, which often lived in adverse environments. However, reactions to such difficulties were presumably different in these traditional-religious societies than in the secular-utilitarian societies of our time.

Demographic conditions somewhat analogous to those described here exist today only in ultra-Orthodox groups in Israel and in some small Diaspora communities.

Conditions among the great majority of Diaspora Jews are radically different today. Changes have been induced by the emancipation, mass emigration to more modern environments, urbanization, assimilation to surrounding societies, rising educational and social levels, and the prevalence of more secular and rationalistic outlooks. Adoption of delayed marriage and of strict birth control followed, and mixed marriages spread. This evolution started as early as the beginning of the 19th century in Central and Western Europe, then occurred among emigrants from Eastern Europe, then in Eastern Europe itself, and much later in Asia and North Africa and among emigrants from those continents.

Further changes in Diaspora Jewish demography have been induced lately by the evolution of the last decades in the demography of the developed countries in which most of the Diaspora is found. There, the family is being progressively destabilized and fertility is falling to a level insufficient for population replacement. Presumably, this evolution is connected with a growing emphasis on self-fulfillment in each phase of life, which leads to attributing lesser importance to family-oriented, children-oriented, and tradition-oriented values.

Recent data for various Diaspora communities show that the Jews tend now to marry less and later than in the past, and in some places marry even less and later than gentiles. Marriage is not only less

frequent, but also more fragile: the proportions of marriages ending in divorce are increasing, and the presence of children presumably constitutes less of a deterrent to divorce than in the past. Cohabitation without marriage seems to have diffused into various Diaspora communities. Household patterns are changing greatly, with a much higher frequency of people living alone and single-parent families.

Outmarriages have become a general feature of contemporary Diaspora demography. In countries including some 80% of the Diaspora, it may be roughly estimated that one-third of Jewish persons marrying have a non-Jewish spouse. In some European countries, where assimilation started earlier, this proportion is between 45% and 74%.

The demographic consequences of outmarriages differ from country to country, but, generally speaking, these marriages inflict losses on the Jewish population. Some recent data also suggest a decline in the proportion of non-Jewish spouses converting.

The fertility of Diaspora Jews in various countries seems to have had an evolution similar to that of the general population: it sank to very low levels in the early 1930s, it had a considerable boom in the 1940s and 1950s, and it has tended to decline again since the 1960s. However, the level of Jewish fertility is generally below that of the general population. In a very rough way, it can be estimated that the average number of children per Diaspora Jewish woman (regardless of marital status) is about 1.5 as compared to a minimum of 2.1 needed for population replacement and to presumably about 6–7, as mentioned above, among traditionalist Jewish communities. Fertility levels vary among and within Diaspora communities. In some places, it has been found that fertility is higher than the average in families with a higher degree of Jewish identity, and lower than the average among working women.

Prolonged low levels of fertility in the Diaspora have determined a process of population aging analogous to that occurring today in all developed populations, but more acute. Today, people aged 65 or more constitute 19% of Diaspora Jewry, as compared to 12% in surrounding populations and 3% among the Jews of Czarist Russia 90 years ago.

High proportions of the elderly determine high mortality rates per 1,000 Jewish population in the Diaspora, despite better than average health standards and life expectancy. Low fertility determines low birth rates. Instead of natural increase, there is thus a natural decrease. Due to this and losses from assimilation, the Diaspora population as a whole is decreasing. It was about 10.2 million around 1970; it has now presumably declined to only 9.5 million. Projections – which should

not be interpreted as sure forecasts – suggest that if present trends do not change, a further decline to less than 7.5 million is possible in the next 25 years.

The demography of the Jews of Israel differs from that of the Diaspora in many respects: mixed marriages and withdrawals from Jewish population are only marginal features. Fertility – which is now almost the same among Jewish families of various origins – is at a level of some 2.7 children per woman, as compared to 1.5 in the Diaspora. This comparatively high level is largely due to the strong desire for children typical of Jewish families in Israel. First results of a recent sample survey suggest that the number of children desired by Jewish married women approaches an average order of magnitude of 3.5. The survey shows also that if economic or health difficulties were not present, the number of children desired would be even larger.

However, not everything is rosy even in Israeli Jewish demography. Nuptiality, which until the early 1970s was very high, is now decreasing. Marriages are delayed, and unmarried cohabitation is increasing. Although weakening of the family may be less pronounced than elsewhere, its first effects in lowering fertility among young age groups are already visible.

Immigration, which was in the past the dominant factor in the demography of the Jews of Israel, sharply declined during most of the 1980s, while emigration is continuing.

The yearly rate of natural increase of the Jewish population of Israel – 14 per 1,000 – is more than double that of developed countries. However, it is only half of the rate of natural increase of the non-Jews in Israel, despite the sharp reduction of fertility which has occurred in the non-Jewish population of Israel under the impact of modernization.

As a result, the proportion of non-Jews in the population of Israel has grown from 15% in 1973 to 18% by the end of the 1980s. If one includes the West Bank and Gaza in the calculation, the proportion of non-Jews would reach 38–39%.

The natural increase of the Jews of Israel has until now been sufficient to compensate for the demographic losses of the Diaspora, but this will not be true in the future. If present trends will not change, projections show that the world Jewish population may decrease from about 13 million now to some 12 million around 2010.

Let us now move to an evaluation of these facts and figures:

Aging and shrinking of the population are regarded today as unfavourable trends in many developed countries, due to their implications for the structure of the labour force, social security, social services, and general security.

For the Diaspora, the possibility of a continuation of present trends appears to be even more worrying. It implies (a) a prospect of a decline of some 30% between 1970 and 2010 in a population which already lost about one-third of its size in the Holocaust, and (b) a proportion of old people much higher than in most other populations.

With regard to Israel, there appears to be a rather general consensus in world Jewry concerning the desirability of further strengthening her Jewish population for political, social, economic, security and other reasons.

The obvious conclusion of all this is that there appears to be little room for complacency and much for concern, although not despair. Indeed, we have not assembled here to mourn together. On the contrary, our main aim is to think, in practical terms, of what can be done in order to mitigate undesirable trends.

Let us first have a look at demographic policies elsewhere in the world. During the past 40 years, an enormous amount of information has become available on population trends, their determinants, and their consequences in practically all countries of the world. Awareness of the importance of demographic developments has spread from professional demographers to governments and public opinion. This, in turn, has put systematic population policies into action. Policies were designed at first to curb excessive fertility in countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where it hindered social, economic, and educational development. In several countries these policies enjoyed a spectacular success. Since then, policies have been adopted also in some countries seeking to avoid further falls in fertility or even to increase its level.

Among the countries more active in this direction are France, the USSR, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria. Different types of policies have been adopted, many of which include giving financial help or tax relief to families with children, providing extensive child welfare services and child-care, paid maternity leave from work for a sufficient length of time to care for a child, and loans or assistance to young couples to obtain suitable housing.

The efficacy of these measures is currently being discussed in extensive scientific literature which cannot be summarized briefly. However, three important examples pointing to the possible effectiveness of intensive policies are often quoted:

(a) France – which was once the pioneer in limitation of births in Europe, but has also since been a pioneer in pro-natalist policies –

today has a level of fertility which, although still low, considerably exceeds that of almost all other Western European countries.

(b) Eastern European countries with strong pro-natalist policies have fertility levels considerably higher than those of Western countries.

(c) The German Democratic Republic, which in the past had a very low fertility level, practically equal to that of West Germany, raised fertility – after adopting appropriate policy – to a level 33% higher than that of the German Federal Republic.

In Israel, on May 11, 1986, the Government decided to start planning comprehensive, long-term, and coordinated demographic policies. These should be aimed at fostering the establishment of new families and their desire for children, eliminating obstacles from their paths, avoiding unnecessary abortions, providing welfare assistance to families experiencing difficulties in child-raising, fostering immigration and immigrant absorption, taking steps to restrain emigration, and encouraging the return of emigrants to Israel.

A working group formed by representatives of the relevant ministries has investigated practical ways for implementing the decisions of the government, and has reached the following conclusions: the establishing of coordinated demographic policies will not be easy, but is feasible; some steps can be taken soon; others – more important for reaching long-term aims – require the acquisition of more factual knowledge. This will be possible in the next few years because important and relevant fact-finding inquiries are well under way. The extent and directions of policies depend upon the extent of financial means which become available.

In a provisional way some possible direction along which future policies can be planned might be: constructive loans for establishing new families, with part of the interest or capital being eliminated upon the birth of children within given lapses of time; help to women suffering from fecundity impairments; counselling or assistance for women when an unexpected pregnancy is detected, to solve the practical problems involved; helping, in the field of housing, families which wish to have more children but cannot do so due to overcrowded housing conditions; systematic revision of current welfare policies for children, working mothers, and families, policies which have been severely curtailed in the 1980s by anti-inflationary measures; enlarging the day-care network and giving more generous subsidization to families which cannot afford to pay the fees for these services; extensive educational activities in the fields of sex and family life and demography.

With regard to the Diaspora, policies to be discussed are expected to deal mainly with possible ways of encouraging Jewish marriages and strengthening the Jewish family, promoting childbearing, assisting families in transmitting Jewish identity to young generations, considering relevant aspects of formal Jewish education, youth activities, especially in university campuses, increasing awareness of demographic trends and their implications, and dealing with problems arising from population mobility, distribution over metropolitan areas, and isolation of small Jewish population groups.

Sound policies must be based on reliable factual knowledge. The only Jewish population in the world for which extensive demographic, social, economic, and other statistics are currently available from censuses and other official sources is that of Israel. Decennial censuses in a few countries furnish some data for their Jewish populations. However, official statistical sources do not supply any information for the large majority of Diaspora Jews.

Under these circumstances, efforts to base knowledge of the Jewish populations on data collected on Jewish initiative have been made during the past few decades at three levels: *local*, *countrywide*, and *worldwide*.

(a) At the *local community level*, a considerable number of sample surveys have been conducted with a view to making information available on the size, structure, ecology, Jewish characteristics, etc. of the Jewish population. However, local surveys have proved inadequate as a basis for wider generalizations.

(b) Taking this into consideration, several *national sample surveys* of Jewish populations have been conducted during the past 20 years: in Italy (1965), the Netherlands (1966), the United States (1970–1971), Yugoslavia (1971–72), South Africa (1974), and France (1972–78).

(c) At the *world level*, some measure of comparability was ensured by the cooperation given in the planning of several of those surveys by the Division for Jewish Demography and Statistics, established in the late 1950s at the Institute of Contemporary Jewry of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The Division has been active in centralizing documentation on Jewish populations all over the world, processing and analyzing available data, and preparing projections of world Jewish populations.

World Jewish statistics have proved to be not only of scientific value. In the past few years, they have been widely used in the search for and follow-up of policies in important fields such as general demographic trends, Jewish education, and care of the Jewish elderly.

However, the countrywide sample surveys taken between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s, which constitute the basis for current estimates of world Jewish population, are becoming obsolete. It is therefore necessary to ensure that proper information become available for the future. This should meet scientific criteria, but should also be oriented to serving the legitimate needs of policy-planning, checking the effects of policies, and monitoring changes relevant from practical viewpoints at local, national and world levels.

It is hoped that the demographers' symposium will formulate practical proposals, focusing mainly on the project of a survey of world Jewish population around 1990. The financial and organizational responsibility for the survey is to be taken by Jewish institutions. Participating scholars should be provided with the means to guarantee scientific integrity, credibility, and comparability of the data collected.

Cooperation among Jewish institutions and scholars, and among people and organizations in Israel and in the various Diaspora regions, will be necessary in this endeavour and in the effort to build a coordinated system of Jewish population policies.

Let us hope that this conference will help in strengthening a feeling of partnership among all the institutions and people involved, and in improving the chances for continuity of all branches of the Jewish people.

*** Note added at the time of publication of this volume**

Recent political events – such as the fall of communist governments in Europe and large scale immigration to Israel from the USSR have changed some of the facts discussed in this paper. However it is too early to evaluate these possible changes. We have therefore reproduced the paper, as it was circulated at the festive opening of the Conference. The paper discusses cursorily topics on which available literature is enormous and partly controversial.

With regard to general demographic trends in the developed countries we quote here a few recent comprehensive works including wide bibliographical references: David H.P. and McIntyre R.J., *Reproductive Behavior: Central and Eastern European Experience*, New York, Springer; Davis, K.D., Berostam, M.S., Ricardo-Campbell, R. (Eds.) (1981), *Below Replacement Fertility in Industrial Societies: Causes, Consequences, Policies*, supplement to volume 12 of *Population and Development Review*, 1986; McIntosh C.A., *Population Policy in Western Europe: Responses to Low Fertility in France, Sweden and West Germany*, Armonk, New York, M.E. Sharp (1983); and a special issue of *Espace*,

Populations, Societes (1989/2) devoted to fertility in industrialized countries in which the aspect of regional differentials of fertility in Europe is discussed. See also the paper by S. Kupinsky on "Fertility Trends and Policies in Low Fertility Contries" in Part IV of this volume; and R. Bachi, "Low Fertility in Industrial Countries: Causes, Consequences, Policies" in *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 610, 1990.

With regard to demographic trends of the world Jewish population, see: U.O. Schmelz, "World Jewish Population in the 1980s – An Outline", in this volume; U.O. Schmelz and S. DellaPergola, *Basic Trends in American Jewish Demography*, New York, The American Jewish Committee (1983); U.O. Schmelz and S. DellaPergola, "World Jewish Population, 1989", in *American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 91 (1991).