

Progressive yeshivah stirs controversy, and optimism

10 November 2000

By FROM REGINE WOZNITZA BERLIN

THIS SUNDAY sees the opening of Germany's first Progressive Jewish rabbinical institute since the Holocaust - in Potsdam, outside Berlin.

While its launch has underscored the continuing uneasiness of mainstream German Jewish leaders over new Liberal communities here, the founders of Abraham Geiger College this week were brimming with optimism about the school's future role in Germany and beyond.

"We are continuing the work of the College of the Science of Judaism in Berlin, which was closed by the Nazis in 1942," declared Rabbi Dr Walter Jacob, the new college's president.

"The graduates of this seminary will be able to make an indispensable contribution to the intellectual leadership of Progressive Judaism in Europe, adding to the impressive efforts and immense achievements of so many in recent years."

The college's organisers see it as taking a lead in training rabbis for an estimated 200,000 Jews gravitating towards new non-Orthodox communities in Central and Eastern Europe.

"We have been open to conversations with the Orthodox community," a college spokesman added. "We look forward to establishing permanent relationships."

But in a reflection of the scepticism with which Orthodox and traditional Jewish figures in Germany view the increasingly visible Progressive communities, no representative of the German Jewry's main leadership body, the Central Council of Jews, is expected at the inauguration ceremony.

Nathan Kalmanowicz, who is in charge of religious issues on the Central Council, commented: "There are some good people involved in the college, but they represent only a very small minority in Germany."

There have been increasing signs of tension in recent years between leaders of the roughly 80,000 traditional and Orthodox Jews grouped under the so-called Einheitsgemeinde, or Unified Community, and a small but growing Progressive movement.

Yet the establishment of the Abraham Geiger College - and the fact that immigration from the former Soviet Union has made German Jewry the fastest-growing diaspora community - seem to have prompted an effort by the Central Council to co-opt the Progressives.

"Because of our history, it remains our strength in German society to speak with one voice," Mr Kalmanowicz told the JC last week. He added that, while only a small portion of the German community was observant and Orthodox, many thousands of Jews in Germany remained traditional in their outlook and synagogal preferences.

There was, in any case, a need for many more than the current 29 full-time rabbis in Germany, he said.

And with this in mind, the Central Council was planning to inaugurate a rabbinic studies course at the University for Jewish Studies in Heidelberg - intended to train Orthodox, Conservative and Liberal rabbis.

"A rabbinic course like this is acceptable, because we need rabbis, and we will integrate [its graduates]," he said. "We are not against different rites within the community."

But many of the new Liberal and Reform congregations - each, typically, with a few dozen active and highly motivated members - bridle at what they view as the continuing reluctance of mainstream institutions to embrace innovation and tolerance.

"Now that the Jewish community in Germany is, ironically, the fastest growing in the world, traditional pluralism should be revived," commented Josef Joffe, the chairman of the board of the new Potsdam college and editor of the weekly magazine Die Zeit.