

Jewish Sweden

The Radical Jewish Traveler celebrates secularism at the 60th parallel.

BY DAVID SHNEER

First stop: Stockholm, Sweden.

I came to Sweden to present at Stockholm's second-ever [Limmud](#), the festival of Jewish learning launched in England 28 years ago. When I told people that I was going to experience Jewish Sweden, the most common reactions I heard were, "Isn't Sweden anti-Semitic?" and "Are there any Jews there?"

Let's be honest, Sweden is not known as a global hotspot of Jewish life. But there are about 20,000 Jews in Sweden—14,000 of whom live in Stockholm. Of those in Stockholm, about 4,500 are registered with the official unified Jewish community. [Kosher slaughter](#) has been illegal in Sweden since the 1930s, and [circumcision](#) is only legal if performed by a medical doctor.

With a small population and a government that likes to regulate religious life, one might think that Swedish Jewry lives a precarious existence. However, perhaps because of the government's past and present relationship to its Jews, Sweden's Jewish community is alive and well, defined by a vibrant and unique secularism.

Limmud, Sweden Style

Limmud Sweden is chaired by an incredibly energetic secular Finnish-Swedish Jewish woman named Marina Burstein. The conference, a 24-hour event, took place in Stockholm's official Jewish community building. It attracted more than 500 participants, which in a national community of 20,000 Jews is an incredible achievement.

Sessions ranged from close text studies of Bible, to workshops on Jewish popular culture. I offered a session on [Chabad's arrival in Sweden](#). It led to some heated conversations about the affect Chabad, and other Jewish organizations from abroad especially the Israeli government, have on Swedish Jewish life.

Most surprising was the diversity of participants at Limmud, including Yiddish-speaking children of Holocaust survivors, who reminded me that Yiddish is a state-sponsored minority language in Sweden; Israeli émigrés, who came to Sweden long ago; and a gay non-Jewish Bosnian refugee, who heads a Swedish-Israeli friendship organization. Visibly lacking was any Orthodox Jewish participation, perhaps because of Limmud's secular, female leadership and its lack of Orthodox presenters.

Europe's Secular Yeshiva

Sweden's secularism is partly responsible for its highly successful Limmud. The country is also home to an important center of secular Jewish learning, [Paideia: The European Institute for Jewish Studies in Sweden](#). The very name, from ancient Greek for the union of civilization, tradition, literature, and philosophy, shows how the institute reflects secular values. Barbara Spectre, an American-Israeli, founded Paideia because she believes that the key to inspired Jewish leadership is knowledge of Jewish sources, and that in Europe this training is best accomplished in a secular environment open to Jews and non-Jews.

I got to meet this year's class of 23 fellows, who together represent 18 countries from across Europe, plus Israel and Argentina. The countries with the largest representation are Russia and Ukraine, suggesting where Paideia thinks the next generation of secular Jewish leaders will come from.

Madame President

And in Sweden's Jewish community, secular, not religious, leaders run the show. Lena Posner-Körösi is the first woman in the world to hold the top position of a country's official Jewish communal leadership, and she is one of the most vibrant, savvy Jewish leaders I have met. She spoke with me nonstop (in perfect English, as does nearly every other Swede) with passion and excitement about what Swedish Jewry has to offer the world—a secular, cultural vision of Jewish life where learning and community are central, and religious worship is secondary.

A Different Kind of Religious Life

The secularism of Swedish Jewish life has allowed women to have full and equal access to its Jewish communal leadership, with women running the country's official community, its secular yeshiva, and its largest annual gathering in Limmud. Its religious institutions, however, are still exclusively male.



Stockholm at night.

Rabbi Phil Spectre, married to Barbara of Paideia, served as Stockholm's official rabbi, and Sweden's de facto chief rabbi, for a couple of years in the early 2000s. Before Spectre, from 1965 to 1998, Rabbi Morton Narrowe, a Philadelphia-born, Jewish Theological Seminary-trained Conservative rabbi, held the position. Rabbi Narrowe is proud of Sweden's liberal traditions, and according to him, he is the only non-Orthodox rabbi to have functioned as a chief rabbi of any community in Europe.

I asked him about the Swedish ban on kosher slaughter that forced the small number of kosher keeping Jews to import meat from that bastion of traditional Jewish life—Copenhagen. Instead of complaining about the government, he told me he is writing a *teshuvah*, an official Jewish legal responsum, that would meet the demands of Sweden's laws on the ethical slaughter of animals and push kosher slaughter in a new, more ethical direction. Perhaps this is how Sweden's Jewish secularism plays out even in the religious sphere.

Stockholm's community does have an Orthodox rabbi with a small congregation, and there are three Chabad rabbis, all foreign born and all male, in each of Sweden's three official Jewish communities. Chabad's presence in Sweden makes many Swedish Jews nervous. One source of that nervousness might be Chabad's popularity. On the Friday of my arrival, the local Chabad rabbi threw a swinging Shabbat dinner open to the public, which attracted more than 150 people, many of whom were young and foreign.

When Chabad arrived in Stockholm in 2001, people were afraid that their liberal traditions and coexistence with non-Jewish Swedes would be jeopardized by Chabad's traditional vision of Jewish life. But President Lena wryly commented that Chabad is, after all, "just another cultural offering for Swedish Jews," another thing to do on a Friday night. She easily absorbed Chabad into her vision of Sweden's culturally, not religiously, driven Jewish life.

Not Like Other European Jewish Communities

Unlike many European cities, the Holocaust does not dominate Stockholm's Jewish landscape. The city's primary Holocaust memorial is a wall tucked into a side area on the grounds of the main synagogue. A more prominent Holocaust landmark is a large orb perched on the waterfront that memorializes Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who helped save many Budapest Jews late in the war.

Sweden does not have the same painful history of the government's complicity in the Holocaust that most European countries have. On the contrary, it was a Swedish diplomat who helped save Budapest Jewry, and many Jews are in Sweden precisely because it was a refuge for Jews during the war. Perhaps this is why Swedish Jews guard their liberal traditions so fiercely.

The community is still looking for a Conservative/Masorti rabbi to take over the pulpit left vacant by Narrowe and Spectre. And they will even consider a woman! A female religious leader serving as the de-facto chief rabbi? Only in the dim light at the 60th parallel.