

Jewish Education in the Czech Republic

a case study of the Lauder schools in Prague

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The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research
and Strengthening Jewish Vitality
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Preface

The series “Field Reports of the Rappaport Center” provides insights and information with regard to specific issues of Jewish life, giving a voice to local community people addressing those issues in a straightforward manner. The present publication, the fifth in this series, was authored by Tereza Foltýnová of the Prague Jewish community. Titled **Jewish Education in the Czech Republic: a Case Study of the Lauder Schools in Prague**, this report provides an on-site perspective and in-depth analysis with regard to the dynamics and the issues affecting Jewish education in the Czech Republic today. Ms. Foltýnová points out that the content and quality of that education has very significant implications not only for the students but also for their parents and families – and for the community’s future. This well-written Field Report enables the reader to appreciate both the great importance of this topic – and its complexity.

It is our hope that the insights expressed in this publication will motivate Jewish communities and leaders to take a new look at the strengths and weaknesses of the ways in which they have until now related both to education and to other aspects of community life – and encourage them to seriously consider and implement new strategies, better suited to ensuring the future of this ancient people in today’s turbulent times.

* * *

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those whose efforts have enabled the publication of this report by Tereza Foltýnová: Ms. Iris Aaron, organizational coordinator of the Rappaport center, who was also directly responsible for proofreading and for coordination with the press; Ms. Denise Levin (text editor); the Ben Gasner studio (cover graphics), and Art Plus press.

The Rappaport Center

The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality is an independent R & D center, founded in Bar Ilan University in the spring of 2001 at the initiative of Ruth and Baruch Rappaport, who identified assimilation as the primary danger to the future of the Jewish people.

A central working hypothesis of the Center is that assimilation is not an inexorable force of nature, but the result of human choices. In the past, Jews chose assimilation in order to avoid persecution and social stigmatization. Today, however, this is rarely the case. In our times, assimilation stems from the fact that for many Jews, maintaining Jewish involvements and affiliations seems less attractive than pursuing the alternatives open to them in the pluralistic societies of contemporary Europe and America.

To dismiss such subjective disaffection with Jewishness as merely a result of poor marketing and amateurish PR for Judaism is an easy way out – which we do not accept. Rather, a concurrent working hypothesis of the Rappaport Center is that the tendency of many Jews to disassociate from Jewishness reflects real flaws and weaknesses existing in various areas and institutions of Jewish life today.

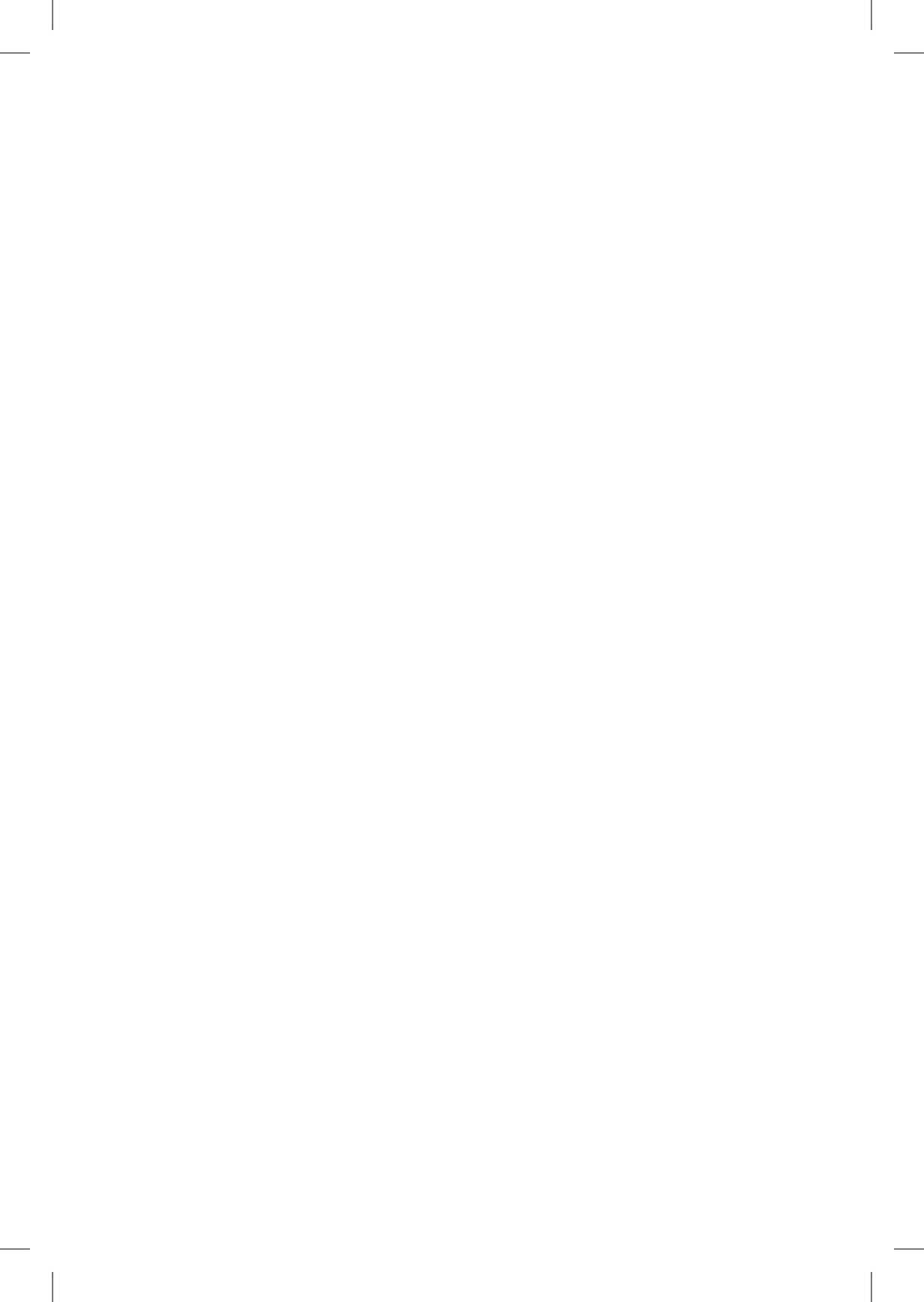
The first stage of all research projects of our Center is, therefore, to analyze an aspect or institution of Jewish life in order to identify and understand what might be contributing to “turning Jews off”. However, since assimilation is not a force of nature, it should be possible to move beyond analysis, characterizing and formulating options for mending and repair. This is the second stage of our activities, and these two aspects are reflected in our name: The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality.

The Rappaport Center views the Jewish People as a global community made up of a large number of nodes that link and interconnect in multiple and complex ways. Recognizing and respecting the wide variety of contexts and aspects of Jewish life today, we realize that insights and solutions relevant to specific communities and institutions are not necessarily directly applicable elsewhere. Yet the interconnectivity of Jews worldwide, enhanced by modern modes of communication, means that novel analyses and responses to problems and issues facing specific Jewish frameworks are of more than local significance. Thus, work carried out at our center can be of benefit to all leaders, activists and institutions motivated – as we are here at the Rappaport Center – to respond creatively to the challenges of assimilation and to enhance and strengthen Jewish vitality.

In addition to “Field Reports”, the Rappaport Center publishes a series titled “Research and Position Papers”, authored by outstanding scholars and experts. These papers present original and interesting findings concerning issues pertaining to assimilation and Jewish identity. Written at a high level of cultural and conceptual analysis, they are nevertheless not ‘ivory tower’ research; they bear operational implications for ameliorating and improving real-life situations. The research and position papers of the Rappaport Center are an invaluable and original series, and constitute a significant addition to the collection of any public and research library and to the bookshelves of all individuals interested in, or concerned with, the future of the Jewish people.

For all of us involved in the activities of the Rappaport Center, and indeed for all Jews and people of good will concerned with the vitality of the Jewish people, the publication of this report is an opportunity to acknowledge once again the vision and commitment of Ruth and Baruch Rappaport. It is their initiative and continued generosity that enable the manifold activities of the Rappaport Center – thus making an important contribution to ensuring the future well-being of the Jewish people. May they continue to enjoy together many years of health, activity, satisfaction and happiness.

Zvi Zohar, Director
The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research
and Strengthening Jewish Vitality



Introduction

The aim of this paper is to offer an overview and analysis of the function of the Lauder schools of Prague. The complex of Lauder schools is seen both by the Jewish Community Administration as well as by the general members of the Jewish community as one of the main means for ensuring Jewish continuity in the country. It is seen as an institution of great functional importance for the community, as well as an institution with potentially significant influence on the life of the community. As such, it can be seen as a Jewish institution that plays a crucial role in the life of Jews as individuals and of the Jewish community as a whole.¹

This report was prepared during the period of February-March 2005; i.e. during one of the climaxes of the one-year long conflict that bitterly divided the Jewish community of Prague throughout the previous year.² The functioning of the Lauder schools, and specifically the issue of the school administration, played a significant role in this conflict. In writing this paper, I made every effort to interview respondents across the opinion spectrum of the community, to give voice to all the involved parties, and to maintain an objective approach to the issue. While the main objective of this study is to examine the functional aspect of the Lauder schools, it touches upon the conflict only in absolutely necessary instances; and approaches it in the most objective manner possible.

- 1 This paper was compiled for a conference organized jointly in May 2005 by the Rappaport Center and by PAIDEIA – The European Institute for Jewish Studies in Sweden. The title of the conference was “Dysfunctional Aspects of Jewish Religious Institutions Today”. The Lauder Schools, although not being a religious institution, were nevertheless included within the scope of interest of the conference.
- 2 The conflict started in April 2004 after the reelection of Mr. Tomáš Jelínek as President of the Jewish Community. The series of several events divided the community into two opposing groups. The main problems causing the conflict concerned distribution of power and responsibility in the community, monetary issues and personnel issues (e.g., designation of the chief rabbi and of the principal of the Lauder schools).

Background Information

The Lauder schools of Prague are a complex of two³ institutions of Jewish education: an elementary school⁴ (Gur Arie) and a high school (Or Chadash). These schools were established in 1997 and 1999 respectively, following the founding initiative of the Chief Rabbi of the Czech Republic, Rabbi Karol Efraim Sidon. The school is a joint project of the Jewish Community of Prague and the Ronald S. Lauder foundation, which are co-founders of the school complex. The schools, Gur-Arie and Or Chadash, are the only Jewish schools in the contemporary Czech Republic and, as such, represent the only option for parents who want their children to be educated in a Jewish school.

Basic Characteristics of the Schools

The school curriculum follows the national curriculum for elementary schools and high schools, respectively. Concerning the instruction of general school subjects, the Lauder schools offer an education comparable to other general schools in the country. As opposed to most other schools, the Lauder schools insist on always having less than 20 students per class in order to facilitate one-on-one contact between students and teachers. The schools are located in a newly refurbished building with exceptionally modern equipment,⁵ which fully satisfies the needs of a modern school.

Jewish Character of the Schools

The Jewish character of the schools has two fundamental aspects: a) the day-to-day functioning of the school (the school schedule follows the Jewish calendar, the schools offer kosher meals in their cafeteria, male students are required to wear a kippah during meals, there is a possibility for the students to take part at *shachrit* [morning prayer], etc.), and b) Jewish school subjects, which are a part of the curriculum (Hebrew language, Jewish education, and facultative seminars on various Jewish issues offered for the High School students). Jewish topics also penetrate into the instruction of general school subjects (literature, history, civics, geography, etc.). The Jewish subjects are taught in all grades and are

3 There is a third component in the complex of Lauder schools, namely the Lauder nursery school. The administration of the nursery school is independent of that of the elementary and high schools.

4 In the Czech education, an elementary *school* is an institution attended by students between 6/7 and 14/15 years of age, i.e. a combination of an American "elementary school" and "middle/junior high school".

5 The refurbishment of the building was largely financed by the Lauder Foundation.

mandatory for all the students. Hebrew is taught beginning from the sixth grade of the elementary school onwards (including the four grades of the high school). The attendance of Hebrew classes is mandatory for all students.

Admissions Policies

The target student group for both of the schools is Jewish children, or more specifically, children of Jewish background, i.e. Jewish ancestors. The schools do not use (any) halakhic criteria for accepting students, and are also open to non-Jewish children. The schools, however, discourage families *practicing* religions other than Judaism⁶ from registering their children, in order to prevent damage to the religious identity of these children. Generally, the schools accept non-Jewish students to grades 1-5 of the elementary school only very rarely, and discourage parents from registering such children for grades 6-9.⁷ The percentage of non-Jewish children is considerably higher in the high school than in the elementary school (this issue will be discussed in greater detail in the chapter "Objective Problems").

On average, the school (elementary school + high school) is attended by approx. 180 students every year.

School Administration

The elementary school and the high school have the same principal, who is responsible for the administration of both schools. The principal is appointed to, and dismissed from, the post by the Jewish Community administration.

The school is administered by the Jewish community (which has school administrative rights as the co-founder of the school). The Jewish community administers the Lauder schools by the decisions of: a) its lay head and his

6 It is essential to stress that the Czech Republic is an extremely non-religious country. In the last census (2001), only 28.6% of the men and 35.5% of the women characterized themselves as "believers in God". These numbers, however, cannot be taken at their face value – religiosity in the Czech Republic is a very complex issue. Nevertheless, the number of people practicing any kind of religion in their daily life is substantially smaller than in any other European country.

7 There are no exact figures available about how many children in the schools are halakhically Jews or Jews of Jewish background. It is estimated, however, that two thirds of the students of the elementary school fall into the category of people with the right of return to the State of Israel. This number has a rising tendency, i.e. the number of children with the right of return is higher in every new first grade class.

secretary, b) Jewish community representation (an elected body which acts as parliament), and c) a special school committee.

Financial Management

The Lauder Foundation entered into the project as a partner of the JC. At the onset of the project, the Lauder Foundation invested approx. 20,000,000 CZK in the refurbishment of the school building and its equipment. The annual school budget comes from several main sources every year:

State subsidy: 30% (6,000,000 CZK)

Lauder Foundation subsidy: 7.5% (1,500,000 CZK)

Jewish Community: 62.5% (12,500,000 CZK)⁸

These figures vary slightly every year. The school budget amounts approx. 19 mil CZK annually. The school occasionally receives other sponsor support, but this does not amount to more than 1% of the budget.

There is no school tuition fee, i.e. the school is free of charge for all of its students. The only fees collected from the parents are fees for the school meals, school trips, and after-school activities.

8 This sum represents approx. 10% of the budget of the Jewish Community.

Expectations

The Lauder Foundation's continuous support of the project stems from its general policy: The aim of the foundation is to help rebuild the Jewish communities of Central and Eastern Europe through the education of Jewish youth. The Lauder Foundation believes that institutions offering Jewish education will help children from this region become Jews with a strong Jewish identity. The foundation trusts that there will arise a new sophisticated generation of Jews, who will be considerably more confident in their Judaism than their parents, who in contrast are often assimilated Jews with very limited knowledge of their Jewish heritage. The Lauder Foundation not only believes that the institutions it supports will educate people who will represent the continuity and the future for their Jewish communities: It also hopes that through these children their parents will also begin to find a way back to their roots.

At the onset of the school project, the expectations of the Prague Jewish Community Administration, the Jewish Religious Leadership, and the Jewish Community members were high. The idea of an institution of Jewish education was perceived favorably. In addition to agreeing that a Jewish school could be the linking element that would fill in the rupture of Jewish tradition caused by several decades of communism, while serving as a guarantor of Jewish continuity for the future, the Jews of Prague were also excited about having a Jewish educational institution as such. In the self-perception of Czech Jewry, emphasis on quality education of children and sophisticatedness and high personal qualities of adults stemming from quality schooling are considered to be inherently Jewish qualities. Therefore, it seemed only natural for many to expect the new Jewish school to produce graduates who would be Jews equipped with a good general knowledge of Jewish religion, culture and history, as well as having a strong Jewish identity, and who would be, at the same time, individuals with a sophisticated general education. The general idea at the onset of the project was that the school would become a quality, if not elite, school for Jewish students.

Objective Problems

Quality of Education

Creating a good Jewish school is a very complex task. There are many elements that come into play: Above all, the school administration has to govern the institution's quality performance. This is an extremely difficult task in itself, let alone in a new school established from scratch. Present Czech education as a whole faces many challenges; the school system is undergoing a process of both legal and conceptual reforms in which the aims and means of the educational process are changing significantly. This naturally puts considerable demands on the flexibility and understanding of students and teachers. As this is true about any Czech school today, the Lauder schools are no exception. Our data (mainly the responses of our respondents) show that this issue is very sensitive and plays an important role in the students' and parents' perception of the schools.

It is not the aim of this study to tackle the issue of the educational qualities of the schools. Nevertheless, there is one aspect of the quality of the schools that indeed is connected to our concern: The quality of the schools is – among other factors – measured by the study performance of its students. Naturally, the performance of the students is to a large degree influenced by their skills, talents, intelligence, aptitude, etc. When the schools were established, many members of the Jewish community took it for granted that they would become schools for “smart Jewish kids”.

Reality proved them wrong. There is no reason to think that within the Jewish community there are not to be found children with learning difficulties, students with behavior disorders, and children with lower study aptitudes. This is one of the reasons (one of many, though) why the schools also accept non-Jewish students. The high school, especially, accepts non-Jewish children in order to increase competition among the students.⁹ From the standpoint of the critical

9 Interestingly enough, according to the observation of the teachers, the non-Jewish students appear to perform generally better than the Jewish children. This can be possibly explained by the admission procedure according to which the students are selected when entering the high school. Each applicant has to sit a test in Math and the Czech language, and do a General Study Aptitude test. In addition, students participate in an interview, in which they have to explain their motivation for studying at a Jewish school. The interview part of the admission procedure is naturally much easier to pass for the children with a Jewish background. Arguably, the non-Jewish children have to present “an additional quality” to be accepted. This stands out in their later school performance.

majority of our respondents (and from the viewpoint of all the interviewed principals of the schools), the non-Jewish children are seen as a positive element (the respondents claim that these students not only increase competition, but that their presence in the schools also helps to create a multifaceted atmosphere that resembles the actual Czech society, etc. In addition, the schools hope that the fact that non-Jewish children experience a close contact with the Jewish culture will to some degree promote multi-cultural understanding in the Czech society as such).¹⁰ The high percentage of the non-Jewish children among the students of the high school, however, raises further questions about the Jewish character of the schools.

Recently, a suggestion was made to start to encourage Jews from Czech communities¹¹ outside of Prague to study at the Lauder Schools¹² (especially, if not solely, at the high school). In this way, the competition among the students could be – at least partly – increased also by Jewish students. In addition, this way, Jewish education would be spread also beyond the borders of Prague, and this might also contribute to cooperation between the Jewish communities.

Jewish Character of the Schools

Another obvious issue that had to be tackled at the onset of the school project was the conception of the “Jewish character” of the schools. The difficulty of this issue stems from the obvious difficulty of defining Judaism in simple terms in today’s stage of development of Jewish culture and identity. Contemporary Judaism is a multifaceted culture; the Jews of today are a very diverse people. Thus, the seemingly most obvious definition of the Jewish character of the school, i.e., definition through the halakha, observance of mitzvot, Jewish tradition and respect for, and study of, traditional Jewish texts, becomes very problematic. The Czech Jewish community is inherently secular; its members are people with not easily definable Jewish identities, i.e., their Jewish identity

10 Especially, this third aspect of the presence of non-Jewish students was stressed by many of the respondents (nine out of 11). In my perception of the issue, this is used mainly as a kind of a “slogan” in the schools. I consider such reasoning artificial to a large degree – I question the notion that Jewish schools should become the venue for promoting multicultural coexistence.

11 There are nine other Czech Jewish communities outside Prague. All are considerably smaller than the Prague community.

12 According to our data, the schools already had at least two students from outside Prague in the past years.

is very often based on an unclearly defined connection with the past, on notions of ethical/moral commitment stemming from their Jewish heritage, and/or on cultural/artistic grounds. At the same time, the Jewish community has a distinct (albeit small) group of observant Jews. To create a school for such a diverse group of children is extremely difficult. In creating the Jewish character of the school, two important elements had to be taken into account: The framework of the Czech Jewish population as a starting point, and a careful specification of “what should happen with the students Jewishly in the course of their school years”, i.e. the aims of the Jewish character of the school.

After asking the people mainly responsible for the Jewish character of the school (Rabbi Sidon – the Czech initiator of the school project, the three interviewed principals and one of the Jewish Education teachers), I discovered the following: All the involved parties realize the problem stemming from the diverse background of the children attending the school. Nevertheless, none of the parties ever clearly specified what the Jewish character of the school should be, and, more specifically, the Jewish community administration never clearly communicated its vision on this matter with the school. Despite the fact that among the students, the teachers, and the Jewish Community Administration there are voices that view the Jewish character of the schools as a matter to be discussed, there is no constructive discussion of the involved parties on this matter.

School Administration

For the sake of the smooth functioning of the school, it was necessary to create an effective system of school administration. The Lauder Schools were founded by the Jewish community, which has an indisputable right to influence the school on both the administrative and conceptual level. The school is a school of the Jewish community created in order to foster its future. This connection is very obvious and necessary. Regrettably, throughout the history of the school, the relationship between the community and the institution has almost invariably been tense. This issue is unanimously seen as the most burning problem of the school by all the involved parties (ten respondents out of eleven cited the administrative relationship between the Jewish Community and the Lauder Schools as a cause of the tension in the school). Opinions on this problem vary considerably and, in fact, they play a crucial role in the present rift in the Prague community. The critical majority (ten out of eleven) of the interviewees agreed that this issue was one of the main elements hindering the further development of the school.

The problem, in my understanding, has two basic aspects:

- a) The system of the Jewish community Administration's management of the school is set in such a way that the school is vulnerable to political turmoil. The school can very easily become a tool in the political (and personal) disagreements among the members of the community.
- b) The Jewish community Administration has a very strong control over the schools, which is not a standard situation in the Czech schooling system.¹³ This problem is exacerbated by the fact that: 1) the representatives of the Jewish community Administration lack basic orientation in the field of education and school management, 2) the Administration has never developed a clear conception for the school and does not clearly communicate its demands for the school, 3) the Administration has no standardized tools for managing the school.

This malfunction of the relationship between the Jewish community and the Lauder Schools has two consequences:

- a) The school becomes a venue for political and personal fights in the community. This became a serious problem, especially during the two years or so prior to the time of writing, when the unsettled situation in the community and its administration paralyzed the functioning and development of the school.
- b) For lack of other means of managing the schools, the Jewish community Administration uses its authority to change the school principal as its main means of managing them (The present principal, Mrs. Eva Nováková, is the ninth principal in the schools' eight-year-long history). This proves to be a means that creates an atmosphere of confusion and mistrust, rather than constructive change. These changes are heavily influenced by the political and personal rivalry among different groups and individuals in the Jewish community Administration and the Lauder Schools Administration.

13 The Czech legal system allows schools to have a so-called "school council", which consists of representatives of the founder of the schools (in this case the Jewish community and the Lauder Foundation), representatives of the teaching staff (except for the principal) and representatives of the students' parents. The institution of the school board enables teachers and parents to partake in school administration. The rights of the council include influencing the school budget, the conception of the schools (including the choice and nature of subjects taught), appointing and dismissing the school principal. The school council can also initiate a school inspection.

The Jewish Character of the Schools

Let us now return to the question of the Jewish character of the schools. As we have observed before, there doesn't exist a clear official conception of what this Jewish character should be. The Lauder Schools administration promotes the Jewish character of the schools in two main ways: a) through mandatory and facultative Jewish school subjects, and b) by creating a school environment where Jewish practice and (supposedly) Jewish values are promoted.

Hebrew Language

All the respondents agreed that the Hebrew language instruction is important for a Jewish school of the Lauder type. The quality of Hebrew instruction has oscillated considerably in the past, due to frequent changes of teachers. Generally, there are very few students who graduate from the school with a fluent knowledge of Hebrew. This should be put into context with the fact that there is very little experience with teaching children Hebrew in the Czech Republic. There are no well-trying conceptions and the teachers have to create their teaching techniques and methods themselves, relying largely on the materials provided by the Czech branch of the Jewish Agency. Naturally, the mediocre quality of Hebrew language instruction has to be seen as a problem. However, in comparison to other issues presented in this report, the question of Hebrew instruction can be seen as of small importance.

Jewish Education and Facultative Jewish Seminars

As we have mentioned earlier, the students take classes in Jewish education in all the grades of both schools. In the Jewish Education classes, the students get acquainted with the fundamentals of Jewish Holidays, Jewish tradition, *Kashrut* [Jewish dietary norms], Jewish history, history of Israel, study of Jewish texts and Jewish philosophy. The high school students can attend facultative seminars on various topics of Jewish interest. These include biblical Hebrew, issues of current Israel, *Parashat ha-Shavua* [Torah portion of the week] and others.¹⁴ Jewish themes also penetrate into the instruction of other subjects (mainly in history, geography, civics and literature).

14 However, due to the recent administration problems of the schools, the high school offers no facultative seminars of this kind in the year 2004/5, which is perceived negatively by both students and parents.

The answers of our respondents made it clear that everybody realizes Jewish Education should be very different in nature, compared to other subjects of the school. It is mainly this subject that should contribute to the unfolding and development of the Jewish awareness and identity of the students. Our respondents realize that Jewish Education (respectively, the Jewish subjects in the school in general) should not only teach the students about Judaism, but also lead them to internalize Judaism and make it a part of their lives. In this respect, the Jewish subjects in the school, and the Jewish Education in particular, fail to fulfill their function. On the whole it is clear that Jewish Education is one of the less favorite subjects among the students, very few students enjoy studying the subject and only very few among the respondents see it as a subject that contributes to the development of the students' Jewishness (three out of 11).

The Jewish Education provided by the schools seems to succeed relatively well in passing on information about Judaism to the students, but appears to fail in influencing the stances and attitudes of the students. We assume that this is a result of many elements: Different teachers have taught Jewish Education throughout the history of the school, the main focus of the classes seems to have been the transmitting of information, i.e., passing knowledge about Judaism on to the children. (Some of the teachers have, unfortunately, also failed in achieving this goal). While I am aware of the very difficult job of the teachers, who have to teach a subject that has no Czech curriculum, very few Czech written materials to work with etc., I cannot but object to an approach in which Jewish education neglects the necessity of consciously appealing to the students' stances and opinions.

The questionable results of Jewish Education are also a consequence of the fact that the school is insensitive to the fact that the classes consist of students of different Jewish backgrounds and, thus, also different needs. In almost every class, there are non-Jewish children, secular Jewish children and observant Jewish children. The children from non-Jewish and secular Jewish families have naturally a much poorer background for further studies in the subject, while the students from families that are more involved in Jewish life have higher expectations and demands of it. Teaching Jewish Education to such a variety of students in one class is like teaching a foreign language to a group of students of different levels of proficiency in the language. The insensitive treatment of this issue contributes to the students' negative approach to the subject. In this context, the issue of the non-Jewish students becomes relevant again. Some of the non-Jewish students are reluctant to attend the classes of Jewish education. They argue that, since they are not Jewish, the classes have much less relevance for them.

Interestingly enough, among the Jewish students, there are some who demonstratively overlook the instruction of Jewish Education and also openly reject other Jewish aspects of the school (they don't want to study Jewish topics in other subjects, refuse to wear a kippah during common meals, etc.). Even though it would be natural to see this as a part of the school's failure to nurture interest in Jewish issues and the Jewish way of life, we think that it can to a great extent be ascribed to natural teen-age resistance and denial of values offered to them by school and parents.

There is one component in the Jewish curriculum of the school that is perceived highly favorably by most of the students – namely the trip to Israel organized for the high school students.¹⁵ These trips have an eye-opening effect on the children and in my opinion fulfill the function of offering the students a feeling of the complexity of Judaism, while being at the same time a strong experience in itself. While this is naturally very difficult to imitate in the classroom environment, some of those elements that obviously work well with the children during the trip can also be made use of during school instruction.

Jewish Environment

The schools follow halakhic rules in many aspects of their functioning: The school schedules follow the Jewish calendar (students don't go to school on Jewish Holidays and the schools organize communal celebrations of Holidays), the schools provide kosher food in the cafeteria, males are required to wear a kippah in the dining hall, there is separate PE (physical education) instruction for boys and girls, etc. These measures have two objectives – the schools hope that the children will acquire some of the aspects of Judaism by living them; also these measures should make it possible for a wide range of students to attend the school. The schools aspire to create such an environment as would be acceptable for most of the students and that would, at the same time, also allow the most observant students to function in the schools without any serious problems. Occasionally there are some who object to the measures (i.e., some of the observant students demand that stricter rules apply to the dress code of the students, some of the non-observant students complain about difficulties connected to kosher catering during school trips, etc.). But, on the whole, the present *status quo* appears to be the best possible compromise.

15 This trip is co-organized with the Jewish Agency.

Involvement of the Parents

The answers to this issue by our respondents varied considerably. It appears that there exists a group of parents who take advantage of the opportunity provided by their child attending a Jewish school, to attend occasional lectures on Jewish topics offered by the school, to take part in communal school celebration of Holidays, etc. However, only a very limited number of parents started to take an active part in the life of the Jewish community after their child started to attend the school.¹⁶ Some of our respondents claimed that the parents became automatically more interested in Jewish issues by registering their children at the school (they became aware of the cycle of the Jewish year because of the school schedule, they were motivated to learn more about the situation in Israel before the students traveled there for the school trip, etc.). We conclude that the school manages to draw the parents to Judaism with different degrees of success, depending on individuals.

It is of interest that, in the last two years, a substantial number of parents started to show interest in the events in the Jewish community. In face of the complicated political situation, they realized it was necessary for them to be involved in the community in order to be able to influence the Jewish Community Administration's control over the school. Some of the parents who had never been involved with the Jewish Community became members¹⁷, and some of the latter also started to take part in various activities of the community.

16 At the same time, naturally, there are parents who were involved in the Jewish community already before their child became a student of the Lauder Schools.

17 Only registered members of the Jewish Community can influence the structure of the Jewish Community Administration through elections.

Achievements

Now that I have analyzed the functional aspects of the school, I shall proceed to a summary of what I understand to be the achievements and the problems of the Lauder Schools:

- The schools create a very important social milieu in which Jewish children meet and create social bonds with one another. These will hopefully create the basis for a perhaps informal but nevertheless crucial social framework of the future generation of Prague Jews.
- The children have demonstrably better knowledge of the fundamentals of Judaism than most of the adult population of the Jewish community.
- The schools manage to nurture and develop Jewish identity and commitment to the Jewish community in some of their students; some of the students become involved in the life of the community in various ways (they become members of the Czech Union of Jewish Students, start to attend services, become involved in the social care program of the community, etc.), a small number of students continue to study Judaism after leaving school on an institutional level (academic study of Judaism or study in Yeshivot). The number of these students is, however, very small. The question remains: To what extent were their decisions influenced by the schools themselves?¹⁸
- The parents of the children get automatically involved in some aspects of Jewish life, culture and tradition when registering their children at the Jewish schools. The Lauder Schools, however, manage to spark deeper interest only in a very limited number of parents who were not involved in Jewish life previous to their children's attendance at the Lauder Schools.

18 In the history of the schools, two graduates made aliyah and one student converted to Judaism. The school experience, however, had probably very little influence on these decisions, as these students were determined to make these steps before they started studying at the Lauder Schools.

Problems

- The schools suffer from various kinds of problems typical of any other Czech school. These include problems with the quality of the instruction, with the quality of the teachers, etc. Even though problems of this kind seem to constitute a large part of the concern of all the involved parties, it is not the aim of this paper to analyze them. Nevertheless, we have observed that there is a tension between the founding idea of creating an “elite school” and at the same time a “Jewish school”.
- The management of the schools (the administrative relationship between the Jewish Community and Lauder Schools) is organized in a way that harms their smooth functioning: The Lauder Schools are too vulnerable to political changes and to personal animosities in the Jewish community, in general, and in the Jewish community administration, in particular.
- In addition, the Jewish Community, as the founder of the schools, has practically no effective means and tools to manage the school. In the past, its main tool for managing the schools was to change the principal. As a consequence: a) none of the principals had sufficient time to develop a conception for the schools and launch it successfully, b) the far too frequent changes of principal created an atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion among the teaching staff, students, parents, as well as among the members of the broader Jewish community, and thus generally harmed the name of the schools.
- The sometimes tense atmosphere at the schools is naturally perceived by the students and the parents as a part of the Jewish experience. It inevitably negatively influences their relationship to Judaism as such (and this is true especially for the students and parents for whom the schools are their only contact with Jewish culture)
- Despite the fact that the instruction of Jewish subjects succeeds relatively well in transmitting knowledge of fundamentals of Judaism to the students, it largely fails to create a positive attitude towards Judaism in the students.

Conclusion

Before I conclude my research, I would like to stress that I am fully aware of the fact that many of the problems the schools have to tackle are inevitable challenges every newly established school must face. At the same time, some of the problems specifically related to the education of Jewish children are shared by other Jewish educational institutions (both in the Diaspora and in Israel), even institutions of great reputation and long tradition.

In my opinion, in the future the schools have to solve two basic problems: the problems connected with school administration and the issues raised regarding Jewish education in the schools as a whole.

- 1) Measures have to be taken to prevent the schools being vulnerable to political changes in the Jewish Community Administration. At the same time, the Jewish Community and the Lauder Schools have to launch open, constructive and continuous discussion about the conception of the schools. This discussion must be free of political and personal concerns and its main aim must be the well-being and goodwill of the schools, their students, and teaching staff. From a formal perspective, the schools would probably benefit largely by the foundation of a school council. This would hopefully contribute to smoothing out some of the difficulties in decision making in the schools.
- 2) Conceptual work on the structure of Jewish education has to be launched. Jewish education as a whole has to undergo such a change that would take note of the diverse backgrounds and, consequently, diverse demands and needs of the students. At the same time, in addition to knowledge-based aims, other objectives have to be included in the planning of the curriculum of the instruction of Jewish subjects. These tasks could be achieved by further stratification of the Jewish subjects offered and via a stratification of approaches.¹⁹ This, however, demands a long-term discussion (which has to involve consultation regarding the issue with experts from outside the school), availability of experienced teachers and good study materials. In addition, such a conceptual work demands a tranquil and enhancing school environment. As such, these changes/reforms constitute a difficult, long term task.

¹⁹ The schools already have a partly developed proposal to change the system of Jewish Education instruction. In this proposal, Jewish Education consists of offering seminars dealing with different aspects of Judaism, which the students would choose from according to their interests, needs and abilities.

- 3) In the long run, the schools could consider encouraging Jews from Czech communities outside of Prague to study at the Lauder Schools (especially, if not solely, at the high school), in order to spread Jewish education beyond the borders of Prague and in order to increase competition among the Jewish students at the schools.

Sources

- Interviews with representatives of the Community Administration, parents, teachers and students of the schools. Number of respondents interviewed: 11 (including three former principals of the Lauder Schools)
- Articles from the local Jewish newspapers:
 - Maskil (Series of articles on Lauder schools in issues 1-7/5765 – www.maskil.cz)
 - Obecní noviny, Roš Chodeš (miscellaneous articles)
 - 'Nejasná zpráva o Lauderových školách' in Literární noviny 29/2004
 - Prague Post (26/03/2004 articles 'Firing sparks Lauder school fight' – <http://www.praguepost.com/P03/2003/Art/1113/news2.php> and 'Rabbis firing reveals fissure' – <http://www.praguepost.com/P03/2004/Art/0708/news4.php>)
- Websites:
 - JC websites: www.kehila.cz and www.kehilaprag.cz
 - LS website: www.lauder.cz
 - Ronald S. Lauder Foundation website: www.rslfoundation.org
 - A private web of the former JE teacher, Dr. Jan Divecký: www.doopravdy.cz
- School annual reports from years 2002-3 and 2003-4.