

Being Jewish in Scotland today

Ephraim Borowski highlights a significant shift in attitude towards Scotland's Jewish community.

A few years ago, at one of the social events the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities runs in all parts of Scotland, a young mother told us that when her daughter was being taunted by other children that "you killed Christ", she did what any mother would do and went to discuss it with the teacher; the teacher's response was, "What are you complaining about? – you did!"

That story so horrified the civil servants in the Community Safety Unit of the Scottish Government that they wanted to know just how typical that experience was, and they commissioned our inquiry into "Being Jewish in Scotland" (www.scojec.org/bjis.html), which reported in 2012. As we travelled round the country, collecting personal stories and giving Jewish people an opportunity to feel a sense of belonging, often for the very first time, we found that in general Jewish people felt they were "lucky to be Scottish and Jewish. I wouldn't change either if I had to be born again".

Yes there were concerns about attitudes in schools and universities, and a lack of religiously and culturally sensitive welfare provision, and we heard about examples of antisemitism including a medical school telling a student that if she persisted in observing Shabbat they would "think twice about taking people with your kind of name", a sixth-former being given a shower cap to wear in the gas chamber, and grotesque parodies of religious beliefs and practices being peddled by teachers. But

these were the exception; the rule was that "Scotland's a darn fine place to be a Jew".

Sadly, that changed barely a year later. During one month in August 2014, we received almost as many reports of antisemitic incidents as we had in the whole of the previous year. So many Jewish people said that they felt uncomfortable, anxious and even afraid to go about their day-to-day activities that the Scottish Government asked us to carry out a second study of how the experience of Being Jewish in Scotland had changed.

This time our findings (www.scojec.org/bjis2.html) were extremely sobering: no fewer than 10% of respondents could not think of anything at all good about being Jewish in Scotland. Many (32%) talked unprompted about a heightened level of anxiety, discomfort, or vulnerability. Others (17%) said they "considered it risky to show my Jewish identity in public". Some had changed their conduct to avoid Jewish gatherings including synagogue services, or for the first time had "seriously talked about an exit strategy for leaving Scotland."

This was reflected in a radical change in people's concerns: in 2012 people spoke about aspects of Jewish and Scottish identity, changes in communal priorities, lack of culturally appropriate public services, education about Judaism, and the importance of interfaith work, as well as attitudes to Israel, antisemitism, and their

sense of security. This second inquiry was dominated by expressions of insecurity and alienation, and 80% attributed this to attitudes to events in the Middle East. Most tellingly, the person who said in 2012 that "Scotland's a darn fine place to be a Jew" now told us: "I feel alienated, and no longer Scottish first then Jewish. I feel Jewish only."

Fortunately the Scottish Government is taking these concerns seriously, and is supporting SCOJEC's work to ensure that Jewish people in Scotland feel safe, supported, and well integrated.

The First Minister has also made good her promise of "greater engagement with members of the Jewish community".

Scottish Jews are here to stay, and the Scottish Government is working with us to overcome their feelings of negativity and alienation.

The Church of Scotland has recently "recognised the damaged relationships" caused by some of its recent pronouncements and we have, we hope, entered a new era of dialogue and understanding. All of that gives us hope that our next study of Being Jewish in Scotland will find less intolerance, less anxiety, and better understanding between Jewish and non-Jewish people.

But can you be sure that your own parish is "a darn fine place to be a Jew"? ■

Ephraim Borowski is Director of the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities.