

Berlin's Rabbinerseminar Celebrates **Chag Hasemichah**

BY RAFAEL HOFFMAN

Last week, Beis Medrash L'Rabbanim of Berlin, the *Rabbinerseminar*, marked its fourth *chag hasemichah* by ordaining two new Rabbanim in a moving ceremony in the German city of Wurzburg. It would seem appropriate that this event pointing to the rebirth of Germany's once-glorious Jewish community should have taken place just days before the commemoration of Kristallnacht, a seminal event in its destruction. Equally noteworthy is that the *chag hasemichah* preceded Germany's celebration of the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, which, along with reuniting East and West Berlin, stands as the strongest symbol of the fall of the Iron Curtain. Both new Rabbis, as well as most of those actively involved in traditional Jewish life in Germany, are from the Former Soviet Union (FSU).

"There is a tremendous amount of symbolism," said Rabbi Chaim Dovid Zwiebel, executive vice-president of Agudath Israel of America, who attended and addressed the event. "In this country, 70 years ago, there was a goal to destroy all vestiges of Jews and Jewish life, and on this very soil the *nitzchiyus*, eternal resilience, of Torah triumphs. To think that today we see a demand for Orthodox Rabbis from across Germany! We are here to proclaim that the 'final solution' was not even final in their own country."

The ceremony was held in Wurzburg's Shalom Europa Jewish Community Center, which houses the town's shul as well as a museum to the town's historic Jewish past. Wurzburg's Jewish presence dates back to medieval times, but is probably best known for the Wurtzburger Rav, Rabbi Isaac Dov Halevi Bamberger, *z"l*, famous for his opposition to Harav

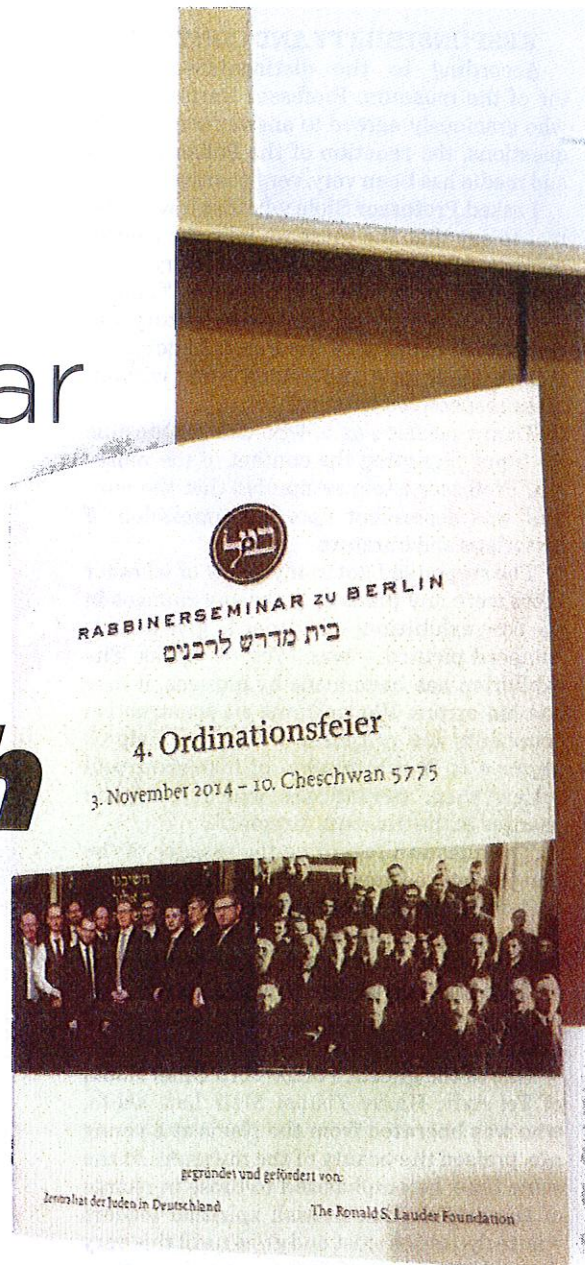
Hirsch's policy of separating Orthodox Jewry from the larger Jewish community.

"There were many people and Rabbis who inspired me to grow in *Yiddishkeit*," said Rabbi Yaakov Pertsovsky, one of the *musmachim*. "I feel that I can inspire other people. I enjoy learning and teaching. I feel this is the best path for me to take."

Rabbi Pertsovsky moved to Munich with his family at age 10 from Kiev, Ukraine. He went to Berlin as a teenager to pursue advanced studies at the yeshivah there. Since the beginning of this year, he has been serving as Rabbi of the community in Chemnitz, which under communist rule was called Karl-Marx-Stadt. The Chemnitz community has about 600 members and, in addition to its shul, maintains a *mikveh* and a kindergarten. Rabbi Pertovskiy will also be teaching in nearby Leipzig, whose larger Jewish community boasts a Torah center.

Also receiving *semichah* was Rabbi Shlomo Aminov, originally of Uzbekistan, who is assuming the rabbinate in the city of Bonn.

Semichah certificates were awarded by Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, Chief Rabbi of Moscow and chairman of the Conference of European Rabbis. He also serves as chairman of the board of the *Rabbinerseminar*.



Rabbi Chaim Dovid Zwiebel, Executive Vice-President of Agudath Israel of America, speaking at the podium.



The crowd was addressed by Dr. Yosef Schuster, vice-president of the Central Council of German Jews and Ronald Lauder, president of the World Jewish Congress. The *Rabbinerseminar*, Berlin's central yeshivah, and indeed many of the institutions most instrumental to the rebirth of Jewish life in central and eastern Europe, are largely sponsored by Mr. Lauder's foundation.

Also in attendance were Christian Schuchardt, Mayor of Würzburg, and Georg Eisenreich, Bavarian State Minister of Education and Culture, Science and Art. Mayor Schuchardt spoke proudly of Würzburg's Jewish past, and even more of its vibrant present-day community.

"On the one hand I can't help thinking that their *zeides* did who-knows-what during the war," said Rabbi Zwiebel, reflecting on meeting the German officials. "But outwardly they were so happy and honored by the event. It was a tremendous source of pride for them."

Joshua Spinner, CEO of the Ronald Lauder Foundation and founder of the *Rabbinerseminar*, said that even though the seminary itself is in Berlin, the center of Orthodox life in modern-day Germany, this event, as well as the last three *semichah* ceremonies, were held in different cities throughout the country. Spinner said that this helps both to strengthen smaller communities and to show that the seminary is a national institution.

Although the *Rabbinerseminar* was only inaugurated in its present form in 2009, its history goes back to 1873, when it was founded by Harav Eziel Hildesheimer, *zt"l*. It was founded in response to the wave of "enlightenment" that swept Germany through the 19th century, decimating its centuries-old Torah establishment. Harav Hildesheimer sought to combat this onslaught by producing Orthodox Rabbanim who would be as polished and educated as their Reform counterparts. It operated

until 1938, when it was closed by the Nazis. Its staff included Harav David Tzvi Hoffman, *zt"l*, noted for his work on *Tanach* and scholarly rebuttals of Biblical Criticism, and Harav Yaakov Yechiel Weinberg, *zt"l*, later *Rosh Yeshivah* of Montreux and author of the response work, *Sridei Aish*.

Today, the *Rabbinerseminar's* three-year course includes a morning program of the standard Talmudic topics covered in yeshivos and an afternoon program in *Shulchan Aruch*, focusing on both the traditional *semichah* topics of *Yoreh De'ah* and other areas pertinent to practical rabbinics. The program is under the auspices of *Dayan* Chanoch Ehrentreu of London, who visits the Rabbinical Seminary twice a year and administers the final exam, lending his authority to the *semichah*.

True to the vision of Harav Hildesheimer, students also receive a degree in social work while pursuing ordination. Mr. Spinner explained that the purpose of the degree is multi-fold. First, it gives the Rabbis certain secular credentials, which is important in gaining legitimacy and respect in the communities they will be serving. Second, it makes them far more valuable to the largely immigrant populations they are serving.

"For the standard FSU immigrant, the Rabbi is there to run the shul and other things that he may see as good, but who is he going to go to if he really has an issue? To the social worker," said Spinner. "We are here to say that the Rabbi is here for all of [their] needs, not only what they view as religious ones."

Spinner said that while a doctorate in philosophy was needed to communicate with German youth in the 19th and early 20th centuries, these would not make a Rabbi any more relevant today, whereas a degree in social work does.

"As time goes on," he said, "I become more and more convinced that we are exactly what Rav Hildesheimer would have wanted us to be today." ■