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References:

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“The Origins and Early Developments of the World Jewish Congress.”

My PhD research on the “Early History of the World Jewish Congress (1932-1939)” is a multi-archival project designed to enrich the growing body of literature on Jewish diplomacy of the interwar period, on the one hand, and on 20th century transnational civil society networks, on the other hand.

Since the 19th century, civil society groups advocating, for example, the rights of women, the rights of workers or the cause of peace and operating across borders have attempted to overcome national and socio-political cleavages. Because they favor the convergence of social and cultural norms in an era of intensified internationalization and globalization, transnational civil society networks are said to facilitate integration among nation-states and to help attenuate behaviors associated with ethnocentrism. There are, however, few studies linking interwar transnational civil society networks to present-day phenomena.

Transnational organization of struggles for political, socio-economic and cultural rights within the Jewish world gained importance in the wake of rising antisemitism during the interwar period. Jewish communities worldwide were eager to seek the support of non-domestic and preferably transnational bodies, which, they thought, could exert pressure on their respective domestic governments. The fact that this form of transnational mobilization only crystallized in the 1930s in the context of an upsurge of nationalism in the Jewish world triggered by the growing threat of antisemitism worldwide buttresses the following argument: despite efforts to de-emphasize nation-state paradigms in the literature, shifts from nationalization to transnationalization processes cannot be regarded as linear. Even if they share issue-oriented as

well as value-driven objectives, ethnonational diasporas should most probably be distinguished from the rest of contemporary transnational civil society networks. As my study on the early history of the World Jewish Congress demonstrates, the transnationalization of struggles for recognition based on Jewish solidarity along ethnic lines constitutes a fundamental paradox, inherent however to an age of increasing nationalization.

In line with the ideology of the Zionist movement, the very purpose of the World Jewish Congress was to channel transnational Jewish political activism along ethnic lines. By cooperating and supplementing the activities of the Jewish Agency, which already acted as a Jewish guarantor on all questions related to Palestine in accord with the terms of the Mandate system established by the League of Nations, the World Jewish Congress aimed at no less than becoming the official Jewish authority on all questions of minority treatment, migration and relief in the Jewish world.

My research shows the extent of involvement it could trigger and assesses the degree of success it could achieve in these three transnational spheres of action. While focusing mainly on interwar Jewish non-governmental diplomacy at the League of Nations, my work on the early history of the World Jewish Congress reflects more broadly on Jewish political history in the modern era.

While in Israel, I plan to collect, process and analyze key archival material documenting the early history of the World Jewish Congress. The Central Zionist Archives holds the archives of the Geneva, Paris and London offices of the Comité des délégations juives/World Jewish Congress for the period 1932-1939. It also shelters the personal records of its key leaders and activists (Aryeh Lev Motzkin, Stephen Samuel Wise, Nahum Goldmann, Nathan Feinberg, Emil Marguiles, Jacob Robinson).

I also hope to make a fine use of the library of the University of Haifa which holds an impressive array of recent published works by learned scholars in the field of Jewish history as well as monographs/biographies/hagiographies by individuals who were key political players in the period under scrutiny in my research.