



# World Jewish Congress's Voice at the Vatican

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**08 Aug 2024 - Viktor Eichner wears a yellow bow tie on the lapel of his dark suit. "It reminds us of the Israeli hostages who are still being held," says the 31-year-old.**

He actually stays out of current politics, but the Hamas attack on Israel has had a massive impact on the young Hungarian's work. "October 7th destroyed many of my projects." Eichner represents the World Jewish Congress (WJC) at the Holy See.

Relations with the Catholic Church are very important for Judaism, stresses Eichner. "Catholics have a deep understanding of Jewish identity and religion. We want to use this to establish further partnerships." Many threads converge in the Vatican representation of worldwide Judaism, which opened on October 18, a few minutes walk from St. Peter's Basilica.

Even Eichner's first papal audience on day 12 of the war in the Middle East was overshadowed by this. WJC President Ronald Lauder and his delegation asked Francis to intercede for the release of the hostages. "Despite everything, it was a great conversation because we felt that the Pope felt very deeply for us," Eichner remembers.

In his work, he is primarily looking for contact with the next generation of Catholic multipliers: young priests, members of the order, seminarians, and students, says the diplomat, who comes from a secular Jewish family in Budapest. "But I also simply want to make the positive aspects of Judaism better known." For example, at so-called "Model Shabbat Dinners," which he organizes at home together with his wife, a young fashion designer, "the guests should get to know our tradition: the dishes on Shabbat, kosher cooking—and that nothing mysterious or strange happens," says Eichner, who speaks English, Italian, and Hebrew in addition to Hungarian.

After four years working as a management consultant in Tel Aviv, among other things, he was happy to go to Rome for the World Jewish Congress. "The vast majority of the more than 100 Jewish communities worldwide live in peace and close partnership with their surroundings and other religions," says Eichner. "But the last few years have shown how quickly that can change." This makes reliable partnerships across borders all the more important.

He finds Germany, the only country in Europe where the number of Jews is growing, to be exemplary. Of course, the increase is also due to migrants from Russia and Ukraine, but also because the federal government and society understand that Jewish life must be protected. The situation is similar with regard to the issue of

Antisemitism: Studies show a worldwide increase of up to 500 percent since October 7. "Germany is no exception, but at a lower level." He feels safe in his new home of Italy, where around 30,000 of the 60 million inhabitants are Jews. "But I don't look Jewish either. Friends of mine no longer wear the kippah in public or remove the Jewish mezuzah from their front doors out of fear."

He is not surprised that antisemitism today does not necessarily come from right-wing extremist circles but also from liberal and left-wing circles. In Eichner's view, some immigrants from Islamic countries also contribute to this. Their hatred is not only directed against Jews but against democratic and liberal values ??in general.

This also fatally changes the view of the Middle East conflict: the formula of Israel as the "occupier" and the Palestinians as the "victims" is now mainstream. "The World Jewish Congress has passed a resolution in support of the two-state solution in which Israelis and Palestinians can live in peace. But this idea seems more distant than ever."

In his work with the Vatican, Eichner has not only the Holy Year in mind for 2025, but also the 60th anniversary of "Nostra Aetate": With the document of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Catholic Church placed its centuries-old strained relationship with Judaism on a new footing. The Jewish response to this is the document "Kishreinu" ("Our Way").

Concrete interreligious initiatives should continue to grow from these mostly abstract theses, says Eichner. He is supported in this by the papal "ecumenical minister," Cardinal Kurt Koch, and his team.

If Viktor Eichner had one wish? "End the war immediately and free the hostages or return their bodies to their families," he says without hesitation. "This war is terrible; there are many dead and a lot of suffering on both sides. And it also prevents important projects, for example, human rights and peaceful coexistence," says the young diplomat. "We should listen to each other, get to know each other, and then work together to develop ideas for a better world."

*This interview was originally published in German in [Domradio.de](http://Domradio.de).*

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