

Barbara Kay: France finally admits to its history of Jew hatred. What about the present?

[National Post](#) - Tuesday July 25th, 2017

July 16 marked the 75th anniversary of the infamous 1942 mass roundup of French Jews in Paris's Velodrome d'Hiver ("Vel d'Hiv"), when 13,152 Jews were deported to Nazi death camps. Benjamin Netanyahu's motorcade arrival at the commemoration ceremony, his limousine sporting gold-fringed Israeli flags, was an electric moment for French Jews, representing the first inclusion of an Israeli head of state in the event's annual commemorative history.

In a moving address to the 1,200 (mostly) Jews in attendance, including Holocaust survivors in their 90s, France's President Macron did not mince his words, assigning full blame for Vel d'Hiv to the Vichy government ("not a single German participated"), another first, and therefore rebuking previous leaders who have accepted only partial blame. The depth of Macron's feeling, evident in the cathartic physical embrace he and Netanyahu shared following his speech, brought the audience to a pitch of passionate applause. This was a moment of genuine reconciliation unlike any that had gone before.

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Macron understood he had to address the painful reality of the new French anti-Semitism. He therefore referred in his speech to the murder, 12 days earlier, of Sarah Halimi, a 65-year old Orthodox Jewish doctor, battered to death by her Mali-born neighbour Kobili Traoré. Traoré had reportedly referred to Halimi as a "dirty Jew," and shouted "Allahu Akbar" as he threw her off her apartment balcony.

The indictment filed against Trahoré did not categorize the killing as a hate crime, let alone an act of terrorism, as many believe it should be. It became a political hot potato. Macron announced that "the judiciary must as soon as possible provide maximum clarity on the death of Sarah Halimi."

Second-guessing clarity would be welcome, but irrelevant to the larger problem: the entrenched pathology of Jew hatred in France's Muslim community. The Vichy government is gone, but its Jew-loathing spirit has returned in, as Macron put it, "the cancerous spread of militant Islam."

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In a 2015 interview with Times of Israel journalist David Horovitz, former Paris policeman Sammy Ghozlan paints a bleak picture of the situation for Jews in France. As an Algerian Jew, Ghozlan was a natural liaison between the Jewish communities and law enforcement. He grew concerned by the tendency he saw in his colleagues of managing the growing social problem of Muslim anti-Semitism by minimizing its root causes. (“The cops would say, if a synagogue went up in flames but nobody was hurt, ‘it’s a criminal act, not a hate crime.’”)

Hate incidents ramped up with the Second Intifada in 2000. It was then that Ghozlan created the National Bureau for Vigilance Against Anti-Semitism (BNVCA French acronym) to record anti-Semitic attacks on synagogues, schools and public transportation (851 in 2014), which he distributed to reporters, police and concerned citizens.

Murders make the news, but pervasive low-level Muslim violence against Jews is barely registered. “If people leave religious objects — a kippa, tefillin — in a car, the car will be attacked,” Ghozlan says. “Jewish homes find swastikas on the mailbox. White powder sent in envelopes.” Hamas and Islamic State flags have been tolerated in demonstrations, where the cry of “kill the Jews” rings out without consequence. Jewish children in France believe it is normal for soldiers to guard their parochial schools, never having known it to be otherwise.

Jewish children in France believe it's normal for soldiers to guard their schools

Ghozlan sees a “direct connection” with anti-Semitic violence and the left’s obsessive anti-Zionism. Arabs and Africans would not be as bold in their anti-Semitism, he says, “if they didn’t have the sense that they were encouraged by political movements and opinions in France that incited them to behave in this way.” In the media, Israel and Israelis are portrayed as detestable, as Nazis. Consequently, Ghozlan asserts, “the French public doesn’t care when the Jews get attacked,” claiming that if in January, 2015, the Hyper-Cacher (kosher) market massacre of Jews had not been linked to the Charlie Hebdo massacre, it “would not have been a big deal in France.”

Macron’s Vel d’Hiv address was magnificent; the embrace with Netanyahu was genuine; the audience’s appreciation was wholehearted. But what are good intentions against righteous hatred of so few by so many? A 2014 “Day of Rage” march by 17,000 (mostly) Muslims was dominated by the slogan, “Juif, la France n’est pas à toi” (Jew, France does not belong to you).” The families of the four victims of the Hyper-Cacher massacre took them at their word. French citizens, they made the sadly reasonable decision to bury their dead in Israel, to ensure their graves would not be desecrated.