

Nazi rhetoric and Holocaust denial: Belgium's alarming rise in antisemitism

Report shows 39% of Belgian Jews have been harassed, with some fearing to wear the kippa in public

By Jennifer Rankin

The Guardian (09.05.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2YsA2rD>– The doors of the Jewish Museum of Belgium, in Brussels, never used to be locked during daytime visiting hours. That all changed after a day in May 2014 when a jihadi gunman shot dead four people during an attack on the museum in one of the country's most shocking terrorist atrocities.

Nearly four years after the attack, antisemitism has again been making headlines in Belgium, a country that symbolises Europe's diversity. Not only is the capital, Brussels, home to the EU institutions and Nato, Belgium is made up of three linguistic groups (French, Dutch and German), making it something of a laboratory for European compromise.

However, last week the annual Kantor Centre report on global antisemitism concluded that, apart from France, "Jews do not experience anywhere [else] in the EU as much hostility on the streets as they do in Belgium".

Organisations monitoring anti-Jewish hate in Belgium report a steady increase in antisemitic incidents, such as vandalism, Holocaust denial and verbal abuse, as well as a rise in conspiracy theories and Nazi rhetoric. The Belgian government-backed Centre for Equal Opportunities said it had handled 101 cases of antisemitism in 2018, up from 56 the previous year.

The Kantor study followed alarming findings from the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency. It found 42% of Belgian Jews had considered emigrating in the last five years, one of the highest proportions in the 12-country survey and only slightly behind France and Germany. Some 39% of Belgian respondents said they had experienced antisemitic harassment in the last year.

The grim findings come as no surprise to Ariella Woitchik, the director of legal and public affairs at the European Jewish Congress, based in Brussels. "Even if you are not personally subject to an antisemitic incident, you hear it everywhere from your friends in schools, places at work. People cannot walk in the streets of Brussels with a kippa on the head."

She thinks antisemitic abuse is getting worse in schools. "In the public schools in Belgium the biggest insult and the most widespread insult is 'Jew'". Facing hostility, more parents are moving their children into Jewish schools, she says. "They do not even have a choice to be honest, they are forced into a very, very difficult dilemma: you leave your kid in a public school and your kid is a target, or you put him in a Jewish school and the school is a target, so it is a very difficult situation."

Jewish buildings, including now the museum, are tightly

secured, with cameras and double doors that can only be opened from the inside. Soldiers patrol outside Jewish schools. "My three year old, she asked me 'Mummy, why do we have soldiers in front of the school'," Woitchik recalls. "How am I supposed to explain that?"

Against this backdrop, Jewish organisations are intensifying long-established efforts to promote understanding of religion and culture.

"After the terrorist attack on the 24 May 2014 the Jewish Museum decided not to close in on itself, but to become more and more than ever a place for culture, but also for dialogue," said Bruno Benvindo, the museum's director of exhibitions. "That was really a statement, a deliberate choice to answer this terrorist attack."

The victims of that attack are not forgotten. At the entrance is a sparkling bronze plaque to commemorate the four people who died. They were Myriam and Emmanuel Riva, an Israeli couple celebrating a wedding anniversary with a trip to Europe. The volunteer guide Dominique Sabrier, and Alexandre Strens, who worked in the museum's communications department, were also murdered on what should have been an ordinary working day. "Victims of a cowardly murder by a terrorist in this place," records the plaque.

The French jihadist Mehdi Nemmouche was sentenced to life in prison earlier this year for their murders.

The building was closed for more than two years after the attack, while the museum's permanent collection travelled to different locations across the city.

"It was a very traumatic experience for all Belgian people," said Benvindo, who joined the museum's staff in 2017. "We didn't want only to become a memorial, but we wanted to remain a place for culture, a dynamic, living institution."

Located in an elegant Brussels townhouse, the Jewish Museum is close to the picturesque Place du Grand Sablon, a magnet for tourists drawn to the gothic 15th-century church, antiques market and luxury chocolate shops. A short stroll from the tourist bustle, the museum is a treasure trove of Jewish history and culture. One floor features a display of filigree silver spice holders, brass candlesticks and old books with cracked spines, while choral music plays. It also showcases contemporary culture, with a recent exhibition on Amy Winehouse.

The museum, which has 16,000 books on Jewish life and culture, has expanded its traditional educational programme. About 5,000 school children visited last year. Some took part in the "Meet a Jew" workshop, which is aimed at 14-18 year olds and seeks to tackle stereotypes. Other workshops offer children the chance to learn about Jewish culture and history, both religious and secular traditions.

This weekend, the museum expects to host 250 people for a kosher Moroccan meal to mark Iftar, the end of the day's fasting during Ramadan. As well as quizzes about Jewish and

Muslim traditions, the evening will end with a gospel choir concert.

Jewish organisations cannot do everything by themselves, community groups stress. The European Jewish Congress wants to see improved training in schools, so teachers are able to manage situations when children refuse to follow lessons about the Holocaust, which the EJC says is becoming more common.

Raya Kalenova, the vice-president of the EJC, stresses that antisemitism is hardly unique to Belgium, referring to the outpouring of hate online to the shooting at a synagogue in Pittsburgh, to what she calls the “openly antisemitic” British Labour party. France and Germany are among European countries that have seen a sharp rise in attacks on Jews, threatening “the very values on which the union was built”, according to the FRA.

Five years ago, political leaders across Europe thought the EJC was exaggerating, she says, but now there is greater understanding of the threat. “We are worried today, not only for Jewish people, but we are worried for our society.

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