

For Jews in France, a 'Kind of Intifada'

Escalation in Hate Crimes Leads to Soul-Searching, New Vigilance

By Glenn Frankel
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PARIS -- The phone message is one of 10 waiting for Sylvain Zenouda at the local office of the Jewish Community Council of greater Paris: A gang of 15 North African teenagers, some of them wielding broom handles, had invaded the grounds of a Jewish day school on Avenue de Flandre in northeast Paris the previous evening. They punched and kicked teachers and students, yelled epithets and set off firecrackers in the courtyard before fleeing.

Zenouda is a commandant and 30-year veteran of the Paris police, but on this day, he is performing a different role: coordinator for the Bureau of Vigilance Against Anti-Semitism, a volunteer group. He phones the school, makes certain the principal has called the authorities and has insisted that the attack be recorded as a hate crime in the police report, then scribbles the details of the attack in his own battered blue notebook and on a red-and-white declaration form for the Jewish Community Council's burgeoning file of anti-Semitic assaults.

Elsewhere on this steamy July afternoon, he will meet with a businessman whose kosher restaurant was torched recently, a young man assaulted for wearing a Star of David necklace and a congregation of frightened synagogue-goers, some of whom are talking seriously of emigrating to Israel.

The file grows almost daily: 309 incidents in the past 15 months in the Paris region, according to Jewish council officials, and more than 550 since the second Palestinian intifada, or uprising, broke out in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in September 2000. The National Consultative Committee on Human Rights, a government-funded body, reported a sixfold increase in acts of violence against Jewish people and property in France from 2001 to 2002.

Many incidents involve verbal assaults -- a taxi driver making an anti-Jewish remark to a passenger, a student harassed at school -- but nearly half involve violent acts of some kind. Most of the perpetrators are not the ultra-rightists and neo-Nazis who once were responsible for anti-Semitic acts, but young North African Arabs of the *banlieues*, the distant blue-collar suburbs where Muslims and Jews live and work in close proximity. Many of the victims are Sephardic Jews who themselves originally came from North Africa.

"We have our own kind of intifada here," says Zenouda, a Jew who immigrated here from Algeria. "But instead of attacking Israelis, they're attacking the Jews of France."

The number of incidents appears to spike depending on events in Israel and the Middle East -- there were sharp rises in the spring of 2002 when Israeli forces reoccupied West Bank cities and again this year when the United States invaded Iraq. What's different these days is that the French government -- after a period of almost indignant denial that the problem existed -- is aggressively responding with tougher laws, uncompromising statements from leading cabinet members and a stronger police presence.

Equally important, the Jewish community itself, normally deeply divided, has coalesced in response to the attacks. What started as a shoestring effort by a handful of concerned activists such as Zenouda has become a well-funded, well-coordinated campaign of monitoring and public education.

The violence in France parallels incidents throughout Europe, where attacks on Jewish institutions and other expressions of anti-Semitism have risen over the past few years, as has strong criticism of Israel. But in many ways, France -- with 6 million Muslims and 600,000 Jews, the largest population of each group in Western Europe -- is unique.

For Jews here, many of whom had thought of themselves as French first and foremost, the violence and the initial tepid response of government officials have led to a crisis of identity.

"At first, neither the politicians, nor the courts, nor the intellectuals, nor the media, nor public opinion, nor civil society -- none of them said anything," said Simon Kouhama, president of the Jewish Citizens Forum, an organization founded largely by Sephardic Jews. "We began to ask if we could even stay in France. Were we really French citizens? Were we Jews? We had the feeling we were a people apart."

A Policeman's Mission

Sylvain Zenouda, 53, a quiet, bearded man who wears his yarmulke under a baseball cap in public, is looking forward to his retirement in September after 30 years on the police force. He has two grown daughters, a disabled son and a new grandchild.

The last thing he needed, he said last week, was a new cause.

He came here with his family in 1962 from Algeria, one of hundreds of thousands of Frenchmen who fled the former colony when it gained independence. His father, who had been head of the officially sanctioned Jewish community organization in Algeria, died within a year, "of a broken heart," says Zenouda, who dropped out of school and worked a succession of blue-collar jobs until a friend helped him join the police department in 1973.

Starting as a traffic cop, he worked his way up to inspector, brigadier, captain and commandant. He knows what it's like to be a victim of violence: In 1978, while working

plainclothes, he collared a pickpocket in the act near Montmartre. The man fractured Zenouda's skull with an iron bar and sent him to the hospital for seven months.

Like many French Jews, he has close connections to Israel. Two of his brothers live there, as did one of his daughters for several years. A copy of the Israeli declaration of independence is on proud display on the living room wall in his apartment in eastern Paris.

The alarm bells first started ringing for Zenouda in October 2000, as he watched television coverage of pro-Palestinian demonstrators in the Place de la Republique shouting "Death to the Jews" and other anti-Semitic and anti-Israel slogans. That month, five synagogues were firebombed and there were attempts against 19 other synagogues, homes and businesses.

The official response, he says, was "glacial silence," followed by rationalizations. Many officials denied there was any pattern or meaning to the unrest. Others portrayed the violence as either the isolated acts of troubled Arab youths or street brawls in which both sides were equally to blame. And in his view, everyone appeared to hold Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's hard-line policies ultimately responsible. A controversial letter by Socialist Party adviser Pascal Boniface suggested that politicians concerned with reelection ought to pay more attention to Muslims, who outnumber the Jews by 10 to 1.

"I was shocked," recalls Zenouda, who had voted Socialist all his life. "I felt like I was passing from being a Frenchman who happened to be Jewish to being a Jew who lived in France."

Worse, from Zenouda's perspective, was the response of the police. They were not aggressive in investigating the crimes, he and Jewish groups say, and categorized them as random acts of violence rather than hate crimes.

Zenouda soon joined with a few fellow Jewish policemen, led by a retired captain, Sammy Ghozlan. They began to keep records, make phone calls, put the puzzle pieces together and lobby for tougher laws and enforcement. With help from such groups as the Simon Wiesenthal Center, they began compiling their own statistics. Zenouda suddenly found himself with a new full-time crusade.

At first the Jewish establishment -- dominated by Ashkenazi Jews whose families have been in France longer than their Sephardic brethren and who are generally wealthier, more Westernized and more liberal politically -- was reluctant to join in. But in February 2002, Roger Cukierman, the new president of the Representative Council of French Jewish Institutions (CRIF), the main Jewish governing council, declared he was fed up. In an open letter to President Jacques Chirac, he wrote: "Once again, we are the scapegoat. It's a part we are no longer prepared to play."

'They'll Have to Kill Me'

One of Zenouda's first stops this afternoon is the Cafe des Delices, a kosher restaurant in Epinay-sur-Seine, a northern suburb. Its ground floor was gutted in April in two pre-dawn arson attacks. The first was a small blaze that did little damage, according to the manager, Jean Claude Fitoussi. The attackers returned a week later and struck with five firebombs.

"We'll redo it and reopen," Fitoussi says. "We want to show them we're still here. If they want me to leave they'll have to kill me."

He is joined by Benjamin Fitoussi (no relation to the restaurant owner), 18, who describes how three young men approached him on the street for a cigarette a few weeks ago, noticed the Star of David around his neck and tried to yank it off. One called him a Jewish murderer, while the largest of the three punched him in the face. "I went to the police and they told me it serves nothing to make a complaint," he says.

There are different groups involved in these assaults, according to Zenouda. Many are teenagers who live in the bleak high-rise public housing complexes that dot the outskirts of Paris. They are often bored at school or unemployed, and seek to emulate what they see on TV networks such as al-Jazeera, he says. They often engage in spontaneous assaults or in gang activities, such as coordinated attacks on Jewish students. Then there are networks of activists who plan and carry out well-organized assaults such as the firebombings of the synagogues in October 2000 or the attack on the Cafe des Delices.

CRIF has developed a series of outreach programs and educational efforts to try to bring together Muslims and Jews. But officials say communication between the two communities is often poor, especially among young people, who share little except an abiding fear of each other.

Said Ait Mouhoub, leader of the North African Association of Noisy-le-Sec, a Paris suburb, says that for many years France ignored the plight of Muslim youths. Unemployment was high, religious and recreational activities were rare. The new intifada, he says, has given them a sense of purpose. "At first it was maybe just a game -- they threw rocks because they saw Palestinians throwing rocks on television," Mouhoub said. "And after it became more political. They wanted to take a stand."

Mouhoub says his officially sanctioned organization has worked hard to combat Islamic extremism and channel young energies into constructive ventures. But he confesses that it's an uphill battle. "For these kids, television is enormous," he says. "It conditions their minds. Before, they had respect for their parents and their roots. Now with this new generation, the respect is gone. The roots are cut."

Taunts and Assaults

The violence has seeped from the suburbs into the center of Paris. One of the reports in Zenouda's notebook concerns Sacha Gironde, 35, a professor of philosophy at the

prestigious Ecole Normale Superieure, and his wife, Yael Ifrah. They were taking her parents and their infant daughter to see their new apartment in the comfortable Gobelins neighborhood last October when they were confronted by a half-dozen young North Africans. A 17-year-old girl shouted, "Dirty Jews, we're going to kill you all!"

Gironde says he stepped between the group and his family, grabbed the girl by the arm and yelled to his wife to call the police. The girl's companions surrounded him. He let her go, but they proceeded to beat him, one of them wielding a metal bar. "I lost consciousness for a minute," he recalls. "It was really impressive. There was blood all over my face."

The Girondes are well connected in the Jewish community, and the attack led to two newspaper articles and a thorough police investigation that resulted in the arrests of five youths. But a recent juvenile court hearing added another layer of insult.

"These kids were very not cowed," said Gironde. "They were staring at me with a smile, mocking me. I complained to the judge about this behavior. She told me I should not interrupt."

Worse, says his wife, is a feeling that they suddenly have become outsiders. "My husband is a product of the French elite system. We're French citizens. We have lots of non-Jewish friends. But in just two minutes we were reduced to being Jews."

The boys who beat up Gironde live in a housing project just down the Rue de Croulebarbe from their apartment, and occasionally he and his assailants eye each other warily on the street. There's a public park across the street with an elaborate children's playground, but the Girondes will not take their daughter there anymore out of fear of another attack. Their five-room flat is the ideal size and style for them, but they are seriously discussing selling it and buying a new place in another part of town

Contemplating Migration

Zenouda's last stop is at Beit Gavriel, an Orthodox synagogue in the suburb of Noisy-le-Sec where, after evening prayers, a dozen congregants gather in the downstairs meeting hall. A 300-foot chain-link fence separates the building from the street. It was a gift from the town mayor after someone threw a Molotov cocktail at the front door on the first night of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, last September.

Local police, under orders to drive past here on their way to and from the station 100 yards around the corner, quickly caught the culprit, an Algerian, who was sentenced to three years for committing a hate crime, but he vanished before sentencing. "He went in one door, and out the other," says the rabbi, Shmuel Allouche, who is also from Algeria.

Congregants complain about new assaults. Ephraim Ben Roche says he no longer lets his children play outside because neighborhood children throw rocks at his backyard.

Armand, who moved to Paris from Morocco in 1972 but refuses to give his last name, says he has moved his three sons to Jewish private schools because they were harassed at the public school they attended.

"It's not true all the Arabs are bad -- there are good and bad," he says. But he tells the group he is thinking of moving his family to Israel. "Even with the terrorism there, I believe it's safer than here. We can't live like this anymore."

Recently the Israeli government -- which encourages all Jews to move to Israel -- reported that 2,556 French Jews immigrated last year, the largest annual influx since the 1967 war, and double the figure for 2001. A recent poll by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency suggested that more than 25 percent of France's Jews have considered leaving.

Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy has told Jewish community leaders he won't accept such talk. Sarkozy, who has won popular support for his tough law-and-order stance, was recently awarded the 2003 Tolerance Prize of the Simon Wiesenthal Center for his work in combating anti-Semitism.

No one is predicting a large-scale exodus. But later, in the car heading home, Zenouda says he wonders whether France can still be considered home. A bond of trust has been broken somehow, and he cannot see how it can be restored. "Maybe it's time for people to go," he says.

Special correspondent Caroline Huot contributed to this report.

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