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Europeans and Americans Seek Answer to Anti-Semitism

By ELAINE SCIOLINO

BRUSSELS, Feb. 19 — Prominent Jewish figures and European officials agreed on Thursday that anti-Semitism is a troubling phenomenon in Europe, and called on European Union countries to forge a common strategy to combat it.

"A European disease," Elie Wiesel, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, told a daylong conference at the headquarters of the European Union.

But the conference exposed deep fault lines that characterize perhaps the most painful and emotional debate on the Continent.

Some speakers said that anti-Semitism today was a playing-out of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the streets of Europe by immigrants from Muslim countries. Others insisted it was a mutated version of anti-Jewish hatred that has tormented Europe for centuries.

While some suggested that European anti-Semitism be fought within the larger context of all racism and xenophobia, others insisted that it was a unique phenomenon with a history whose horror would be diminished if it were linked to other forms of bigotry.

And while some speakers called Europe a democratic haven that protects the rights of all citizens, Jews included, others portrayed it as an increasingly dangerous place.

"We bring a message today and that message is a warning cry, a warning to Europe," said Cobi Benatoff, president of the European Jewish Congress. "Anti-Semitism and prejudice has returned. The monster is here with us again."

By contrast, David Susskind, honorary president of the Center of Secular Jewish Communities of Belgium, said, "We Jews who live in Europe live in states governed by the rule of law."

A number of speakers urged the European Union to take concrete steps to eradicate anti-Semitism, including the systematic monitoring of anti-Semitic incidents, tougher law enforcement, improvements in school curricula on the history of Jewish life in Europe and governmental pressure to shut down satellite channels that promote anti-Semitism.

"We are not here to beat our breasts in public and then do nothing," said Romano Prodi, the president of the European Union's executive arm. He urged European Union governments to adopt a proposal for a law against racism and xenophobia, which for the first time would define as crimes anti-Semitic acts and Holocaust denial.

There was universal condemnation of the street demonstrations, satellite television broadcasts and Internet Web sites that compared Israel's crackdown in the West Bank and Gaza to Nazi persecution of the Jews.

But Natan Sharansky, Israel's diaspora affairs minister and a former Soviet dissident who spent nine years in a Soviet prison, emphasized that Europeans had the same right as Israelis to criticize the Israeli government. "The politician in Israel who will stop for one day from criticizing his own government has no political future," he said.

Still, he emphasized that there was only a "fine line" between legitimate differences and anti-Semitic "demonization."

Much of the debate focused on finding a definition for the new wave of anti-Semitic acts and statements that have swept through Europe since the Israeli crackdown on Palestinians in 2000.

Mr. Wiesel, the Nobel laureate, painted the status of Jews in Europe in dark colors, saying: "I have seen in the last year communities that contain people who came to me and whispered in my ear, saying simply, not, 'Should we leave?' but 'When should we leave?' My God, what a question."

Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer of Germany called the debate between "old anti-Semitism and new anti-Semitism" unimportant. "It boils down to the same thing": hatred and exclusion of the Jewish people, he said. "Ultimately you end up with murder."

Earlier this month, the American ambassador to the European Union, Rockwell Schnabel, a political appointee who is a friend of the Bush family, said that anti-Semitism in Europe was "getting to a point where it is as bad as it was in the 30's."

A spokesman at the American Embassy said later that the remarks were "neither a personal opinion of Ambassador Schnabel nor the view of the U.S. government."

A number of speakers at Thursday's conference praised President Jacques Chirac of France for his hard-line policy of "zero tolerance" of anti-Semitism in France.

But Israel Singer, chairman of the Governing Board of the World Jewish Congress, said that Europe needed help from outsiders to combat anti-Semitism. He told Europeans to get used to the arrival of what he called a "new kind of Jew" who was determined to change the status quo that allowed anti-Semitism to persist.

He said that there would be "no more playing by other people's rules," but softened a bit, saying, "We try to do it your way but hopefully with some of our clout."

French Comedian Canceled

PARIS, Feb. 19 (Reuters) — Promoters have canceled a show in Paris by the French comedian Dieudonne, after his appearance in a television sketch dressed as an Orthodox rabbi and giving a Nazi salute.

The Olympia theater said it could not guarantee the safety of the audience at the show, which had been scheduled for Friday, after several incidents marred previous performances. His scheduled appearances in 10 cities were canceled.

The comedian, whose full name is Dieudonne M'Bala M'Bala, came under attack from anti-racist groups and Jewish organizations after his live appearance in December on a show broadcast by the public television channel France 3.

Dieudonne, who faces trial on charges of making a racist slur, has denied that he is anti-Semitic, saying that his sketch was intended to criticize the policies of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel toward Palestinians.