

Benlolo: 70 years after liberation from Auschwitz, Jews are fearful again in Europe

AVI BENLOLO

Published on: January 27, 2015 Last Updated: January 27, 2015 4:37 PM MST



Following the recent terror attacks in Paris, and the growing recognition that thousands of French Jews are leaving (or, in the case of 7,000 French Jewish citizens in 2014, have already left) due in large part to increasing anti-Semitism, now is the time to ask: was Theodor Herzl, the father of modern Zionism and the state of Israel, right?

In 1894 Herzl, a secular Austro-Hungarian Jewish journalist, covered the court martial of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a French Jew who was falsely convicted of treason despite a trail of evidence leading elsewhere. Herzl witnessed mobs shouting “Death to Jews” in the streets. The controversial ‘Dreyfus Affair’, as it became widely known, convinced Herzl that Jews — no matter how strong their loyalty to the state (Dreyfus was a staunch patriot), would forever be plagued by anti-Semitism. Two years later the once nominally

Jewish Herzl published his manifesto titled, “The Jewish State,” providing the ideological basis and describing the urgent need for the Jewish people to return to their historic homeland. Although he could not have foreseen the Holocaust, his reading of the dangers to the Jews of Europe at the turn of the century was spot-on.

Fast forward to the eve of International Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27, 2014. The streets of Paris rang with shouts of “Juif, la France n’est pas a toi” (“Jew, France is not yours”) and Nazi salutes. Video footage shows demonstrators shouting “the story of the gas chambers is bullshit,” as thousands of marchers took to the streets in a fervour of anti-Jewish hate. Today, 40 per cent of French Jews are afraid to publicly identify as Jewish. More than 120 years after a Jewish soldier was unjustly imprisoned — just because he was a Jew, France is still not safe for its Jewish citizens.

Sadly, this upsurge in anti-Semitic hate is not unique to France. A recent survey published by the U.S.-based Anti Defamation League (ADL) found that in Poland, which lost three million Jews to Nazi concentration camps scattered across Europe, 45 per cent of people are anti-Semitic; a similar percentage of Britons hold anti-Semitic views. The situation for Jews in England has become so severe that BBC Director Danny Cohen was moved to comment last month, “I’ve never felt so uncomfortable being a Jew in the U.K. as I’ve felt in the last 12 months ... Having lived all my life in the U.K., I’ve never felt as I do now about anti-Semitism in Europe.”

A mere 70 years after the end of the Holocaust, European Jewry is once again questioning its future, and the meticulously planned slaughter of six million people is fodder for anti-Semitic comics and Holocaust deniers. Why?

I believed this ‘new’ anti-Semitism, in which disagreement with Israeli politics and an outright refusal to admit that the Jewish people have a right to the historic homeland from which they were repeatedly and forcibly exiled, have merged with traditional anti-Jewish hate to form the toxic new configuration currently ravaging Europe. The impetus for this latest iteration was the 2001 World Conference on Racism in Durban, South Africa. The key feature of Durban I was the launching of the narrative labelling Israel as an apartheid nation, and the beginning of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions effort to delegitimize the Jewish state. Almost immediately many left-leaning trade unions, churches, gay rights groups and student groups jumped on the anti-Israel bandwagon.

Today, as both right and left wing radicals shamelessly parade their anti-Semitic hatred (even as Jews are being gunned down in the streets of Belgium and Paris simply because they are Jewish), the question remains: was Herzl right?

January 27, 2015 marks the 70th International Holocaust Remembrance Day commemorating the Soviet liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp. On this solemn day Jewish communities look to world leaders to offer more than platitudes of regret for the past, as they face an uncertain future in the great cities of Europe.

Avi Benlolo is the President and CEO of Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies, a human rights advocacy and education organization based in Toronto.