

French Jewry at Risk: What Can Be Done?



By Michael Wildes

For centuries, France has had a complicated relationship with its Jewish citizens. Beginning in the Middle Ages, France's Jewish population suffered from persecution by the reigning government, as well as from many of its non-Jewish citizens. While there have certainly been times of official tolerance and acceptance (such as during the reign of Napoleon Bonaparte), an overall culture of antisemitism has never been truly eradicated. Possibly at its worst since the end of World War II and the Nazi-guided Vichy government, antisemitism in France is experiencing a highly troubling flare-up and showing few signs of cooling down.

Inspired in part by the growing far-right National Front Party led by the noted antisemitic father-daughter duo of Jean Marie and Marine Le Pen, the National Front Party has grown to historically large levels and has called for the banning of traditional Jewish skull caps (*kippot*). Also, a growing Muslim population in France with deep anti-Israel and anti-Jewish sensibilities has led to a revival of traditional antisemitism in France.

Clearly a sign of the times, one of the most popular comedians in France, Dieudonne M'bala M'bala, has taken the country by storm with his satirical mix of overtly anti-Zionist and antisemitic views. Despite attempts at censorship by the French government, Dieudonne (as he is affectionately known) uses his shows to make thinly veiled jabs at Holocaust denial and rationalizations for Islamic terrorism and suicide bombings in Israel. He often uses the "quenelle," an inverted Nazi Heil salute that has been recreated by his devoted followers at synagogues, Jewish cemeteries, and Holocaust memorials.

A recent poll of French Jews shows that roughly 75% consider leaving France for good, most of them citing antisemitism as the driving cause. This is the highest number ever recorded in France, a country of 500,000 Jews, the third highest total Jewish population in the world behind only Israel and the United States. In the past few years, an increasing number of violent antisemitic attacks have occurred in France, including assaults on rabbis and the trapping of hundred of Jews in a Paris synagogue by a violent mob, an act eerily reminiscent of the 1940s. These are just a few examples of a bevy of anti-Jewish crimes in

France that has left the Jewish population in fear.

Because of the antisemitic environment in France, French Jews have become ripe candidates for asylum and refugee status in the United States. Now that even a simple walk to the grocery store can be treacherous for individual Jews in the country, there may be a valid reason for them to be awarded a safe haven in America.

Gaining either of these two designations can be difficult and highly complicated. Technically speaking, asylum seekers must already be located in the United States when attempting to apply for asylum here. On the other hand, refugees must be *outside* of the U.S. when applying for the designation. French Jews may be eligible for either of these designations, depending on where they are located at the time of application. It is of utmost importance for asylum and refugee status seekers to demonstrate that they were persecuted or that they fear persecution due to their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. As a result of the surge in antisemitic attitudes and attacks in France, this may definitely become a viable option for French Jews.

While there are many nuances to the asylum laws, one particularly important wrinkle in the case of French Jews is dual-nationality. If someone attempting to obtain a visa to the U.S. on humanitarian grounds holds citizenship in another country (such as Israel) which can also be a source of protection, it becomes much more difficult to convince the United States government that the person involved needs to be here. Since a place like Israel takes in numerous Jews facing persecution in their home countries, the United States would be strongly inclined to deny asylum to French Jews who also hold Israeli passports, as they can go there safely.

Persons who may be considering leaving France out of fear of the rising tide of antisemitism, would be advised to do so cautiously and with the advice and counsel of an experienced immigration attorney. This very intricate process needs to be handled with extreme care, to assure success and avoid further danger in France. We at Wildes & Weinberg have successfully worked on countless cases involving asylum and have a deep background in guiding and defending persons who have been persecuted in their home countries. We would be honored to give guidance to any asylum or refugee case, and stand in solidarity with all those experiencing persecution.

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