

Combating Anti-Semitism

REPORT FROM A CONFERENCE IN VIENNA



University of Vienna
(Universitat Wien)

A remarkable event took place on November 20-21 in Vienna. I had the privilege of participating in the presentation of a 150-page document entitled “An End to Anti-Semitism: A Catalogue of Policies to Combat Anti-Semitism,” which constituted the first result of a conference that was held last February in the same city. The gathering was sponsored by the University of Vienna, New York University, Tel Aviv University and the European Jewish Congress (EJC). The purpose of the conference, which included 150 scholarly presentations before some 1,000 participants, was to bring to bear an interdisciplinary analysis of the problem of anti-Semitism and call on scholars to put forward specific recommendations. I was one of the organizers, along with Professors Armin Lange of the University

of Vienna and Dina Porat of Tel Aviv University as well as Dr. Ariel Muzicant, a vice president of the EJC and longtime leader of the Austrian Jewish community. Mark Weitzman of the Wiesenthal Center joined us in editing the report.

We were privileged to present our “guidebook,” as it was termed by the European Commission’s Coordinator on Combating Anti-Semitism, Katharina von Schnurbein, first at a conference on European values, rule of law and security sponsored by the Ministry of the Interior of Austria, and then again at a “high-level” conference: “Europe Beyond Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism—Securing Jewish Life in Europe” sponsored by the Chancellor of Austria. In between we participated in a beautiful glatt kosher dinner sponsored by the Federal Chancellery of the Republic of Austria and the EJC, under the leadership of Dr. Moshe Kantor. (Yes,

it was also called a “high-level” dinner.)

What was so unique here was the participation of the Chancellor (equivalent to the prime minister) of Austria, Sebastian Kurz, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu was originally going to attend in person but canceled as a result of the rocket barrage from Gaza, and he sent a beautiful video message instead. I and my fellow editors had the chance to meet the Chancellor privately for a short photo-op, by which time it was already clear that he was strongly committed to making an important statement about anti-Semitism in Austria and in Europe as a whole.

These events were all connected with the assumption by Austria of the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union. In this position, each member nation has the opportunity to bring a very important issue to the fore. The EU had

already committed itself to fighting anti-Semitism, although on a scale way too small. What Chancellor Kurz did was to move this issue to the head of the line. He reiterated several times, as he'd also said during his recent visit to Israel, that Austria had to take responsibility for being a perpetrator of the Shoah, not the victim it had claimed to be for so many years. He also declared both in his formal speeches and during a panel discussion in which he also participated, that anti-Zionism, meaning denial to the Jewish people of the right of self-determination in their own land, was a form of anti-Semitism.

I had the privilege of speaking briefly at both of these meetings as did my colleagues, and the message of our Catalogue seemed to have been received positively and even with enthusiasm. Hundreds of copies were distributed at both events and the document will soon be available online.

Kurz seems to be extremely sincere in his desire to raise the profile of the need to fight against anti-Semitism, whether violent or only verbal. After all, European Jewry is currently facing a major challenge, and according to some, an existential one. Throughout Europe, Jews are uncertain about their future as a result of rising anti-Semitism and violence. The problem is quite complex, since the situation is different in the various countries. England is engrossed right now in a struggle as to whether the Labour Party will continue down the road of anti-Semitic and anti-

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Israel statements and even actions, or whether this pattern will be reversed and it will once again become a welcoming home for politically involved British Jews.

The problem in France and Belgium, however, is very different. There the governments have decided that Jewish



PHOTO CREDIT: EJC

Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz (right)

schools and houses of worship are truly at risk, in the aftermath of horrendous violence perpetrated by Arabs. For this reason, soldiers stand guard at *shuls* and schools. The situation in Denmark and Sweden is not much different, and in Switzerland the government in the area of Basel has just decided to provide similar security to Jewish institutions. In Germany, the threat comes from skinheads and neo-Nazis as well as from Arab migrants. There, too, security is provided by the government.

Of the larger countries of Western Europe, perhaps Italy and Austria are the best, because their Muslims are Turks who have traditionally been less anti-Semitic and anti-Israel, and neither country has experienced anti-Semitic violence. In both those countries, however, high-level security is provided by the government.

Can the future of Jewish communities be one of militarily protected synagogues, children locked in their schools and needing to pass soldiers to enter?

There are some who see Chancellor Kurz's effort as motivated by having entered into a coalition with the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPO). This party,



Lawrence Schiffman presenting at the conference

like many of the European rightist parties, has historical connections to Nazi parties and includes some unsavory members who themselves have been linked to anti-Semitic fraternities. The Jewish community of Austria as well as the Israeli government have stayed away thus far from interacting with those in the Austrian government who represent this party. It may very well be that Kurz came to the anti-Semitism issue to some extent motivated by a desire to demonstrate that he in no way accepts the anti-Semitism attributed to some of his coalition partners. But whatever the motivation, he has put the power of his office and the government as a whole behind his campaign to raise the issue of anti-Semitism in the EU countries. And it couldn't have come at a more needed time. Studies have found that 57% of the Jews of Europe aren't sure if they should remain there, and it is expected that the results of some soon-to-be released studies indicate even greater fears.

What's the big deal about our Catalogue of Policies? After all, organizations and governments have been working for years to control and even eradicate anti-Semitism, unfortunately with way too little success. The answer lies in the magnitude of what we are proposing and its comprehensiveness. In my remarks I used the expression "full-court press," borrowed from basketball to make the

point that Europe has to decide to attack anti-Semitism on all fronts, simultaneously and with considerable expenditure, if it wishes to have a serious impact, let alone bring it to an end. We propose specific programs for governments, NGOs, businesses, educational institutions on all levels, cultural and religious institutions. We argue that Holocaust education, while a good thing and extremely important, is simply not sufficient to provide the educational basis for eliminating hatred of Jews. Further, unlike many other documents dealing with anti-Semitism, we put in the forefront the cultural and religious aspects stemming from a history of anti-Semitic culture in Europe and certain teachings of Christianity and Islam. We face these difficult issues with both frankness and detail. After all, there is no way to fight anti-Semitism without recognizing its religious character. While we recognize that anti-Semitism has elements in common with other prejudices, which we condemn as well, we see the recognition of certain unique aspects as necessary to succeed in combating it.



Is this really a turning point? Will this make any difference? This will depend on whether in the coming months Austria's talk will lead to action. Will the Austrians put forward specific proposals for change in their own country, and will our document lead to further action on the part of the EU? Will the EJC and its many allies in the Jewish community and beyond turn the document we provided into a true guidebook for the ongoing

fight against anti-Semitism in Europe?

In 1939 my father-in-law, of blessed memory, was taken off a trolley car in Vienna and forced to clean the streets. He went from there to the United States Consulate and applied to emigrate, as his brother was already in the US. He returned to Europe as a serviceman in the United States Army to fight the Nazis. I doubt he would have dreamt that I and my colleagues would have addressed these two conferences, calling on them to adopt a 150-page list of steps to fight anti-Semitism. And I am sure that many readers will be totally skeptical that anything can or will come of this. After all, Europe has such a shameful record. For the short term, at least, let's hope that it's not too late, and that Jewish life in the communities of Europe can indeed be preserved. ●

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El Al Says It Will Change

RAV SOROTZKIN RECEIVES COMMITMENT

The saga that 180 *shomer Shabbos* customers of El Al endured last week, in which they ended up unexpectedly in Athens, Greece, because of a delay by flight crew in arriving at the airport, made headlines around the world. But those headlines were mostly focused on the *chareidi* passengers, with false claims made that they were violent, even as eyewitnesses stated that they were lies.

El Al still hasn't entirely apologized for its role—or that of its crew—in spreading such stories. But it has stated, once again, that it never blamed any group of passengers for trouble on the plane. And the company has decided to give free roundtrip plane tickets to Europe to all of the 400 passengers on the plane, *shomer Shabbos* or not, because of the inconvenience they experienced.

Rav Sholom Ber Sorotzkin, *rosh yeshiva* of the Ateres Shlomo network of *yeshivos*, told *Ami* that El Al did commit to him, now, to make changes.

"They promised to fix all problems in regard to *Shabbos* and the *frum oilam*," he said, including problems that some passengers have had in getting the *glatt* meals onboard flights. And he said that El

Al is remaining strong in the face of criticism from the secular media and public for agreeing to these things. He said that he would be meeting with El Al next week to discuss the details of the changes that they will be making.

But these changes may not be enough for some passengers, according to a report by *Kan* that stated that a number of *shomer Shabbos* passengers are bringing a complaint to the FAA against El Al. According to the report, the passengers are pointing to the pilots' decision to lie to passengers and take off rather than return to the gate to let them off, which they said took place while some passengers were not belted in and others were on their phones, as violations of air safety regulations.