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Media in Conveying and Countering Prejudice

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It would take more temerity than I have for an American to tell Europeans how to solve the ancient problem of antisemitism. Notwithstanding the very substantial bonds of culture and community that bridge the Atlantic, American solutions don't necessarily travel any better than fine wines. Moreover, it would be tempting fate to say that we are confident we know how to deal with the eruptions of antisemitism that surface in the United States. Let me confine myself therefore to the more modest task of reporting what a friendly and concerned trans-Atlantic visitor observes.

First, and by way of context, we ought to recognize that there are important respects in which there has been progress. In 1879 Wilhelm Marr could organize the League of Anti-Semites and attract a large following. Down to the middle of the last century important personages were unashamed to be publicly identified as antisemites. Today in Europe antisemitism has become the hatred that dare not state its name. Today antisemites indignantly protest being called such. And that is progress, at least as long as we know antisemitism even when it calls itself by some other name.

Secondly, serious though the rise in antisemitism is, and it is serious indeed, I do not think we are on the eve of Kristalnacht as some have said. There is a vast difference between the present situation and that presented by a heavily armed major

European nation whose unequivocal policy is the extermination of Jewry, and we lose credibility if we do not recognize that distinction.

Indeed, the Holocaust, while demonstrating where racism can lead us, also, like the flash of lightning that illuminates the black night sky and then leaves the eye blinded to shades of gray, can desensitize us to manifestations of antisemitism well short of the hellish fires of the crematoria. I hope that in educational programs we are at pains to make clear that the evil of racism is found not only in gas chambers, but also when Jewish doctors are expelled from their hospitals, Jewish lawyers disbarred, Jewish academics fired, and campaigns of humiliation and hate appear in the press, on the airwaves, in the streets and on public platforms.

Thirdly, we should recognize that, at least since the time of the Copenhagen Conference in June of 1990, the political leaders of Europe have formally recognized that antisemitism represents a problem that must be dealt with. And that, too, is progress. The extent to which the members of the OSCE have lived up to the commitments they made at Copenhagen to take “effective measures” to combat antisemitism is the subject of a detailed report issued yesterday by The Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights. I think it fair to say that the report presents a mixed picture and that, on the whole, the solemn undertakings given at Copenhagen have been met in a less than adequate fashion. But the willingness to enter into those commitments and the gradual emergence from a state of near total denial about the prevalence of antisemitism is in itself a measure of progress.

Having said all that, this is no time for Pollyannas. Antisemitism is on the rise in Europe today. The manifestations are too numerous and the reports from varied

credible sources too unanimous to leave any room for doubt. A very high level of anxiety is warranted. Antisemitism is a weapon of mass destruction whose demonstrated lethality is without rival. And it is proliferating.

Moreover, there remains a serious reluctance in many quarters to face the problem squarely, to acknowledge its gravity, and to mount the effort required to deal with it effectively. Of all the forms of denial the most serious is the attempt to dismiss the threat as not really European at all but as an immigrant Arab problem or an Arab-Jewish problem. I do not doubt for a moment -- no one who lives as I do under the shadow of the World Trade Center in Manhattan can doubt for a moment -- that some Muslims are capable of engaging in acts of homicidal rage against America, against the West, against modernity and, not the least, against Jews and Jewish institutions. Nor do I doubt that from Islamic states pours forth a steady stream of antisemitic agitprop.

However, the fact, if it is a fact, that much of the antisemitic violence in Europe is attributable to Arab immigrants doesn't make it any less of a European problem. One can hardly just shrug one's shoulders and say "boys will be boys". Very serious thought must be given to the question whether Arabs and, more generally, Islamic states are selling antisemitism precisely because they have found willing and eager buyers in the West, because they have found that they could bond with Europe on this front, as the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem found in Berlin some 65 years ago. It is certainly worth noting that when Islamic spokesmen talk of a new crucifixion, when they circulate that old Czarist forgery, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, when they invoke the images of the swastika, the SS and the Holocaust, they are not invoking images from deep within

Islamic culture. They are dealing in European tropes meant to resonate with European audiences.

It would therefore be helpful if Westerners made it clear that this sort of bonding doesn't work, if they reacted with indignation and contempt, if they applauded less vigorously when Islamic dignitaries begin to sound like Josef Goebbels.

It would also be helpful if, in addition to the focus on street violence, alarming as it is, we focused as well on the violence of the word, the hooliganism of the headline and the cartoon, the bigotry of the academy and the antisemitism of the salon. These all create the atmosphere in which race hatred prospers.

Most dangerous of all is the attempt to explain antisemitism as the regrettable but natural consequence of the behavior of Jews, whether in Israel or otherwise. Let me be very clear: In every age hatred of Jews has been explained in terms that made perfect sense to the populace of the time. It has never lacked for explanations persuasive to the opinion molders of the day. We have been told that antisemitism was understandable by reason of Jewish responsibility for the death of God, or for the ritual murder of Christian youth, or for the poisoning of wells. Hatred of Jews has been ascribed to the perception that Jews are rich, blood-sucking, money lenders or miserably poor rag pickers, that they are arrogant separatists or pushy assimilations, that they are capitalists or communists, that they are historical fossils or the avatars of unwelcome modernity, that they are timid, unmanly weaklings or storm troopers, that they are landless cosmopolitans or -- now -- Jewish nationalists. Such supposed explanations, however fervently believed, however obvious they may have seemed, are symptoms of antisemitism and not its cause. They explain nothing except the credulity of the

antisemite. In my view, the attempt to explain antisemitism in terms of the behavior of Jews in Jenin, or in Har Homa, or in Wall Street, or in Washington is likewise a manifestation of antisemitism and not an explanation of it. It is the very essence of racism to find the cause of hatred in the victim.

Finally, permit me to suggest that the challenge of antisemitism in Europe will not be met until it is clearly understood that we are no longer talking about what was once called the Jewish Question. We are talking about the European Question. All who care for Europe, for the civilization that emerged here and for its future, must care deeply about this question.

In November 1990, just five months after the Copenhagen Conference, the heads of European states met in Paris and issued a Charter proclaiming the birth of a "New Europe". The Charter of Paris avows that Europe is "liberating itself from the legacy of the past" and opening "a new era of democracy, peace, and unity." The nations reaffirmed the undertakings just given in Copenhagen, including specific reference to antisemitism, and avowed that they had put behind them the forms of madness that had twice in the previous century brought Europe to the abyss. They affirmed that persons belonging to national minorities -- ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious -- have the right freely to express, preserve, and develop that identity without discrimination, that everyone will enjoy recourse to effective remedies, national or international, against violation of such rights, and that "full respect for these precepts is the bedrock on which we will construct the New Europe."

Are all those bright hopes to founder on Europe's most ancient fault line: its inability to find the Jew fully within the social compact? If Europe has turned a

decisive corner, if there is indeed a New Europe as the Paris Charter declares, then antisemitism must be understood to be un-European. It must be recognized as a form of treason against the aspirations for a new order.

One would hope that antisemitism will then be met with at least as much determination as would be brought to bear on an outbreak of SARS or bubonic plague. A reliable system of data gathering on a continent-wide basis should map the outbreaks and spread of the disease. Responsive measures should not be left to chance but should be coordinated and institutionalized. The OSCE should appoint an outstanding and respected citizen to serve as a special representative or high commissioner to keep a vigilant eye on all the steps that are being taken and to warn of all the gaps in the defenses.

All this calls for greater seriousness of purpose and intensity of effort to meet this threat to Europe's future. I have no doubt of Europe's capacity to do what is needed. It is a question of will. And all of us, Jews and non-Jews, NGOs, the academy, the press, the church, and civil society generally have a responsibility to see to it that Europe survives, overcomes its ancient failure, meets its own historic challenge, and achieves its aspirations for human dignity, for democracy and for peace.