

Containing the Virus of Antisemitism

by Michael Curtis



They intended evil against you. Therefore, you should make them turn their back.

On February 26, 2020 Pope Francis spoke of the too many offensive and harmful words, too much verbal violence, amplified by the Internet. Words indeed range from the brutal and most cruel to the insensitive. The brutal is often accompanied by discrimination, persecution, violence, massacres, pogroms, and, at its worst, death camps. Auschwitz is still the global personification of evil. The insensitive may be couched in false prudence, or as Abraham Lincoln said, blowing out the moral lights around us.

A recent specious example of that insensitivity can be observed in the case of one of the major leaders of the British Labour Party, John McDonnell, MP. After visiting Julian Assange, accused by the United States of leaking

thousands of classified documents, who is in Belmarsh prison in London, McDonnell compared the attempt to extradite Assange to the U.S. with the persecution of Alfred Dreyfus: "I think it's the Dreyfus case of our age, persecuted for political reasons, for simply exposing the truth for what went on in relation to recent wars."

Assange could face prison for violating U.S. espionage laws and publishing classified information published in 2010-1 online by WikiLeaks relating to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. He spent seven years hiding in the Ecuadorian embassy, before waiting in prison. It is an insensitive distortion of history to draw a parallel between the two cases. Assange committed an illegal act, and so far has not been punished for it. Dreyfus was innocent, falsely convicted of treason in 1894 for passing military secrets to Germany and sentenced to life imprisonment on Devil's Island, and later pardoned. He was guilty only of being a Jew.

McDonnell's statement was ridiculous and deeply offensive, but it reflected in oblique fashion the increase in antisemitism in European countries. Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo at a conference in Paris on February 24-25, 2020, of the EJA, European Jewish Association pointed out, "We cannot be disconnected from the history of antisemitism and we should be very careful of hate speech. Attacking Jews is an act against humanity. There is a new form of antisemitism which is anti-Zionism." In France President Emmanuel Macron, in a speech on February 20, 2019 had already commented on the resurgence of antisemitism that was probably unrepresented since the end of World War II.

At the Paris conference, participants discussed the issue of "Jews in Europe; united for a better future." The organizer EJA was founded in 2018 in Budapest with funds from the Hungarian government to fight antisemitism and anti-Zionism in European Union countries.

The conference examined a survey presented by the Hungary based Action and Protection League of 16,000 people from 16 European countries that showed some unwelcome results. About one fifth of Europeans believe that a secret Jewish cabal runs the world, influencing politics and economics, though it did not provide the meeting place which can be here revealed as a kosher deli at the corner of Times Square and 42 Second Street, where the language is Yiddish. The same proportion of those surveyed also believe that Jewish people talk too much, in unspecified languages, about the Holocaust and exploit the Holocaust for their own needs. A third of those surveyed said that Israel's policies, undefined, made them understand why some people hate Jews. The survey showed that Holocaust denial was more common in East Europe and in Greece, while antisemitism and anti-Israeli diatribes were more common in the west of Europe.

The Paris conference was attended by 250 people including Elan Carr, U.S. special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism. It proposed a plan to appoint a special envoy to deal with antisemitism in every European country, upgrade Holocaust education, to work with European legislators to punish those who foment antisemitism, and perhaps make it illegal for BDS to be implemented in any public institution. The optimistic hope is that, if the plan is implemented, the situation regarding antisemitism may get better.

Can one be so optimistic? Accusations of Jews poisoning wells have largely disappeared, but blood libels, killing Christian children to use their blood still exists, as does caricatures of Jews based on infamous stereotypes. Popular behavior illustrates this. On February 24, 2020 a disgusting carnival parade in the small town of Campo de Criptana in Ciudad Real, in the central region of Castilla-la-Mancha, 70 miles from Madrid, supposedly intended to be a commemoration of Holocaust victims, was a combination of vulgar kitsch and antisemitism, a mockery and trivialization of the Holocaust. It featured a

man dressed as a Nazi soldier carrying a gun, virtually naked women dressed as Nazi SS officers with dominatrix whips, and others supposed to be concentration camp prisoners. One carnival float had a large Menorah lamp between two gas chamber chimneys, a reminder of Auschwitz.

The distastefulness of the carnival was compounded by the fact that only a few days earlier on February 13, 2020, a militant politician, Clara Ponsati, economist and academic, Catalan member of the European Parliament, had made a speech that could be misinterpreted. She condemned what she called one of the most hideous crimes against the Jewish people, the general expulsion in 1492 of Jews from Spain. This first episode of state antisemitism, she said, was one that Adolf Hitler admired and sought to surpass, stands as a cornerstone of the Spanish tragic record of intolerance. Today, she held, this intolerance takes the form of contempt for the right of the certain minority. Therefore, she compared Spain's expulsion of Jews in 1492 with its treatment of the Catalan minority.

The Spanish carnival was not the first of its kind. Already there have been carnivals at Aalst , a town about 10 miles from Brussels. The carnivals, supposedly celebrating Lent, every year repeat in a blatant way racist and antisemitic presentations which depict Orthodox Jews with large hooked noses standing on stacks of fake bars of gold coins. At its carnival on February 23, 2020 floats have Jews depicted as ants and insects, while some carnival revelers wear Nazi uniforms. The carnival is not only beyond good taste, it is not humorous. It is a mockery of the Holocaust.

Other countries have been part of this demonization of Jews. In April 2019 an Easter holiday ritual was held in the small town of Pruchnik in south east Poland. Local residents burned an effigy of Judas portrayed as a Jew seen with hooked nose, black hat, and sidelocks. Similar rituals have been held in other places, including Ermioni, small port city of Greece.

The evil of antisemitism still exists but is also belatedly recognized by offenders. One example is illustrative. The Nederlandse Spoorwegen, NS, the Dutch owned railroad company acknowledged the role it had played in World War II. It announced in June 2019 that it would pay compensation for survivors and families of the 100,000 Holocaust victims, more than 70% of the Jewish population, who were sent on Dutch trains to Nazi death camps. On the other hand, soccer fans of the team Rotterdam Feyenoord chanted antisemitic songs and slogans in its match in Rotterdam against rival team Ajax, popularly regarded as a Jewish team.

The world is currently suffering from the coronavirus that has killed more than 2,800 people world wide. The danger is that the disease can spread widely, and therefore it must be contained. This is also true of the evil disease of antisemitism.