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French Jews Tell of a New and Threatening Wave of Anti-Semitism

By CRAIG S. SMITH

SEVRAN, France — Jérémy Bismuth is Jewish, though he doesn't wear a yarmulke or Star of David pendant or adhere to a Kosher diet or leave school early on Fridays to be home before sunset. Nothing identifies the 15-year-old French boy as Jewish except his birth.

Yet because he is a Jew, he was attacked by a group of other children, mostly Muslim, at the private Catholic school he then attended. They dragged him into the school's locker room showers shouting that they were going to gas him as the Nazis had gassed Jews. He was beaten and flogged with a pair of trousers whose zipper scratched one of his corneas.

For Jérémy and his parents, the incident a year ago was the harrowing confirmation of a trend that many say is gathering momentum: a resurgent European anti-Semitism, coming not from its traditional source among Europe's right-wing nationalists, but from the Continent's growing Islamic community, egged on by the political left.

"The political climate is too pro-Arab, and in the past year it has become intolerable," said Michèle Bismuth, Jérémy's mother at the family's home last week. She said her traumatized son would not leave the house for 10 days after the attack.

To some, such incidents, which have become increasingly common since the latest round of Israeli-Palestinian fighting began more than two years ago, represent the Middle East conflict brought to Europe, where sympathy for the Palestinian cause runs far higher than in the United States.

"Since the intifada began in 2000, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been imported here," said the mother of another high school student who had a hood thrown over his head and was beaten to unconsciousness by a gang of Muslim youths calling him a "dirty Jew" outside a Paris high school two months ago.

The woman, talking nervously at a kosher restaurant not far from the school, said she fears the atmosphere will darken with the war in Iraq. "When they say 'America' they think 'Israel' and when they think 'Israel' they think 'Jewish,'" she said. "Who is going to assure our safety?"

Swastikas, slogans and physical assaults against Jews in Europe have reached a frequency not seen since the 1930's when Fascism was on the rise. But in the vast majority of the cases today, the assailants are young Muslims of North African heritage whose parents emigrated to Europe in the 1960's and 1970's.

The greatest number and most violent attacks have come in France, which, with an estimated six million Muslims and 650,000 Jews in the country, has Europe's largest Jewish and largest Muslim populations.

Some Jews have left France for Israel, driven as much by the deteriorating climate in Europe as they are drawn by solidarity with the Jewish state. According to Israeli government figures, 2,556 French Jews emigrated to Israel last year, double the number a year earlier and the most since the 1967 Six Day War.

Not everyone is willing to call the current wave of violence anti-Semitism. Henri Wajnblum, head of the Union of Progressive Jews of Belgium, said it is important to distinguish between anti-Semitic and anti-Israel actions. He and other members of his Brussels-based group have been visiting classrooms in Muslim neighborhoods to help explain the difference between Zionists and Jews in general.

But for Jews who have become targets, the distinction is a false one that masks the root problem — a latent anti-Semitism that they say has created an environment in which a new strain of racism can thrive.

"In the popular imagination, Jews aren't sympathetic because they are identified with Israel and Sharon," said Sammy Ghozlan, a retired police officer who operates a clearinghouse for information on anti-Semitism in France, referring to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel.

He said many Jews are distraught after willfully believing that the hatred of Jews was erased in Europe by the traumatic accounting of anti-Semitism's toll at the end of World War II.

"There is a feeling that the honeymoon period is over and that it's now impossible to say what will come," Mr. Ghozlan said. He said he has verified reports of 100 serious anti-Semitic incidents in Paris and its suburbs in the first three months of this year alone.

Jews say that much serious harassment goes unreported because the police register many incidents as simple vandalism or assault-and-battery even though they are clearly anti-Semitic. Worse, anti-Semitism risks entrenching itself in a generation of children for whom the language of bigotry has become the slang of the schoolyard.

The word "feuj" — from the inversion of the French word "Juif," which means "Jew" — is now a playground standard, both as an insult against Jewish students and as a contemptuous adjective. Children say a pen that does not work is "completely feuj," for example, and the Hebrew salutation "mazel tov" is used in the same way.

Concerned that the war in Iraq could intensify the problem, France's education ministry last month launched a campaign to stamp out anti-Semitism and other types of racism in schools. Education Minister Luc Ferry acknowledged that verbal insults are becoming common.

"There is a real danger — all the greater because today anti-Semitism is of a new type, coming from parts of society that are more acceptable than the extreme right: from Arabs and Muslims," Mr. Ferry said on state radio last month.

He introduced 10 measures to combat the problem, including the creation of a monitoring committee in Paris, the appointment of a team of mediators for the worst cases and the publication of a booklet to be distributed around schools.

But some schools have advised Jewish parents that they cannot protect their children from harassment and advised that they change schools instead.

At a macadam soccer field in a quiet, well-groomed park in northeastern Paris, Muslim youths come regularly to harass students of a nearby Jewish school. Shlomo, a 15-year-old Jewish boy wearing a black velvet yarmulke, described the taunts and shoves and, in the most serious cases, blows.

In Sevran, Jérémy Bismuth's mother, Michèle, shows photographs she took of anti-Semitic slogans and graffiti that were painted along the parade route of a pro-Palestinian rally in the town last year. One photo shows a street sign scrawled with the words "Death to Jews," and another, taken long after the rally, shows large stars of David and Nazi swastikas with equal signs between them.

When Jérémy broke free from his tormentors in the shower, he ran for help to the teacher's lounge but none of the faculty rose from their chairs to help the disheveled and distraught boy. Jérémy said it wasn't the first anti-Semitic incident he had experienced at the school, nor the last.

The director of the school, Robert Patrois, dismissed the incident as a schoolyard brawl between a Muslim boy and a Jewish boy "that brought out their 14-year-old vocabulary." In a telephone interview he grew irritated when asked if the teachers had come to Jérémy's aide.

"Don't ask me to remember what they did," he said. "I didn't want to treat it as an anti-Arab or anti-Jewish incident. I treated it as fighting."

After the incident, Jérémy and his parents filed a complaint with the police, but the boy was taunted repeatedly in the subsequent weeks by other Muslim students.

Finally, Jérémy's mother sent a lengthy complaint in the notebook that every student carries to pass messages between parents and faculty, but the notebook was never returned and a new, blank one was sent home with her son instead.

The Bismuths withdrew Jérémy from the school at the end of last year and enrolled him in a new school, although with some difficulty: his previous school records had disappeared.

"No one helped him," his mother said, sitting at a glass dining room table in a white stucco house that, until recently, housed Mrs. Bismuth's optical shop and her husband's dental practice. They have closed both businesses and plan to leave France for good.

The Bismuths considered going to Israel, but have set their hopes on the United States instead. If all goes well, they will move to Florida when the school year ends in June.