

{JULY 17 2004}

MARIE AND THE GHOSTS

Sometimes a trivial episode throws a revealing light on a grave public disease. A classic example: the Captain of Koepenick. On the face of it, it was a minor criminal incident: in 1906, a shoemaker named Wilhelm Voigt was released from prison, after serving a sentence for forgery. To get work he needed a passport, which, as a former convict, he could not get.

So he went to a junk shop and bought the uniform of an army captain, commandeered some soldiers in the street, took them to Koepenick, a Berlin suburb, arrested the mayor and confiscated the blank passports. Since he was well-known to the police, he was soon arrested. All Europe laughed at this exposure of the situation in Germany, where anyone wearing a uniform was a king and every army officer a demigod.

In the classic film about the episode, the news was brought to the Kaiser (the same Kaiser Wilhelm II who had earlier met with Theodor Herzl in Jerusalem). For a long moment, the courtiers held their breath. Then the Kaiser burst out laughing, and the relieved courtiers joined in. It wasn't really a laughing matter, because eight years later the unbridled German militarism was one of the causes of World War I.

A week ago, a young Frenchwoman called Marie Leonie caused an uproar. According to her, six youngsters "with a North African look" attacked her in a Paris train, grabbed her purse and, (wrongly) believing her to be Jewish because she lives in the well-to-do 16th arrondissement, tore her clothes and painted swastikas on her belly. They then overturned her baby carriage – all this while 20 other passengers looked on without lifting a finger to help her.

France waxed hysterical with rage and guilt. The leaders of the republic, from President Jacques Chirac down, blamed themselves and promised to put the fight against anti-Semitism at the top of the national agenda. All the newspapers displayed giant headlines about the nation's shame, together with profound background-pieces about the groundswell of anti-Semitism. Jewish organizations in France and throughout the world accused European society of a frightening resurgence of anti-Semitism and invoked memories of the Holocaust. The Israeli media had a field-day,

telling all Jews that they would find safety only in Israel. I had my doubts from the first moment. After my 40 years as the editor of a magazine specializing in investigative journalism, I have developed a keen nose for phony stories. This one was manifestly implausible. I am convinced that the French investigators doubted it from the beginning. But who would dare to raise any doubts in the face of a runaway public hysteria?

And then, suddenly, the whole story collapsed. Not a single eye-witness came forward. The station cameras did not show any sign of the occurrence. It became known that the young woman had made false statements to the police in the past. Two days after the uproar, the woman broke down and admitted the truth: the whole thing was an invention.

Like the Captain of Koepenick, who trained the spotlight on Prussian militarism, so did Marie Leonie direct the light at the anti-anti-Semitic hysteria in Europe, an irrational phenomenon that turns experienced politicians into fools, makes serious newspapers go crazy and allows all kinds of ugly manipulations.

In order to inject a measure of logic and sanity into the matter, one has to begin by distinguishing between different phenomena. There is indeed some real anti-Semitism. It is deeply embedded in European-Christian civilization. It does exist today, as it always did. This is a hatred of Jews because they are Jews, irrespective of who and what else they are – rich or poor, capitalists or communists, supporters or critics of Israel, corrupt or honest. One of its expressions, for example, is the painting of swastikas on tombstones, an idiotic act that any disturbed juvenile can carry out on his own. I don't believe that this kind of anti-Semitism has increased in recent years. Perhaps it has lost some of its shame with the passing of the years since the Holocaust. In the present situation, it is not dangerous.

A quite different phenomenon is the North-African war conducted on European soil. Young Muslims from North Africa are battling young Jews from North Africa. That started back home, when the Jews supported the French regime against the freedom fighters. In the last phase, the Jewish underground organization was the mainstay of the opposition to the liberation of Algeria. (The organization was set up by Israeli agents to defend the Jews, but the leaders gradually migrated to Israel and the organization was left in the hands of the most rabid Arab-haters.)

Now this confrontation has become a local offshoot of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Muslims are enflamed by TV pictures of the oppression and humiliation enforced by our soldiers in the occupied territories, while the Jewish organizations support the Sharon government. Most Jews in France are emigrants from North Africa. This causes many incidents and creates the impression that anti-Semitism is on the rise.

Our government is pouring petrol on the flames by instructing its representatives around the world to stigmatize all criticism of its actions as anti-Semitism. This way it sticks the label of anti-Semitism on the entire world, from the UN General Assembly and the International Court of Justice to humanitarian organizations.

It is easy to create this confusion when one does not differentiate between “Jewish” and “Israeli”. Everything becomes mixed up: anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, criticism of Israel, criticism of Sharon. Such a mix-up is convenient for those interested in manipulations, but it is not good for the Jews. “Jew” and “Israeli” are not the same.

Israel is a state like any other state. It was indeed created by Jews and a majority of its citizens are Jews. But Israel is an independent and separate entity. It is permissible (and, in my opinion, desirable) to criticize the policy of our government, much as it is permissible for us to criticize that of any other state. There is no necessary connection between such criticism and anti-Semitism.

True, the Jews in Israel have a strong affinity with Jews all over the world, and these have an affinity with Israel. That is quite natural, and much like the affinity that many people in Australia and Canada feel for Britain. But this does not mean that Jews around the world must automatically support every act of the Israeli government in a kind of Pavlovian reflex. That is convenient for the Israeli government, but not necessarily good for Israel. It is certainly bad for the Jews.

We are Israelis. We created this state in order to be masters of our own destiny. We want to be like any other people, indeed, like the best of them. We are responsible for our actions, and nobody who is not a citizen of Israel bears any responsibility for them.

The Jewish citizens of France are responsible for the actions of the French government that they vote for, and perhaps for the actions of the Jewish community to which they belong. They are not responsible for our actions. They do not have to defend our actions at all costs. If they want to criticize them, they are welcome.

When there is a clear and clean separation, anti-Semitism will remain in Europe as marginal a phenomenon as it has been since the Holocaust. And if we Israelis succeed in returning to the road to peace, the attitude towards Israel will return to what it was after Oslo, when the whole world saluted us.

If the disturbed Frenchwoman’s hoax helps us overcome the hysteria and return to a sane approach to this matter, than she deserves our blessing.

The Good Boy Scout

“In a dramatic television broadcast, the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, called upon the million Russian emigrants in Israel to return at once to their homeland, in view of

the growing danger to their security there.” That did not happen, of course. But it is easy to imagine what would have been the reaction in Israel if Putin had indeed made such an appeal. Or if the president of France, Jacques Chirac, had called upon the French-speakers in Israel, the hundreds of thousands of immigrants from France and North Africa, to move to France, where their life is not threatened by suicide bombers.

The Israeli media would have gone berserk. The Knesset, in an emergency session, would have denounced the outrageous anti-Semitic outburst of the president of Russia and/or France. The politicians would have tried to outdo each other in condemnations of the inadmissible interference in the internal affairs of Israel. The Foreign Office would have ordered the return of the ambassador in Moscow and/or Paris for “consultations”.

What happened was, of course, the reverse. It was the Israeli Prime Minister who called on the French Jews to leave their homeland “as soon as possible” and come to Israel, in view of the – alleged – anti-Semitic wave in France. The French government and media reacted exactly as their Israeli counterparts would have done.

One of every hundred Frenchman (and Frenchwoman) is Jewish. “A deplorable misunderstanding,” the official French spokesman intoned. Meaning, in non-diplomatic language: “Shut up, you bastard!”

Profound commentators all over the world tried to guess the hidden motive of Ariel Sharon. Was this a veiled warning to France not to vote in favor of the judgement of the International Court in the UN General Assembly? (France voted for it anyhow, compelling all of Europe to follow suit.) Was he doing a favor to President Bush, who detests Chirac?

The truth is much more simple. It is impossible to guess Sharon’s intention, because he had none. It was an inconsequential speech before an inconsequential audience. Sharon wanted to say something that would give him five seconds on TV, and he got them. Everybody was satisfied: the TV stations, the Prime Minister, his audience and the general public. Everybody, that is, except the French. In Israeli ears it was an unimportant, routine statement. Israeli leaders miss no opportunity to call on every occasion upon Jewish communities to drop everything and come to Israel. If there is a sign of anti-Semitism anywhere, this is an automatic response.

If there is a “misunderstanding”, it is mutual. It could be called, in the vogue phrase, a “clash of civilizations”: the French-European and the Israeli-Zionist. In the French view, the French Jews are French. The republic is not based on religion or ethnic origin. The way the French see it, every citizen is a partner in the republic and French culture – whether Christian or Jew, Alsacien or Breton, North-African or Corsican. This is the basis of the République.

And along comes the Prime Minister of a foreign country and has the cheek – not to saychutzpa – to attack the very foundations of the republic and sow discord among its citizens. That is the gravest assault on France, barring an outright military attack.

In the Israeli view, it looks quite different. According to official doctrine, Israel is “the State of the Jewish People”. The “Jewish People” consists of all the Jews in the world, irrespective of whether they live in Brooklyn, Barcelona or Bratislava.

Every child here learns that all the Jews in the world will come to Israel sooner or later. They will have no choice, since the Goyim (Gentiles) hate the Jews, and so the anti-Semites will come to power in all countries in due course. Israel exists in order to offer them a haven when they are compelled to flee, once the inevitable comes about.

This explains the ambivalent reaction of the Israeli establishment to any anti-Semitic event anywhere. The natural reaction is, of course, one of anger and condemnation. But there is also another reaction, a hidden one that borders on satisfaction: Here, we told you so. Now it is happening. We were right all along.

Both reactions lead to the cry: Come, brothers, before it is too late! It rather resembles the good boy-scout in the joke, the one who helps the old lady to cross the road, whether she wants to or not.

So Chirac is furious, Sharon is obdurate and repeats his call, and in the middle stand the poor French Jews, who just want to be left alone.

AVNER Y | SHARON'S SKIN AND BUSH'S SPOTS