

Monday, March 29, 2010

# Hate crimes force Jews out of Malmo

Karl Ritter ASSOCIATED PRESS

MALMO, Sweden

Marcus Eilenberg is a Swedish Jew whose family roots in Malmo run deep. His paternal grandparents were Holocaust survivors who found shelter in this southern Swedish city in 1945. His wife's parents fled to Sweden from communist Poland in the 1960s.

Now the 32-year-old law firm associate feels the welcome for Jews is running out, and he is moving to Israel with his wife and two children in May. He says he knows at least 15 other Jews who are leaving for a similar reason.

That reason, he says, is a rise in hate crimes against Jews in Malmo, and a sense that local authorities have little desire to deal with a problem that has exposed a crack in Sweden's image as a bastion of tolerance and a haven for distressed ethnic groups.

Anti-Semitic crimes in Europe have usually been associated with the far right, but Shneur Kesselman, an Orthodox rabbi, says the threat now comes from Muslims.

"In the past five years I've been here, I think you can count on your hand how many incidents there have been from the extreme right," he said. "In my personal experience, it's 99 percent Muslims."

Sweden prides itself on having taken in tens of thousands of the world's war refugees. About 7 percent of Malmo's 285,000 people were born in the Middle East, according to city statistics, and the city has large numbers from the Balkans, including the Macedonian who heads the city's largest mosque. After the Holocaust, it took in many Jews who survived the World War II Nazi genocide.

Malmo police say that of 115 hate crimes reported in 2009, 52 were anti-Semitic. Bejzat Becirov, the mosque head, estimated there are about 60,000 Muslims in Malmo. But the number of Jews

is about 700 and shrinking - it was twice as big two decades ago, according to Fredrik Sieradzki, a spokesman for the Jewish community.

Last year at least 10 of the hate-crime complaints were filed by Mr. Kesselman, from the Brooklyn-based Chabad-Lubavitch movement, whose black fedora and long beard single him out as he moves around the city.

Walking home from the Jewish community center on Malmo's snow-flecked streets, the 31-year-old rabbi recalls some of the worst incidents: a young man who shouted "Heil Hitler" and chased him off a city bus; a car that suddenly reversed and almost hit him on the crosswalk by the opera house.

"A typical situation is I'm walking in the streets and a car with Muslim youth between 18 and 30 will roll down the window and yell '(expletive) Jew,' give me the finger and shout something in Arabic," he said.

Malmo's Jewish community is mostly secular and long felt safe because few display Jewish symbols that would distinguish them from other Swedes. But things changed after a series of fierce anti-Israel protests and a spike in anti-Semitic hate crimes after Israel's assault against Hamas-run Gaza last year.

Tempers flared when Jews held a peaceful pro-Israel rally outside City Hall a week after the offensive ended. A bigger crowd waving Palestinian flags threw bottles, eggs and firecrackers.

Tensions rose again two months later when Malmo authorities, saying they couldn't guarantee security, forced Sweden and Israel to play their Davis Cup tennis matches in a near-empty stadium as police held off rock-throwing anti-Israel activists outside who wanted to stop the competition completely.

Mr. Eilenberg said it was a wake-up call - "a degree of hate that none of us - except those who survived the Holocaust - had experienced before."

Jewish groups say anti-Semitic attacks increased in several European countries following the Gaza war, notably the Netherlands and France.

Across the narrow Oresund Strait, Jews in Copenhagen say they have also felt a rise in Muslim anti-Semitism but are less worried, said Yitzchok Loewenthal of the Jewish International Organization in the Danish capital.

"The fundamental difference is that here in Copenhagen, Jews feel that the police, state and authorities take the issue very seriously and are on top of the situation. while in Malmo the

---

Jewish community feel unsafe because the political will is not there," he said.

Malmo's Jews say they feel little support from Mayor Ilmar Reepalu, a left-winger who told a Swedish newspaper in January he thought the anti-Semitism was coming from extreme-right groups. He also drew criticism for blaming Malmo Jews for not distancing themselves from the Israeli campaign in Gaza.

"Instead they choose to hold a demonstration ... which can send the wrong signals," Mr. Reepalu was quoted as saying by Skanska Dagbladet.

Jewish leaders sensed a blame-the-victim attitude. Mr. Reepalu has since spoken out against anti-Semitism and claims the media twisted his comments.

In an interview aired by Danish broadcaster TV2 this month, Mr. Reepalu said he was being misrepresented by "the Israeli lobby who aren't interested in what I say and believe."

Mr. Reepalu didn't respond to repeated requests for an interview with the Associated Press.

The city recently appointed an anti-hate-crimes coordinator, Bjorn Lagerback, who said Mr. Reepalu has sent a letter to the city's 20,000 employees denouncing all attacks against minorities in Malmo, though without specifically mentioning Jews.

Asked whether Jews were particularly targeted by hate crimes in Malmo, Mr. Lagerback said anti-Semitism had become "more explicit." He added that "we also have discrimination against women who wear a hijab. They are also exposed to various kinds of insults."

Mosque leader Mr. Becirov spoke similarly, saying he feels "great sympathy for the Jewish community" and knows what it's going through because "the Muslim community, too, is exposed to Islamophobia."

He listed a range of incidents, including an anthrax letter sent to him after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York, and several arson attacks against his mosque.