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French Jews hide Jewishness under their caps

By Devorah Lauter

PARIS (JTA) — They started to pop up in clusters around town a few years ago: Plain, black baseball caps made of thin fabric, pulled tight in the back and worn by men in nondescript, formal attire.

It was a noticeable change in the Paris fashion landscape, where caps usually are multicoloured and reserved for casual wear.

Yet this slightly off-kilter Franco version of the American fashion accessory, the baseball cap, was meant not to attract attention but avoid it.

That's because the men wearing them were French Jews interested in blending in, not standing out.

In 2003, France's chief rabbi, Joseph Sitruk, recommended replacing or covering kippas with baseball caps when in public to avoid attacks by antisemites.

Since then the practice has spread. After dark, on the metro or exiting the synagogue, Orthodox Jews commonly slip on their caps as a means of protection.

"I wish I could walk around without the hat," said Daniel Tapia, 58, who recently started hiding his kippa out of safety concerns. "It has become a necessity. I'd rather be cautious."

Jacques Slama, 47, says he's not afraid of antisemitic attacks but covers his kippa with the baseball caps his wife brings him from New York because he prefers to go unnoticed.

"I don't like people to say, 'there goes a Jew,'" said Slama, a butcher.

The practice of hiding kippas from sight is one salient sign of the degree to which life has changed in the past few years for French Jews. Some have grown accustomed to the daily precautions they take, but many say they are no longer comfortable in France. Some have plans to emigrate.

"Before, people paid less attention if they wore a kippa," said Fortune Mazeltov, 50, who sells the caps to Jewish customers in a packed knickknack shop in central Paris. But now, she said of her customers, "given the tense times we're going through, they're afraid."

Jewish women, too, have been hiding signs of their Jewishness. Many tuck away the Stars of David or Sephardic hamsa ornaments they wear around their necks before going out.

French Jews agree that the sea change happened earlier this decade, when France experienced a startling spike in antisemitic attacks that coincided with the surge of Israeli-Palestinian violence during the bloody years of the second intifada.

Many French Jews bifurcate their lifestyle into "before" and "after" this change. Before, they could send their children to public school, walk through any part of Paris with a kippa or leave a Jewish book on the car dashboard.

French Jews used to feel strong, said Sammy Ghozlan, head of the National Bureau of Vigilance Against Antisemitism.

"But we were weakened. Since Jews didn't defend themselves, they lost their initiative," he said of lacklustre Jewish and government responses to violent attacks on French Jews. "We'll never again feel strong. We'll never find the place we had before. Today the Jews are seen as the handicapped members of society."

Even as crime against Jews has declined, the fears remain. Many say antisemitic violence has dropped only because Jews now are better protected, not because there is less anti-Jewish sentiment in France.

The total number of antisemitic crimes fell approximately 10 per cent last year compared with 2006, according to the records of the National Bureau of Vigilance against Antisemitism. The Service for the Protection of the Jewish Community calculated a 30 per cent decrease for the same period.

Ghozlan said the decline is the result of Jewish parents pulling their kids out of public schools, Jews fleeing suburbs where anti-Jewish violence has flared and the community transforming its institutions into "fortresses."

"We reduced the antisemitic acts with our behaviour, we changed our habits," he said. "Still, a Jew that's found alone on the street today is a potential target."



Meir Ben Avraham (right) says that when he goes to less-safe neighbourhoods in Paris, he wears a baseball hat over his kippa for protection.

insults against Jews have become commonplace and that harassment of Jews is rising. Meanwhile, the French media have been largely silent on the issue.

Jean-Yves Camus, a political scientist at the Institute of International and Strategic Relations, says Jewish life in France is flourishing despite a long tradition of antisemitism.

"The truth is that I see Jews wearing kippas, there are Jewish schools, synagogues, community centres," he said.

Camus wears a kippa in public, dismissing Sitruk's advised defensive dress code as "absurd."

"Withdrawal, he said, is not the answer.

"If they see that Jews are weak, then they'll treat them as weak," Camus said. "At some point we have to stop complaining, or we can stay here and do what it takes to make it better. That is, show ourselves."

Haniel Bennisan, 20, who was beaten up three years ago, says the defensive stance of French Jews is justified.

Bennisan said it's understandable "why a mother would want her children, who have to walk home alone or through a housing project, to hide their kippa. It's completely normal. Things can happen."

At a Jewish bakery and cafe in northern Paris, an area that continues to be the site of frequent antisemitic attacks, Danielle Mshid, 60, says the number of visible kippas in her part of the city is dwindling.

During an interview, her voice suddenly drops to a whisper when she mentions the word "Israel." The same thing happens when she uses the word "Jew."

Asked why, Mshid smiles sadly. "We were always discreet," she said. "But it's true, I didn't use to lower my voice like that. I've gotten in the habit now."

Seminar addresses top issues for families of the elderly



Charles Wagner, Dr. Nathan Herrmann, Ian Hull, Rabbi Roy Tanenbaum

By Atara Beck
Tribune Staff Writer

TORONTO — With the rapidly growing population of seniors comes the need for a wealth of information on issues ranging from health care and counselling to financial and legal advice. It is the families of the elderly in particular who could benefit from greater knowledge and advice from professionals about available resources and necessary preparations to address concerns regarding care for the elderly.

Four leading professionals will address these matters at a seminar next month — *Insights on Aging and the Elderly* — sponsored by Scotia Private Client Group, Beth Tzedec Congregation and B'nai Brith Canada.

Ian Hull of Hull and Hull LLP, a foremost expert on estates, trusts and wills, will discuss the legal issues surrounding powers of attorney, as well as litigation regarding the appointment of a statutory guardian over property or personal care.

Dr. Nathan Herrmann, head of Geriatric Psychiatry at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre, will talk about *Recognizing the Red Flags of Alzheimer's*.

Rabbi Roy Tanenbaum of Beth Tzedec Synagogue will discuss Jewish thought and religious law regarding family conflicts with respect to elderly autonomy.

Charles Wagner, chair of B'nai Brith Canada's Trust & Estates Group, will explain the responsibilities of a Power of Attorney over property and the situation that results when an attorney has violated his or her fiduciary duty as Power of Attorney. Refreshments will be served.

The community is encouraged to attend this unique and important opportunity to help families with the challenges of elder care.

The seminar will be held Thursday, March 27, 7 p.m., at Beth Tzedec Synagogue, 1700 Bathurst St. Admission is \$10 to the Beth Tzedec Chesed Committee.

For information or to register, call Hyla Reichmann at (416) 633-6224, ext. 128, or email hreichmann@bnaibrith.ca.

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Ethical Challenges Series

Clanton Park Synagogue
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Rabbi Yonah Reiss
incoming dean of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University, Director of the Beth Din of America, and former editor of the Yale University Law Journal.

9:00 am – Breakfast & preparation for Shiur (seminar)
9:30 am – Seminar
10:15 am – General Q & A / Ask-the-Rabbi

Breakfast, Lecture, and Source material for the seminar will be provided free of charge. Sponsored by Yeshiva University and Clanton Park Synagogue

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