

'An End to Antisemitism!'

Such was the title of a recent conference in Vienna. With this undoubtedly ambitious aim in mind, its participants held frank discussions about right-wing governments in Europe and the Holocaust, BDS, the plight of Jews on the continent, and the deep roots of Jew hatred

• BARRY DAVIS

There are countless conferences held all over the world, all year round, with definitively academic agendas. While they may be fascinating and envelope-pushing ventures per se, such events often address the interests of members of select professional fields, rather than appealing to the general public.

Unfortunately that was not the case with the international gathering which took place at Vienna University a few weeks ago. The event went by the ambitiously declarative title of "An End to Antisemitism!" which, as we know only too well, is a glaringly burning issue at present.

The exclamation point seemed to offer a neat and encouraging line of intent, as if just by convening a bunch of A-listers, lecturers, intellectuals, religious leaders and the odd philosopher, one could wave a magic wand and all would be well again, and that the loud rumblings of racism and xenophobia crashing across the world could be stemmed at Vienna University.

That, of course, is simplistic pie in the sky thinking, and the venerable folk who attended the opening slot of the conference, at the Vienna Municipality's sumptuously appointed neo-Gothic main hall, were fully cognizant of the scale of the problem.

In terms of public profile the conference organizers could hardly have set their sights any higher. The municipality-hosted kickoff featured a stellar lineup of speakers, including Israeli Ambassador Talya Lador-Fresher and Moscow-born philanthropist Moshe Kantor – one of the principal sponsors of the conference, along with New York University and Tel Aviv University – whose numerous positions include President of the European Jewish Congress, President of the European Council on Tolerance and Reconciliation, and Chairman of the World Jewish Congress (WJC) Policy Council.

Pope Francis and Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen count not attend and had their remarks delivered by others. Vienna University rector Heinz Engl said Van der Bellen would have attended, but had unfortunately come down with flu.

The undisputed star of the opening proceedings was Jewish-French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy. Over the last four decades or so, the 69-year-old Lévy has become a media personality, acclaimed writer and sought-after speaker. I managed to grab a few minutes with him prior to the gathering.

I put it to Lévy that, considering its Holocaust past, Vienna was a particularly poignant location for a conference on antisemitism. "Vienna has been witness to the best and the worst of the 20th century," he noted. "As [20th-century Viennese Modernist writer] Hermann Broch said, Vienna was a sort of accomplishment of civilization. But Vienna was also one of the epicenters of Nazism, which is absolute darkness."



My Viennese-born mother left the Austrian capital on a Kindertransport in December 1938, and I have ambivalent feelings toward the beautiful city, with its sprawling parks, imperial architecture and ever so efficient public transport. Lévy, it transpires, has a similar double-edged take. "Each time I come to Vienna, I have a double feeling."

My own affinity with my mother's place of birth is tempered not only by Austria's recent dark past, but also by the fact that it took the country close to half a century after the end of World War II to admit its guilt, as a willing contributor to the genocide. Lévy says he understands why it took so long for the Austrians to stop churning out the official responsibility-shirking stance that Austria was "the Nazis' first victim."

The French philosopher says the Austrians were not alone in their political laundering approach. "Of course



I understand that. It also took the French a long time [to admit their guilt]. Anyway, this work of memory, this work of sorrow, this work of mourning is hard work.”

It is an ongoing process which, Lévy posits, will take quite a while longer.

“Some parts of the world did not even begin it. The Arabs and the Iranians have not yet started. They have their part in guiltiness in this particular moment of history, which is Nazism. They still haven’t started. They are still in denial, complete denial, about their share of responsibility for the Holocaust.”

That, he says, leaves a long road to travel before the societies in question can come to terms with their Holocaust-related legacy and, possibly, deal with the implications of such a back-burner approach to addressing rising antisemitism.

Lévy notes the rise of extreme right-leaning politics in places like Poland, Hungary and Austria – one might add Italy and France to that sorry roster – and that the conference host country has regressed of late. “What I feel about Austria is there was a moment in the ’80s and ’90s of the last century when the work started to be done [countries recognizing their role in the Holocaust]. My feeling is that, since a few years, maybe

since the beginning of the 21st century, there is a sort of way back, a sort of burial of those parts of the cemetery which had been unburied. This is maybe the peculiarity of Austria.”

That process of reconciliation – and of addressing areas which, if neglected, could encourage antisemitic forces to rear their ugly head – is not helped by the way the political scene has been panning out in Austria in recent times. That is not helped by the inclusion of the right-wing populist Freedom Party in the current coalition. Does Lévy lay the blame for that at Chancellor Sebastian Kurz’s door?

He does, but says that the lack of an appropriate response from wider circles is a troubling phenomenon, too. “Of course, and I blame the European community for taking that as if it was nothing. There is a sort of banalization of the worst. The Europeans should be stronger, not against Austria but for Austria. What is happening today – with the three ministers of the extreme Right holding big ministries – is bad for Austria and also for the world.”

The subject of Islamic extremism also found its way into the conversation, and how this is affecting Jewish communities in Europe, including in Lévy’s

PROTESTERS HOLD signs reading ‘Don’t let Nazis govern’ during a demonstration against the far-right Freedom Party in Vienna last January. (Heinz-Peter Bader/Reuters)

THE UNDISPUTED star of the conference's opening proceedings was Jewish-French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy. Over the last four decades or so, the 69-year-old Lévy has become a media personality, acclaimed writer and sought-after speaker. (Ouriel Morgensztern)



own country. Reference was made to the decision by around 40,000 French Jews to make aliya in recent years. Lévy suggests that relocation is not the answer, and that Jews should adopt a more hands on approach to antisemitism.

"There are three choices – submit, leave or struggle, resist. My choice is No. 3. You can submit, you can leave or you can fight. My feeling, I may be wrong, is that it is still time to fight. It is not yet time to leave."

That is a moot point. A Jewish-Viennese friend, who is highly active in the local community, I met during my stay said she was considering her options, and that she wondered how much longer it will be safe to stay in Austria. That is a particularly chilling thought, in the context of Austria and the events that took place there. People such as my mother clearly remember the arrival of German troops in Vienna following the Anschluss in March 1938, and the horrors of Kristallnacht eight months later.

Expressing dismay at the actions of a government, says Lévy, is all well and good and, in fact, a sign of robust social health. However, in the case of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, he feels that is beyond the bounds of fair play. He has gone so far as to equate the international drive to ostracize Israel as plain and simple antisemitism.

Lévy is all for democracy and cites the current groundswell here generated by the ongoing investigations into Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's bribery charges as positive signs of the times. However, he does not consider BDS which, inter alia, opposes Israel's hosting the opening stages of the prestigious Giro d'Italia cycling race in Jerusalem this May, an acceptable way of voicing opposition to a country's political stance.

"There is no limit to a critique of a government," he states. "But it jumps to antisemitism when it jumps from this legitimate critique of a government to criticizing the country's very right to exist."

That didn't happen in the conference's host country, Lévy notes, following, for him, a more troubling political development. "When one criticizes the choice of the Austrian prime minister to appoint three ministers from the extreme right, I did not read even one article, thank God, saying that Austria has no right to

exist because of this. That would, of course, be crazy to jump from criticizing a policy to criticizing Austria. For Israel, that jump is done all the time. From the possible indignity of a policy or a prime minister you draw the conclusion that there is an indignity of the country itself. This is specific for Israel. It does not happen for any other country of the world. That is the moment when criticism of Israel turns into antisemitism. For them [BDS supporters] the critique of Israeli policies is just a pretext to place shame on the very principle of Israel's existence. The program of BDS – they are against the two-state solution. They are in favor of one binational state."

For Lévy that is yet another sticking point. "I am a partisan of the two-state solution. I dream for the moment when Israel goes back to the border of '67, more or less, involving a 10% exchange of territories, not including Jerusalem. But I recognize the Palestinian people's right to exist, I recognize it and even hope for it, but not at the expense of Israel's right to exist. BDS is against the two-state solution and against Israel's right to exist."

Lévy believes there are even more sinister undercurrents to the international movement to sideline Israeli products. "They [BDS] are refreshing the slogan of boycott by Arab Nazis of 1946, 1947, 1948, renewing and refreshing that. And I don't like Nazis. They can be German, Austrian, French – we have Nazis [in France] – or Arabs. For me it is the same. There is no excuse for a country that was formerly subjected to colonialism [such as various Arab states]... to refresh Nazi ideology. The boycott of Jewish products is a Nazi slogan."

WHILE APPRECIATIVE of being offered the opportunity to take center stage at the conference opener, Lévy advised against getting carried away with the idea of a predominantly academic gathering holding back the gathering clouds of antisemitism across Europe and beyond.

"I like the exclamation point of the [conference] title," he says with a smile, "and maybe that is the best part of the title. I am slightly embarrassed about that. The idea of putting an end to antisemitism, again, I have a slight embarrassment with that. According to the Midrash, antisemitism has existed for 3,500 years. I

am not sure we will put an end to that today," he added tongue in cheek. While displaying his admirable knowledge of scholarly Jewish commentary, Lévy's command of Hebrew spelling evidently leaves a little to be desired.

Referencing the giving of the Ten Commandments, he evoked a play on words which, while phonetically neat, confuses the letter *sin* with the letter *samech*. "Antisemitism is a special form of hatred. At the very moment where they [the Jews] were born, the midrash says that antisemitism appeared when the nations forgot the last letter of [the name of] the little mountain from where the Revelation occurred – when the nations forgot the final *yud*, which is the name of God, Sinai became *sinna* (hatred)." While the Hebrew spelling of Sinai opens with *samech*, *sinna* starts with *sin*. Still, the message was clear.

If any of the conference attendees entertained utopian thoughts of stamping out antisemitism in five days, or even longer, in Vienna last month, Lévy poured cold water on such a fanciful notion. "My conviction is that, against this plague of antisemitism, against this hate which is addressed to the Jews of flesh and bone, but also to the text which [the Jews] continue to revere and worship, this hatred has to be contained, has to be fought against, has to be resisted but, alas, I think it will not be erased or eradicated. The idea of eradicating the evil, or purifying the world of the evil, it may be a difficult and risky idea." Clearly there is work to be done.

IF ATTACKING the problem from practically every angle is one way of, at least, curbing antisemitism, the conference organizers gave it their best shot. Over the five days, some 150 intellectuals from around the world, and from various religious, academic and political stripes, took part in panel discussions, lectures and debates.

The speaker lineup featured Austrian-Jewish community head Oskar Deutsch; Tel Aviv University Professor Emeritus of modern Jewish history Dina Porat; Bishop Michael Bunker, general secretary of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe; and Imam Hassen Chalghoum, president of the Conférence des Imams de France, and spiritual leader of the mosque in Drancy, France.

Drancy was the site of an internment camp for Jews



during World War II and where, as far as I know, my mother's father was murdered. Other leading speakers at the conference included Rabbi Abraham Skorka, rector of the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano in Buenos Aires; New York University Biblical studies professor Rabbi Lawrence Schiffmann; Jewish Agency Chairman Natan Sharansky and Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz.

The thematic spectrum was as diverse as the speakers' disciplinary range. Prof. Armin Lange, of the University of Vienna's Institute of Jewish Studies, where most of the events took place, spoke about antisemitic readings of the Jewish scriptures in late ancient legislation, while Miri Rubin, a lecturer at Queen Mary University of London, who specializes in the social and religious history of Europe between 1100 and 1500, enlightened her audience about medieval England's anti-Jewish sentiments.

There were intriguing contributions across the field, and some very frank discussions. Bunker, for instance, talked freely about Martin Luther's distasteful ideas, mentioning his "terrible antisemitic writings in his later years." While not, in any way, condoning Luther's unfortunate about-face, Bunker suggested there may have been some political motives behind the German monk's racism, which surfaced after he initially took a favorable approach to Jews.

"He [Luther] was of the opinion that his interpretation of the Bible, including the Christian Old Testament, was the only right reading. This was his way to combat the Roman Catholics. But he could not combat the Jews, and this could be a deep-rooted reason which evoked this hatred, his antisemitism," Bunker said. So, how would Bunker counter arguments within his own Lutheran church that it is okay to hate Jews because, after all, the denomination's founder took that line? Bunker expresses a refreshingly open-minded stance: "The first thing is we have to see the shadows in Luther. Luther is not a saint for us," he says, noting another dark side to Luther's philosophy. "His anti-Islamic writings are not very well known."

With his white *taqiya*, or skullcap, Chalhough stood out from the conference crowd. We settled into a corner for a chat and I asked him, a staunch supporter of Israel and of the Jewish community in his adopted France,

whether he felt comfortable with being known as "the imam of the Jews." "For me it is an honor," he says.

He says he is not ruffled by the flak he gets for his pro-Jewish views. "I don't care what people say about me. I am a man of peace. I love the Jews." Chalhough believes that all Muslims should embrace that positive view of Jews. "That is part of my faith. A third of the Koran talks about the Jews. I don't know how you can be a Muslim and also antisemitic."

Chalhough's sunny disposition belies some cold facts of his lifestyle and, while he says he will not change his way of thinking, he is tired of having to surround himself with bodyguards and to keep his wife and five children away from the political firing line. His home has been attacked and there have been threats to his life.

Jews and non-Jews battling antisemitism clearly have their work cut out for them right now. And the news from Poland isn't encouraging either. The conference's closing statement duly focused on moves to outlaw associating Poland, or any Poles, with any crimes committed during the Holocaust.

"We, the assembled international scholars and experts on antisemitism call on the government of Poland to withdraw its proposed amendment of the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance," it said. "This law, if implemented, would gravely inhibit freedom of research and speech and would severely distort the history of the Holocaust in Poland. It poses a direct threat to Holocaust survivors, scholars and all those who research and retell the story of that dark period. While we also agree that the term 'Polish death camps' is historically inaccurate and should be strictly avoided, we firmly reject all attempts to educate through threats and criminalization."

It is not, the statement notes, just a Polish symptom. "We also wish to express our concern about the growing trend of democratically elected governments to legitimize antisemitism through words and actions. It is our hope that our conference, by gathering the leading international experts on antisemitism together, with an eye toward suggesting policy recommendations in the fight against antisemitism, can help bring about 'An End to Antisemitism.'"

A PROTEST banner was displayed during the conference's proceedings. (Ouriel Morgensztern)

ONE PANEL on antisemitism and Abrahamic religions was headed by Bishop Michael Bunker (third from left), the general secretary of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe. (Ouriel Morgensztern)