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## The secret service of Antwerp's Jewish community

by JewishNews-Ester

The 20,000 strong Jewish population of Belgium's second city has its own protection in the form of a clandestine group of volunteers who work with the local police force to defend the community's schools and synagogues

Almost 40 years have passed since the Belgian Jewish community underwent a pair of terrorist attacks and five years since the attack on the Jewish Museum in central Brussels, and now the country's Jewish community has learned to rely on itself for its security.

About 150 Antwerp's Jews are now part of the local community watchdog organization. Most of them are young, boys and girls with Israeli-born parents who have exchanged the dream of joining the Israeli army for local activism. At the age of 16, they have joined an organization that focuses on security and preservation of synagogues and other Jewish institutions in the city.



An ultra-Orthodox couple walk past an armed guard at an Antwerp Jewish school (Photo: Reuters/Archive) (Photo: Reuters)



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There are some 20,000 Jews in Antwerp, and another 20,000 or so in Brussels, the Belgian capital. The annual report on anti-Semitism issued by the Kantor Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry placed Belgium in a less-than-illustrious fifth place on the map of anti-Semitic violence, with 19 cases documented in the past year.

“With all due respect and appreciation for the good work of the local police, we realized after the pair of terrorist attacks in the 1980s that our community needed more to protect itself,” says T., the current head of the Jewish defense organization, in a rare interview.

He is gives infrequent interviews, let alone discusses the organization, for security reasons.

T. is referring to Black July of 1980, when a teenager was killed in a grenade attack on a bus parked near a Jewish school that was taking youngsters to summer camp.

A little over a year later, in October 1981, three passers-by were killed and 106 others wounded when a car bomb exploded in front of the Portuguese synagogue in the diamond district of the city, which had a sizeable Jewish population.

Nearly four decades on, against the backdrop of the deadly 2014 terrorist attack at the Brussels Jewish Museum and the 2016 bombings at the nearby airport, as well as a sharp rise in anti-Semitism across the entire continent – it is clear that the trauma still dictates the security mood in the city.



Flowers are placed at Brussels Jewish Museum after a deadly 2014 attack (Photo: AFP)





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The attacks were the catalyst for creating an independent security organization for the Jewish community in the city. It is an umbrella organization that serves all Jews in Antwerp, from the ultra-Orthodox to the secular and everything in between. The organization provides security to 60 community facilities – 41 synagogues and 19 schools.

### 'We have to be prepared'

The organization also offers security at special Jewish events. For example, when the Conference of European Rabbis met last May in Antwerp, four Belgian police officers were present outside the Hilton Hotel in the Old City for the three-day event.

Two were on patrol around the building while the two others were stationed at the entrance to the hotel armed with machine guns.

But the sharp-eyed would have spotted a group of young Hebrew-speaking people on site to help the conference members. Only their earpieces gave any indication that they were the second circle of security at the conference. All were members of the local security network of the Antwerp Jewish community.

"Anti-Semitism exists in Europe and manifests differently each time," says T. "For now it does not directly threaten us, but we must be prepared. In Antwerp today, there is a thriving Jewish community that lives in peace with everyone, including the Muslim community, but we have learned from past experience and we are always wary."

### Combat training

T. is today considered the key man in the organization, and the liaison with the local police. For this reason, he firmly refuses to show his face in a photo. He is known in the local Jewish community, of course, but fears that people outside will discover that alongside his business, he also deals with security.

The organization, which works in conjunction with the local police, relies primarily on community volunteers who are usually (with the exception of such events as the European rabbis' conference, for example) not paid at all.



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Members of the Antwerp Jewish community walk past local police officers (Photo: AP)

The decision not to offer pay is partly ideological, but also stems from the acceptance of the fact that the community simply cannot budget for private security of all its institutions.

"Each year," says T., "we have about 35 teenagers who reach the age of 16 and want contribute. They go through weekly training for a year, in which they learn how to respond during events, undergo Krav Maga (Israeli martial arts) training, and even how to operate security cameras in synagogues and what to look for. If they're good, then at the age of 18 they join our group. After years of receiving from the community, they are giving back to it."

Although most of them have not served in the military, they pass on combat training from father to son in the community. They also get training from the local police force, with the aim of knowing how to protect not only themselves but the entire community.

### 'Lock the synagogue during prayers'

In many ways, it seems that to the young people in the community, this is the kind of decision that parallels immigration to Israel and enlisting in the IDF. Those who are unable to do so would rather contribute to guarding their own community.

Yitzhak, who has been a volunteer for four years, says: "I look at it as a contribution to the community. My father and my brother volunteered in their day and now it's my turn. No one told me to volunteer."



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He adds: "There is anti-Semitism here and there are people who don't like us, and if we can stop them from hurting us – then that is what we will do."



A kosher restaurant in Antwerp. Providing protection is seen as a service to the community (Photo: AP)

T. says the organization operates according to Rabbi Hillel's philosophy, "If I am not for myself, then who will be for me?"

"We are the outer perimeter, in particular during a difficult period of racism around the world," he says. "As an organization, we try to make everyone in the community understand that they need to guard their homes, lock the synagogue doors during prayers like you lock the house when you're home at night."

"It starts with the small children right through to the adults, because ultimately the aim is to avoid having to respond to anything, because the community functions as it should at the security level."

As reported by Ynetnews

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