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University Denounced for Showing Sign Language for 'Jewish' as a Hooked Nose



The University of Ghent in Belgium hosts a sign-language dictionary on a website that translates Flemish into Flemish sign language by video. EPA, via Shutterstock

By Milan Schreuer

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BRUSSELS — A university in Belgium has refused demands to “immediately” strip its website of Flemish sign-language videos displaying stereotypical and anti-Semitic symbols for Jews, saying it was merely hosting a dictionary of signs without adding “value





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judgment.”

Ghent University hosts the sign-language dictionary on a website that translates Flemish, the language spoken in Belgium's northern region of Flanders, into Flemish sign language by video.

According to the Flemish dictionary, there are [four ways](#) to sign the word “Jewish”: by stroking the chin; by stroking an imagined goatee; by mimicking bilateral pipe curls with the fingers; and by moving a hooked finger over the face — symbolizing a hooked nose. (A fifth video shows an exaggerated variant of the last sign.)

In a letter to the university last week, Rabbi Menachem Margolin, chairman of the European Jewish Association, urged the university to “clarify the situation” and remove the “offensive videos immediately;” after a Flemish Jewish family contacted him and expressed their “disgust” at coming across three videos when looking up words in sign language for fun.

“The first two appear to be standard sign language,” Rabbi Margolin said of the signs in the letter to the rector, Rik Van de Walle. “If the aim of this project was to embellish or add to the standard definition, it has certainly managed to so, in the most stereotypical and racist way imaginable, by focusing on side-locks and, worse still, gesticulating a hooked nose to describe a Jew.”

But the university, which has about 44,000 students and is publicly funded by the Flemish government, has declined to take any action. It said that it had discussed the complaints with the researchers who created the dictionary. But in a statement on Friday that was approved by Mr. Van de Walle, the university described the controversy as a purely “scientific issue.”





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It said that in creating the dictionary, researchers merely “register and describe the signs that are used in the Flemish sign language.” It added: “They don’t take position on these signs, and don’t cast a value judgment on them. This is what lexicographers do.”

The controversy comes amid a wider rise in anti-Semitism across Europe. And Belgium has been criticized for the persistence of blackface imagery as cultural themes and for other tactics seen as punishing religious minorities.

One of the most popular festivals for Belgian children is St. Nicholas Day, on Dec. 6, when the saint brings presents for all the good children and the bad ones are punished by his helper, a character called “Black Pete,” who wears blackface makeup.

The same tradition was followed in some parts of France and in the Netherlands, where it [has come under intense criticism](#), often being [abandoned or rethought](#). The practice has lingered in Belgium, a former colonial power in Africa.

This year, Belgium banned Muslim and Jewish ways of ritually slaughtering animals, part of a clash across Europe over the balance between animal welfare and religious freedom. Animal rights advocates and right-wing nationalists both pushed for the ban on ritual slaughter, but others said the new restrictions [amounted to bigotry under the guise of animal protection](#).

And also this year, Jews condemned a carnival in the city of Aalst, about 20 miles from Ghent, [where floats displayed gross caricatures of Orthodox Jews](#) with mice on their shoulders, sitting on bags of money.

Responding to the offensive sign language videos, Chief Rabbi





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Pinchas Goldschmidt, president of the Conference of European Rabbis, said: “We no longer live in an era where just because something was historically acceptable, it is still acceptable today.”

“With the rise of anti-Semitism and anti-Semitic stereotypes throughout Europe, as well as the specific challenges the Jewish community is facing regarding limiting religious practice in the Belgian regions of Flanders and Wallonia, racist imagery like the hooked nose only exacerbate prejudices.”

The Flemish Sign Language Center, which helped create the dictionary in 1999 and is responsible for updating its content, said in a statement that the dictionary included signs on a “descriptive” basis, based on the state of the Flemish sign language “as it is.”

“We don’t decide ourselves whether or not a sign has its place in the dictionary,” the statement said, adding that because sign languages are visual, they often refer to “certain stereotypical visual characteristics” of people.

The center said that the offensive Flemish signs were “not new,” but “originated much earlier” than 1999 and had become offensive only in recent years. Across Europe, the center noted, “Belgium” is often signed by a beer belly gesture, “China” by tugging the eyes and “Africa” by referring to skin color.

But in many dictionaries of sign languages around the world, including of American Sign Language in the United States, the sign for “Jewish” is simply a stroke under the chin.

Michael Freilich, a Jewish member of the Belgian federal Parliament for the conservative and separatist New Flemish Alliance party, said that universities should be on the forefront of





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fighting such symbols of bigotry in society, rather than excusing them.

“It’s more shocking that the university’s rector doesn’t empathize with the Jewish community and doesn’t understand the problem — that is a bigger issue than that it was published in the first place,” he said.

“Mistakes happen,” Mr. Freilich added, “but when you are shown that mistake, you would expect an apology, some movement. But when it comes to Belgium, these sensitivities are just not there.”

The controversy appears to have had some effect, however. The Flemish Sign Language Center said it would soon create a new dictionary that would attach value labels to certain signs. And by Friday, the label “negative connotation” had appeared under the videos depicting Jews using signs for pipe curls and hooked noses.

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