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Senior rabbi warns of 'existential threat' posed by anti-Semitism in Europe

Jewish future 'is at risk' as Holocaust memory fades and far-right, radical Islam rise, says Pinchas Goldschmidt as Conference of European Rabbis honors Catholic charity

By COLLEEN BARRY

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Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, chief of the Conference of European Rabbis, at a news conference in Berlin, Germany, July 12, 2012. (AP Photo/Gero Breloer, file)

MILAN, Italy (AP) — The chief rabbi of the main Orthodox rabbinical alliance in Europe says that a resurgence of anti-Semitism on the continent “poses an existential threat to the Jewish community.”

The warning by Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt was sounded as the Conference of European Rabbis awarded the Moshe Rosen Award on Thursday in Rome to the founder of the Catholic charity Sant’Egidio, Andrea Riccardi.





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Goldschmidt said the award recognizes non-Jews who promote dialogue, understanding and tolerance to ensure a Jewish future in Europe, which he said: "I believe is at risk."

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Goldschmidt told The Associated Press that the receding memory of the Holocaust, rising far-right sentiment and radical Islam are the key factors fueling the anti-Semitic climate.

An attack two weeks ago on a German synagogue was the latest violent manifestation of the trend, but also includes more subtly negative stereotypes and verbal expressions of cultural contempt.

"The last survivors and the last perpetrators are about to leave our world and the Holocaust is changing from being something that is living memory to being part of history," Goldschmidt said. "Certainly, it is also the political turmoil in Europe today, which is unsettling all the agreements and values which were agreed in 1945, after World War II."



In this October 1, 2012 file photo, founder of Catholic charity Sant'Egidio Andrea Riccardi attends the International Cooperation forum, in Milan, Italy. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno, file)





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Goldschmidt said a myriad of factors — ranging from attacks on Jews and encroachments on Jewish life like a Belgian law outlawing the kosher slaughter of animals — have made Europe less safe for Jews than 20 years ago.

During that period, the number of Jews in Europe has diminished, he said, from 2 million to 1.5 million today, largely through emigration.

Riccardi is being recognized for work by the 51-year Sant'Egidio community to construct a dialogue between lay Catholics and Jews, reaching beyond Vatican efforts to mend relations with Jews dating from the 1962 Second Vatican Council.

The Sant'Egidio community believes that preserving the memory of the Holocaust is critical to constructing a united Europe, and for the last 25 years has marched with the Jewish community on the anniversary of the October 16, 1943 deportation of Roman Jews to Nazi German death camps.

Sant'Egidio has also helped create a memorial to deported Jews at the Milan Central train station, and has participated in memorial walks in Antwerp, Belgium and Pecs, Hungary.



An illustrative photo of a man wearing a kippah. (Carsten Koall/Getty Images via JTA)





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“I think that it needs to be recognized that this is a difficult moment, because nationalism is giving rise again to a politics of hatred,” Riccardi told AP. “And the first chapter, not the only one, but the first chapter of political hatred is anti-Semitism.”

“This must make us worry, and it should wake us up.”

Riccardi said the trend can be countered by keeping alive the memory of the Nazi Holocaust that killed 6 million European Jews, creating solidarity between the Jewish and Christian communities in daily life, and investing in a common culture.

“Anti-Semitism is like a storm, at a certain point it explodes. We need to act at the first signs,” he said.

The Moshe Rosen award was named for the late chief rabbi of Romania who safeguarded his community during communism.

The first recipient two years ago was former French President Nicolas Sarkozy and last year the award went to Lithuanian novelist, Ruta Vanagaite, for her work challenging conventional thinking in a book about her country’s involvement in the Nazi killing machine that exterminated 95 percent of the Jewish population.

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