



# PERSPECTIVES

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## Extreme Anti-Semitism at Berlin Schools

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Jewish pupils at German public schools are particularly vulnerable to the country's greatly increased anti-Semitism. A number of extreme anti-Semitic incidents have been publicized in recent years, of which several of the most severe occurred in Berlin. German authorities are only slowly waking up to the problem. In many cases, the alleged perpetrators are children of Muslim immigrants – in particular in Berlin, which has the largest Muslim and Jewish communities.

In Germany, anti-Semitism has increased in recent years on social media, in the public domain, within the political system, and in society at large. While German Jews often try to avoid locations where anti-Semitism is at its worst, schoolchildren often do not have that option, and a number of extreme anti-Semitic incidents have occurred in German schools. By examining several of these recent incidents in Berlin, we can get some indication of how serious the problem has become.

In April 2017, a Jewish schoolboy was tormented by fellow pupils of Arab and Turkish descent at a public school in Berlin's Friedenau district. He became known in the media as Oscar Michalski (his first name was changed to protect his identity). Not only was he insulted at school, but an older student shot at him with a realistic-looking gun. That student also choked Oscar to the point of unconsciousness.

The school's population is about 80% Muslim, mostly of Turkish and some of Arab provenance. Friedenau is not considered to be one of the neighborhoods in which Berlin's problems caused by immigrants are particularly serious. Yet in that same neighborhood in 2012, Rabbi Daniel Alter was severely beaten on a street by four Arab-looking youngsters in the presence of his seven-year-old daughter.

The school's headmaster, who taught mathematics to the victim's class, said he was unaware of the problem. The school's administration and social worker ignored the matter even after they were informed of it by the victim's parents. The parents then moved Oscar to another school. The French-German public broadcaster Arte has since broadcast a documentary on Oscar's story.

The degree of media attention this case received was perhaps due to the fact that the victim's father, Wenzel Michalski, is head of the German Branch of Human Rights Watch. Little or no attention was paid to the fact that Oscar's British mother, Gemma, is a daughter of a member of the House of Lords, Baron Wasserman, and a granddaughter of the late Hugh Gaitskell, a leader of the British Labour Party, and his Jewish wife Baroness Gaitskell.

Another case of anti-Semitism in a Berlin school came to light in December 2017. (That month, many years too late, German politicians finally started to talk about Muslim anti-Semitism because of the public burning of a homemade Israeli flag by Muslims in the German capital.) An 18-year old Jewish high school pupil at the Ernst-Reuter-School in the Gesundbrunnen neighborhood was told by a female fellow student during a discussion on the Middle East, "Hitler was good; he murdered Jews." Other students told the Jewish pupil, "You are all child murderers" and "You should all be decapitated." From that point on, during recess each day, the boy remained indoors for his security.

In March 2018, a second-grade Jewish girl at the Paul Simmel Elementary School in Berlin's Tempelhof-Schöneberg neighborhood was mobbed because of her Jewish identity. Her father said that his daughter had been insulted and threatened with death by Muslim pupils because "she doesn't believe in Allah." German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas thereupon said, "When a child is threatened by anti-Semitism, that is shameful and intolerable."

Also in 2018, German Jewish student Liam Rückert relocated from Berlin to Israel because he had experienced rampant hatred of Jews at his Jungfernheide public school in Berlin's Spandau neighborhood. The school is known to be problematic. Sixty-two percent of its pupils come from migrant backgrounds. Rückert said he realized he had to conceal his Jewish identity when, during a discussion about the Middle East conflict, a student of Arab origin said that if there were a Jew in the class, he would kill him.

Rückert had a gay Arab friend called Hussein, and the two shared their secret identities. Once Rückert's Jewish identity became known, he was constantly insulted with words like "shit Jew" and "shit Israeli." The school refused his request to change

classes. His mother, who is of Israeli descent, said: "We received no support from the school administration."

In June 2018, it became known that at the highly reputable John F. Kennedy School in Berlin's Zehlendorf neighborhood, a Jewish student had been mobbed by pupils for several months. This school's students are primarily from German elite families and the families of foreign diplomats. One classmate blew cigarette smoke in the student's face and told him "he should think about his gassed ancestors." On other occasions, he received notes from classmates emblazoned with a swastika. A large part of the class either tolerated the mobbing or participated in it. There were also anti-Semitic incidents at the school aimed at a female Jewish student. The school's administration said they hadn't realized the problems for several months, but took action as soon as they became known. At the beginning of the new school year, the administration plans to introduce a special program on discrimination.

Franziska Giffey, the German minister for family affairs, senior citizens, women, and youth, said, "Many schools do not want to report anti-Semitism, radicalization and racism and public hate, because they are afraid of stigmatization." Last summer the federal government decided to send 170 anti-bullying experts to selected schools that have problems.

Giffey's assessment is backed by Frankfurt sociologist Julia Bernstein, whose groundbreaking study on anti-Semitism in German schools from the perspective of the victims was published in December 2018. Based on 227 interviews, Bernstein concluded that teachers often fail to recognize the anti-Semitic nature of the increasingly common swear word "Jew," and school managements deny anti-Semitism for fear of harming their schools' reputations. In Bernstein's view, the frequent use of Hitler salutes, swastikas, and "Holocaust jokes" testifies to the rapid removal of taboos and lowering of inhibitions.

Vladislava Zdesenko, one of nine Jewish Berlin lawyers who have teamed up to help victims of anti-Semitic bullying and their families, says the current situation cannot be allowed to continue. Jewish victims end up changing schools while their assailants stay put and go unpunished. She also notes that "the cases that come to public awareness are just the tip of the iceberg."

The German authorities are slowly waking up to the problem and are beginning to address it. Berlin created an online information portal for teachers to help them thematize anti-Semitism, and starting in school year 2019, educational institutions in Berlin will be required to report cases of anti-Semitism to the police or the school authorities.

Last summer, the federal government decided to send 170 anti-bullying experts to selected schools that have problems. The government recognizes that in many cases, the alleged perpetrators are children of Muslim immigrants – particularly in Berlin, which has the largest Muslim and Jewish communities.

Despite recent laudable efforts to combat the problem, it will take a long time before most German schools deal effectively with anti-Semitic and racist incidents and educate pupils against discrimination. If incidents continue to occur, the perpetrators should be severely punished. All such incidents should be reported to the authorities and school administrations, and those that do not comply should be reprimanded or replaced.

*This is an edited version of an [article](#) that appeared in *Algemeiner* on January 2, 2019.*

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