



BATISSEUSES DE PAIX COMPRISES JEWISH, MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN WOMEN

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The women are members of the Bâtisseuses de Paix, or the Peace Builders, an organisation that comprises Jewish, Muslim, Christian and 'even agnostic' women, working to improve relations between the Jewish and Muslim communities in France amidst a growing number of anti-Semitic incidents.

They meet once a month at this bakery, Les Jardins de la Mediterranee, located in a shopping centre flanked by beige and grey housing blocks. There they concoct pastries from Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Israel and other countries, in an activity that brings together individuals who might normally not meet, or even speak to one another.

'I love this rapprochement of people,' says Julie Sultan, a Tunisian-born Jew who has lived in France 53 years. 'No white, black, brown or any colour. Just a meeting of hearts. We are all sisters, and to tell the truth, I feel closer to Arab women than to French women.'

Ouafa Kabsi, a Tunisian Muslim, says that for her, being a member of the group is a way to 'open up' and to change preconceptions. 'We're all human beings, we're all the same,' she says.

Formed in 2002 by French Jewish journalist Annie-Paule Derczansky in response to acts of anti-Semitism in the suburbs around Paris, the Bâtisseuses say they have a core membership of some 60 women and see a further 300 to 400 each year at their various activities.

'Women are the backbone of Mediterranean families and the builders of the future,' says Derczansky. 'What we do is an example to children that happy co-existence is possible because we've seen many friendships develop between Muslim and Jewish women.'

These sentiments contrast with the rise in ethnic tensions in France, home to the largest Jewish and Muslim populations in Western Europe (numbered at around 600,000 and five million respectively). Indeed, several high-profile cases involving both communities have hit the courts over the past month, leading to much discussion and soul-searching.

In the most disturbing case, a Frenchman of African origin, Youssouf Fofana, is on trial for the 2006 murder of a Jewish young man, Ilan Halimi. Also accused are 26 alleged accomplices of Fofana, including women and teenagers.

Halimi was kidnapped in January 2006, held for ransom, and tortured for three weeks in a cellar in the Paris suburb Bagneux before he was left handcuffed to a tree near a railway station. When police found him, he was in a state of shock, his body covered with burns and cuts. He died on way to hospital. Prosecutors say the perpetrators targeted Jews for ransom money.

The Bâtisseuses de Paix are now planning meetings to 'allow people to comprehend what in the education of young people could have led them to commit such a crime,' says Derczansky, who also acts as president of the group. 'We don't want to explain or to excuse, but to try to understand.'

Along with the bakery workshops, the group organises dinner meetings where diplomats, psychoanalysts and other experts are invited to give speeches. The Bâtisseuses also work with schoolchildren, taking them alternately to the Institut du Monde Arabe (Arab World Institute) and to the Musee d'art et d'histoire de Judaïsme (Judaism Art and History Museum), both in Paris. 'The idea is to show how much Jews and Muslims have in common,' says Derczansky. Her hope is that if religious harmony can be fostered at a young age, there might be fewer cases of ethnic violence.

But the group has its work cut out for it in other ways. Although members make it a point to avoid discussing the political situation in the Middle East, events there can reignite simmering hatred.

During the Israeli military campaign against Hamas in January of this year, some synagogues were attacked, and Jewish students were abused on the streets.

The Bâtisseuses suspended all meetings because 'everybody was feeling too much pain,' says Derczansky. She proposed a talking session, 'like in psychoanalysis', but no one responded.

'Nobody got back to me,' she recalls wryly. 'But the important thing is that no one withdrew from the group.'

The organisation is now busy with another of its projects: trying to get the Grande Mosquée of Paris to erect a plaque showing that Jewish adults and children were sheltered there during World War II before they made their escape to other countries.

The group has launched an appeal to President Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria (under whose authority the mosque falls) to open the historical archives on the role of the mosque during the German occupation of France.

'This would send such a strong symbolic message if people knew that Muslims were working to save Jewish people during World War II, while the French government was in collaboration with the Nazis,' Derczansky says.