Young Swedish Muslim joins fight against anti-Semitism

by Lauren Markoe in the September 28, 2016 issue

Siavosh Derakhti, 25, a Swedish Muslim honored in Europe and the United States for his campaign to counter anti-Semitism, explains his motivation by invoking David.

David, Derakhti has told audiences on four continents, was one of his best friends when he was a child. Other children always bullied David, and Derakhti wanted to know why. David said he was hated for being Jewish. After that, David had a Muslim ally, someone who literally fought by his side.

Derakhti is devoted to addressing the plight of the Jews in Sweden and Europe, where anti-Semitism has risen to levels so alarming that Jews talk of leaving for safer lives in Israel or the United States.

“I’m Muslim, I’m proud of it, but I’m also proud to be cousins with the Jewish population,” Derakhti said.

At age 19, he founded Young Muslims Against Anti-Semitism, now known as Young People Against Anti-Semitism and Xenophobia, and he takes his message into schools and businesses.

Derakhti said that anti-Jewish hatred he witnessed as a child in his home city of Malmö has only spread and intensified. His friend David supports Derakhti’s work but is afraid to join him in presentations at Malmö schools.

“Today it’s even worse to be a Jew in Europe,” Derakhti said.

Derakhti was named one of *Forbes* magazine’s “30 under 30” list of influential young people this year. In 2013 Sweden presented him with its Raoul Wallenberg Award, named for the Swedish diplomat who saved thousands of Jews during the Holocaust.

Willy Silberstein, head of the Swedish Committee Against Antisemitism, calls Derakhti “a one-man show.” Many of Sweden’s approximately 20,000 Jews and others have tried to draw attention to the rise of anti-Semitism in Sweden and elsewhere in Europe in recent years—including incidents of verbal harassment, physical abuse, and hate-motivated murders. But Silberstein said he can point to no

other non-Jew in Sweden who has taken defense of Jewish people as his calling.

“I wish there were more people like him,” Silberstein said. “But there is a lot of pressure against him.”

Criticism and threats come from many quarters. Some in Muslim immigrant communities have called Derakhti a traitor and told him he should fear for his life. Some ultra right-wing Swedes nurse prejudice rooted in historic European anti-Semitism. And on the left, many are staunchly anti-Israel and extend their disdain to Swedish Jews. Some Swedes say the liberals among them have failed to denounce anti-Semitism among the country’s Muslim minority for fear of appearing Islamophobic.

Derakhti’s image helps him convince more young people to confront bigotry, Silberstein said. He is a hip dresser, accessorized with earbuds, an earring, and tattoos—including a prominent one in Arabic. He talks in a cool way in both English and Swedish.

“I’m pretty used to speaking in public,” Silberstein said. “But when I went into a school with Siavosh, when I spoke they hardly listened. When he got up and spoke, that’s when they really started listening.”

Derakhti has taken busloads of Swedish teenagers to Auschwitz and other concentration camps nearly 20 times. He has also taken groups to Srebrenica, the site of the worst massacre in Europe since the Holocaust, where Bosnian Serbs in 1995 slaughtered more than 8,000 Muslim men and boys during the Bosnian War.

Derakhti’s parents were persecuted in their native Iran as members of the Azerbaijani minority. They moved to Sweden, where Derakhti was born. His father took him to Bergen-Belsen when he was 13 and Auschwitz when he was 15, to show him where hatred can lead.

“My father told me that if you’re in a minority, you always have to stand up for a friend,” Derakhti said.

Growing up in Malmö, a city with a reputation for intolerance in a country known for just the opposite, Derakhti saw its tiny Jewish minority—including its Chabad rabbi—attacked by members of the city’s much larger Muslim community. Many Malmö Jews fear wearing a yarmulke or other symbol of Judaism. In the capital,

Stockholm, Jews feel safer but still wonder about their future in Sweden, particularly when Israel is at war.

“The statistics for hate crime go up dramatically every time there is a problem in the Middle East,” Silberstein said. “There is a fear among some Jewish Swedes, the fear to show that they are Jewish. . . . I always wear my Star of David. But the day I cannot do that I won’t stay in Sweden.”

Petra Kahn Nord, secretary general of the Jewish Union of Sweden, said it was the fatal attack on a Copenhagen synagogue in neighboring Denmark in 2014 that got her Jewish friends talking about where they might go should it seem similarly unsafe to practice Judaism in Sweden.

“The risk for the future is that the people who care most, the people who give most to the community, they will say, ‘OK it’s not safe here, we’ll go,’” she said. “The rest of the Jews will blend into society.”

Nord sits with Derakhti on the board of Seeds of Peace, a nonprofit that brings together young people from opposite sides of conflicts dividing their societies. Nord said he has made her a better advocate for her own people.

“He’s a young Muslim guy, and he stands up for us; it made me feel like I can do it as well,” said Nord. “And because

I do it, maybe someone else will do it.” —Religion News Service

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