

Peter Zoehrer
September 13, 2026

Antisemitism as the Universal Scapegoat

The community a society finds convenient to blame

PETER ZOEHRER

SEP 14





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Hall of Names at Yad Vashem, Jerusalem. A circular memorial lined with Pages of Testimony and photographs of Holocaust victims, gathered so that as many of the murdered as possible can be remembered by name and face. The empty white circle at the center stands for those who remain unknown. Yad Vashem continues to collect testimonies to fill the gaps.

A personal note on antisemitism, memory, and the work of religious freedom

By Peter Zoehrer

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There are rights one can recite from a treaty, and rights one has watched fail at a neighbour’s door. Freedom of religion or belief belongs to the second kind. It is tested not on the community a society finds admirable, but on the one it finds convenient to blame.

For two thousand years in Europe, that convenience has had a single, recurring name. That is not a claim that Jewish pain outranks every other pain on earth. It is a reminder I keep giving myself: a FoRB advocate who has not learned this history is not yet ready to speak for anyone else.

Walk through a European city on a Friday evening and notice which doorway still requires a police van at the kerb.

The men going in are late; they are carrying children; they want to pray and go home. The van is there because a very old story is still believed by enough people to make a threshold dangerous. That is not a metaphor. It is the ordinary wish to be unremarkable, denied.

In 2005 I walked Yad Vashem on the Mount of Remembrance in Jerusalem. I have never quite walked back out. The **Hall of Names** is not a museum of moods. It is a cone of faces and **Pages of Testimony** rising around a blank white circle — an archive, and an admission that many names are still missing. The **Children's Memorial** does something harder still: one candle, five mirrors, a million and a half extinguished lives turning in the dark.

Built more than they were allowed to keep

Jews are about two in every thousand living human beings. They have received more than a **fifth of all individual Nobel Prizes since 1901**, and a still higher share in **physics, medicine, chemistry, and economics.**

That is not racial charm. It is what literacy, debate, and stubborn study yield when they are not being hunted.

Vienna knows this. For a few luminous decades it was a Jewish city of the mind — whether it admitted it or not. Freud, Wittgenstein, Popper, Mahler, Schnitzler, Zweig, Schoenberg: not guests, but architects of German-speaking modernity.

Then the city that sat in their concert halls learned how to look away.



Wiener Musikverein (Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde), Vienna — the concert hall that became a temple of German-speaking musical modernity. Mahler conducted here; the city's Jewish musicians helped fill these rooms. Then Vienna learned how to look away.

A FoRB organisation that speaks of Jews only as victims has already surrendered to the antisemite's framing. The record is also a gift: law, medicine, music, rigorous doubt, and the habit of arguing with God.

How a people became a plot

In the Hellenistic and Roman worlds, Jewish refusal of the civic cult was misread as hatred of mankind. When Christianity became the religion of empire, a sermon hardened into law: the Jews, collectively, had killed God. From that sentence came badges, forced baptisms, expulsions, and the blood libel.

The Enlightenment retied the knot. A republic could proclaim the rights of man and still send Dreyfus to Devil's Island. The charge turned biological; Wilhelm Marr named it. ***The Protocols of the Elders of Zion***, a police forgery, travelled as minutes of a world conspiracy.

Then a night Europe still prefers to treat as a passing riot. **On 9–10 November 1938 — Kristallnacht —** the SA, Party formations, and ordinary crowds burned synagogues, smashed shops, and dragged families into the street. Some 1,400 synagogues and prayer rooms were attacked; around 30,000 Jewish men were taken to **Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen**. At least ninety people were murdered in those hours. The glass was not the point. The point was permission: the state would no longer protect Jewish life, and the public was invited to help.

Between that night and the sealed trains there was no mysterious leap.

Shoah, Mauthausen, the roads

On the eve of the war, roughly 9.5 million Jews lived in Europe. Nazi Germany and its collaborators murdered around six million. About 1.1 million of the dead were children. Poland's community fell from some 3.4 million to a remnant.

From Vienna the proper name is close. **Mauthausen**, above Linz, was the granite quarry of the Ostmark: the Stairs of Death. In the last winter of the war it became a terminus. **From January 1945 some 25,000 prisoners arrived from emptying camps. April 1945 alone recorded more than 11,000 deaths in its system.** Then the roads filled. Of some three-quarters of a million people driven on the death marches, about a quarter of a million died along the way. Columns left Mauthausen toward Gunskirchen. Lanes that now carry weekend cyclists once held those columns.



Prisoners in striped concentration camp uniforms being marched under armed guard along a road through woods, likely during a late-war evacuation or death march (c. 1944–1945).

There is a photograph I cannot file away: men in striped uniforms on a wooded road, a guard with a rifle. And there is the Hall of Names. One image is a column without names. The other is the refusal to leave them unnamed.

Along the **Avenue of the Righteous** stand non-Jews who hid a neighbour or opened a door. Moral agency was never impossible — only terrifyingly rare. Memory that stays only in Jerusalem is memory we have outsourced. Every country that claims the European Convention should keep a small Yad Vashem of its own: a room of names, a room of bystanders, a room for those who hid a child.

Why 7 October made the hatred worse

A decent intuition says a massacre of Jews should shame antisemitism into silence. On 7 October 2023 Hamas murdered some 1,200 people in Israel and took more than 250 hostages. The intuition failed. Incidents against Jews outside Israel leapt.

Hatred is not a moral accountant. It is an opportunist. When Jews suffer visibly, a part of the world sees confirmation rather than victims. **Then inversion: a crime against Jews is recoded as a crime by Jews.** War supplies a modern vocabulary — “colonial,” “global” — into which older slanders fit without anyone saying the word Jew. The diaspora is billed for a government it does not elect.

Here the horseshoe closes. The extreme right arrives with race, soil, the “**globalist**” banker, the replacement tale. Parts of the radical left arrive with newer packaging: settler, colonial, “**Zionist**” used as a solvent that washes a student, a kosher shop, or a synagogue into the same category as a cabinet in Jerusalem.

They do not share an economic programme. They share an explanatory convenience. Both need a people who are at once too powerful and too foreign.

Both found 7 October usable — the right as proof of a tribal war, the left as proof that the murdered had it coming.

This is not an indictment of social democracy or conservatism. It is a warning about the edges, and about the centre that falls silent when those edges rhyme. An advocate who denounces a brownshirt but excuses a campus chant — or the reverse — has chosen a tribe, not a principle. Article 9 does not change polarity with a party card.

The numbers followed. The ADL’s 2025 audit found 6,274 incidents in the United States — the third-highest total since 1979. Three people were murdered in antisemitic attacks on American soil that year.

FBI figures put anti-Jewish incidents at about 63 percent of religion-based hate crimes, from two percent of the population. Tel Aviv University called 2025 the deadliest year for such attacks worldwide in more than three decades.

A refusal to auction the dead

Open Doors’ 2026 World Watch List estimates that more than 388 million Christians live under high persecution — one in seven. Researchers counted 4,849 Christians killed for their faith in the latest

year, most of them in sub-Saharan Africa. Those numbers dwarf present tallies of attacks on Jews. Demography is not indifference.

A decent advocate will not use one community’s dead to hush another’s living. By headcount, Christians are now the most persecuted religious community on earth. Yet Jews remain the community against which Europe built its most complete ideology of collective guilt — and the only one a modern European state set out to annihilate as such. Both sentences belong in the same paragraph.

The job

See the person first. Allow no security exception that empties Article 9, and no FoRB exception that ignores murder. A visit to Yad Vashem that never connects to a living Jew beaten on a European pavement is a finished ticket. Advocacy that treats antisemitism as a problem only when it comes from the political opponent is a caucus.

Europe did not trip into Kristallnacht or Mauthausen. It walked there — on sermons, forgeries, and the small permissions of tired officials. That road remains open.

The men at the Friday doorway are still late. The child is still heavy. The names on the Mount of Remembrance are still incomplete. The right we work for is the right that they — and a parish in Nigeria, and a prisoner in a labour camp — might come and go without a van at the kerb.

That is the whole job.

Institutional version: *Antisemitism as the Universal Scapegoat*, FOREF Europe, 13 September 2026.

Facts first. Jurisdiction second. Slogans never.

Related Links

- [Hall of Names, Yad Vashem — the archive of faces](#)
- [The death marches, 1945](#)
- [Mauthausen and the Stairs of Death](#)
- [Kristallnacht, 9–10 November 1938](#)

Related reading

- FOREF Europe, *Antisemitism as the Universal Scapegoat* (13 September 2026)
- Yad Vashem, *The Hall of Names and Pages of Testimony* (yadvashem.org)
- USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia, *Death Marches* and *Kristallnacht*
- Ernő Lazarovits, *Mein Weg durch die Hölle* (2009) / *Vándorlás a pokolba* (2007); English typescript: *Wanderer in Hell*, USHMM.
- Deborah Lipstadt, *Antisemitism: Here and Now*
- Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*
- Open Doors, *World Watch List 2026*
- ADL Audit of Antisemitic Incidents (2025)

- European Convention on Human Rights, Article 9

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