


Yellow protest badges over Jewish school buses spark outrage in Outremont

Similarity to the stars Jews were forced to wear under the Nazi occupation triggers strong emotions in the community.

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Ginette Chartre speaks while wearing a yellow badge during Outremont's borough council meeting Monday night to protest the use of school buses by the community's Hasidic Jews. HANDOUT / THE CANADIAN PRESS

An Outremont woman who sparked outrage after she and other citizens wore yellow badges on their clothing at a borough council meeting to protest the Jewish community's use of school buses in her neighbourhood says she's the real victim.

Despite being told by residents the yellow square on her shirt evoked the

Holocaust — when European Jews were forced to wear yellow stars under the Nazi regime — Ginette Chartre said in an interview Tuesday she wouldn't stop wearing it.

"(The Jews) always bring up their painful past," she said. "They do it to muzzle us. We're wearing the yellow square because the school buses are yellow.

"We'll march down the street wearing them, banging pots and pans if we have to," Chartre said about the most recent flare-up between some residents of Outremont and its burgeoning Hasidic community.

"We are living an injustice. We are being persecuted by them."

Outremont's Hasidic Jews use school buses to transport their children and members of the community to school and around the neighbourhood.

Chartre and a handful of other residents have been complaining for years the vehicles block the streets and are a nuisance because they run in the summer and during what she says are odd hours during the day and evening.

"On just one residential, one-way street, there are 14 buses in one hour!" she said. "That's not reasonable."

On Monday night, Chartre and about eight other people attended the Outremont council meeting wearing the yellow badges and tried to distribute them in order to get other people to don them, too.

The incident at the meeting was the most recent in a long-simmering dispute between the borough's ultra-Orthodox Jews and Chartre, as well as a handful of other citizens.

Last November, citizens voted against allowing Hasidic Jews to open more synagogues on Bernard Ave. in Outremont, sparking accusations of anti-Semitism.

"Should we just go away? Just vanish?" Alex Werzberger, a member of Outremont's Hasidic community, said in an interview Tuesday.

He wasn't at the council meeting, but said he was told about what happened.

"The Jewish people for millennia have been exposed to this stuff, some worse, some better, and it's almost part of our existence, part of our being," he said.

Montreal Mayor Valérie Plante weighed in on the matter, saying "living together as a community is sometimes challenging."

"However, I find it unacceptable to launch a political action against children," she said in a statement. "They should never be a target."

Outremont councillor Fanny Magini said she and her colleagues were shocked when a handful of people walked into the room wearing the badges.

"It's a campaign that targets children — particularly Jewish children," she said. "It's totally unacceptable. We think it's a symbol that was very poorly chosen."

Jennifer Dorner, an Outremont resident, asked those in attendance to remove the badges because of their symbolism.

"The buses are not a nuisance," she said in an interview Tuesday. "I have a

Hasidic friend and when she saw (the yellow rectangles) it triggered an intense wave of emotion for her and she cried.

"I don't think they realize the impact they are having on the community."

Magini said that although it seemed as though some people heard Dorner's comments and began reflecting on their decision to wear the yellow badge, "others just rolled their eyes and sighed."

She said she didn't see anyone take them off.

Reuben Poupko, rabbi of an Orthodox congregation in Montreal, said if people are truly concerned about solving municipal issues they should "embrace tactics that engender communication and dialogue.

"And certainly, some of the tactics employed (Monday night) were not designed to enhance the possibility of resolution but were designed to be provocative," he said.

Chartre maintains her yellow badge is about school buses and not about the Holocaust.

"Should we change the colour of school buses now because it reminds (Jews) of their past?" she said. "What about the yellow street markers on the roads? If we wore a yellow hat, would that be better?"

"We are exasperated and we don't know what to do anymore."

Werzberger said most people in Outremont have no problem with the Hasidic community.

"This is a cadre of 100 or 200 people," he said. "I've been here since 1950, there is no real problem. We are a very peaceful community. What is the murder rate or the drunk rate in the Hasidic community? We are quiet, nice people."