CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

DEALING WITH THE SHOAH IN SCHOOLS

If schools do not talk about anti-Semitism it is not necessarily, or uniquely, due to indifference or the easy conscience of the teachers but primarily because the school does not know how to deal with it, how to confront it or to guard against it. When the issue crops up spontaneously or, rather, when it is introduced, there are outcries and outbursts questioning the responsibility of schools.

Talking about Anti-Semitism

In the course of our research, it was always the researchers who introduced the issue of anti-Semitism. Generally speaking, interest in the subject is generated from without, or else from above. The principal of a school in Argenteuil who took part in our sociological intervention explained how he had come to turn his attention to the question:

Since I came here, it’s true that I have discovered things, in particular about racism towards Jews which did not seem that important to me. I was with Luc Ferry (the Minister for Education) last week. He was holding talks with heads of establishments about the law on secularism. By way of introduction, he gave some figures. He gave the figures for acts listed as racist between 1990 and 2000. There were ten per year. But what threw me into a panic and you could have heard a pin drop at the time—there were about 30 people present in the room—was that the figure which he had given in 2003 had been multiplied by 150 or 160 with what he described as anti-Semitic racist acts. And he said, “90% of the culprits are North Africans”. He said it officially, and that we could confirm the figures. I came back to the school and we (the heads of establishment) have a data base called SIGNA that we have to fill in every month recording acts, or incidents. Now, and this is new, we are asked to list racist and, in particular, anti-Semitic acts of violence in SIGNA. I’m telling you what I heard. That means that racist acts doubtless target Jews more than others.

In some cases it is the intervention of the victim, or their families, which forces the institution, which would otherwise be reticent, to take
up the issue of anti-Semitism. B., a librarian in a school in Sarcelles, gave us an example:

One and a half months ago we had a Board of Governors’ meeting. There was a Jewish mother, who is a representative, who vented her anger because her kid was being subjected to anti-Semitic insults. This created an incredible malaise. I would like to be as non-violent as possible. I don’t want to call people anti-Semitic or cowards. But all the same, there was a general reaction of embarrassment which tended towards: “Stop talking about that. We’re not going to discuss that now. We’ll talk about it later, in private”. Now if they talk about it in private, I won’t know anything about it. I asked this parent to go on, saying that I was very happy she had raised the issue because if she had spoken about it in private I would not have known about it. And that is what is so dreadful. It must not be hidden any longer. We have to stop concealing it, and fooling ourselves, thinking that will protect us.

B. is part of the infinitely small minority who would like to open up the files and see the issues dealt with. He comes up against a climate dominated by the refusal to act. In this climate, indifference can be combined with misunderstanding and an inability to perceive the gravity of the facts. A teacher of French in Stains recounted:

I was walking down a corridor when I happened to hear one pupil say to another: “Filthy Feuj” (Jew). I stopped […] The teachers who were there said, “Don’t bother”. Apparently I was the only person to think there was a problem.

The fact remains that even within schools there are some individuals, possibly somewhat isolated, who do break with the law of indifference and put an end to the dumb reticence about dealing with the question.

The very reality of anti-Semitism in schools, when it is not absent—or denied—is constantly interpreted. Four heads of establishments who had reported incidents of anti-Semitism by means of the SIGNA data file kindly agreed to meet us. The principal of a school in

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1 Since January 2004, the SIGNA data file which compiles a register of violent incidents in schools has been refined to include more categories. Before this date, the data file only offered the category ‘insults of a racist nature’. Nowadays, heads of establishments who report an incident must systematically specify whether it is an act of ‘racism’, or of ‘anti-Semitism’, by a culprit who is ‘unknown’, or ‘other’. The files included data about the victim, the perpetrator and the place, but, on the other hand, say nothing about the importance of the facts. Specific details of a possible punishment were optional. In six months, a total of 36 anti-Semitic incidents were listed by these