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Outremont a symptom of the new age of ignorance

The refusal to apologize for the insult of the yellow badges speaks volumes about an ignorance that is as wilful as it is dangerous.



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Ginette Chartre, wearing a yellow badge, addresses an Outremont borough council meeting on Monday, March 5, 2018. SCREEN GRAB / THE CANADIAN PRESS

To understand the horrible significance of clothing emblazoned with yellow badges, one doesn't have to travel far from the leafy borough of Outremont.

A short distance down Côte-Ste-Catherine Rd., just beyond the borders of the tony Montreal enclave, is the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre. This museum and cultural centre documents the atrocities the Nazis perpetrated against Europe's Jews before and during the Second World War. Among the more chilling exhibits are the personal artifacts donated by local survivors of this not-so-distant genocide, many of whom immigrated to Montreal afterward.

There is a starkly striped "uniform" worn by a prisoner who defied death at



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Auschwitz. There is a blanket, still bearing traces of blood, which probably meant the difference between life and death during a forced march.

And there is a yellow star.

The six-point symbol with the German word for “Jew” scrawled in its centre was the crude identification sign the Nazis forced the Jewish population to wear to deny them their rights, single them out for discrimination and, perhaps most crucially, dehumanize them as the “other.” The [yellow star in the Holocaust centre’s collection](#) was once worn by George Ehrman who, after living through the hell of multiple concentration and labour camps, started a new life in Montreal.

To behold this yellow patch is to glimpse one of history’s darkest chapters and take stock of the tragic lessons we ought never to forget.

But in Outremont — home to a deeply rooted and growing Hasidic Jewish community living cheek by jowl with members of Montreal’s francophone political and intellectual elite — wearing a yellow badge recently took on new meaning.

A group of residents showed up at a borough council meeting last week with [yellow rectangles pinned on their chests](#). It was meant to signify their irritation with the school buses that make frequent stops to pick up or drop off the neighbourhood’s many Hasidic children.

If attaching such a potent and hurtful symbol to such a petty cause wasn’t appalling enough, it’s how the disgruntled citizens acted once their insensitivity was called out that is most telling.

Ginette Chartre, who spoke for the protesters at the meeting, at first said she didn’t understand the significance of the yellow badges. The residents chose yellow, she explained, because, well, the school buses are yellow. This level of ignorance is sadly believable in a province where the mass murder of 6 million Jews gets only passing mention in the [high school history curriculum](#).

But once informed of the meaning, Chartre and her ilk refused to remove the insignia. In fact, she vowed to “march down the street wearing them banging pots and pans, if we have to.”

She added: “(The Jews) always bring up their painful past … They do it to muzzle us. We’re wearing the yellow square because the school buses are yellow.

“We are living an injustice. We are being persecuted by them.”

It takes an awful lot of privilege, entitlement and gall to compare the inconvenience of getting stuck behind a school bus to extermination in the gas chambers. If the badge-wearing Outremont residents had any legitimate complaint, they undermined their case with their disrespect and recalcitrance.

Outremont has long been a flashpoint in Quebec’s infernal accommodation debate that pits radical secularism against minority religious rights. Whether it’s school buses on weekends or traffic during the Jewish festival of Purim or bylaws preventing new synagogues or repeated [bans on eruvs](#) or requests to frost the windows of a gym for the sake of modesty, there is always some neighbourhood annoyance that ends up serving as a proxy for the larger

culture wars.

In recent years, some open-minded community residents have sought to build bridges and promote dialogue. And the new Projet Montréal-dominated borough council is committed to easing tensions and changing the tone of local debates. But there seems to be at least a small group determined to exacerbate tensions.

The refusal to apologize for the insult of the yellow badges speaks volumes about an ignorance that is as wilful as it is dangerous. To equate the Holocaust with a mundane problem is to minimize it. To minimize it is to deny its gravity. To deny its gravity is to fail to understand the consequences of anti-Semitism and other forms of xenophobia, intolerance and hatred, which are on the rise.

The yellow rectangle can perhaps be seen as a symbol of the new age of ignorance, or at least a symptom of it. The post-truth, fake news, alternative-fact era we now find ourselves in is a global phenomenon — and a virulent one — that disdains science, muddies truth and fuels conspiracies.

If there is an antidote to all this lunacy, it is the wisdom of the next generation, who are seeking to set their elders straight.

Inspired by the brave example of the teenage survivors of the Parkland, Fla., high school massacre, who have emerged as an eloquent voice demanding gun control in the U.S., [Grade 6 students at JPPS Elementary](#) in Côte-St-Luc expressed their outrage over the use of the yellow badges and the refusal to drop them.

The words of these students display a common sense, confidence and sophistication beyond their years. Their sage views offer optimism for a future where the important lessons of the past don't fall on deaf ears. It's a small sign that we still have hope, as long as having to counter the deliberate ignorance of adults doesn't crush the courageous innocence of youth.

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