

French Jewish activists determined to help brethren

80 French social workers here to learn aspects of community building

By RUTH EGLASH

Despite growing anti-Semitism, French Jewish community organizations must stay focused on strengthening cultural, educational and social welfare programs for those who continue to live there, according to Michel Elbaz, director of the Leon Ashkenazi Institute, which works with Jewish welfare and cultural groups in France. Elbaz is in Jerusalem this week at the World Council of Jewish Communal Service's (WCJCS) Quadrennial Conference.

Elbaz arranged for more than 80 social welfare, medical and educational professionals from

French Jewish communal organizations to participate in the conference and led a pre-conference seminar last week specifically addressing the needs of the Jewish community in France. He told *The Jerusalem Post* that out of the 600,000-strong Jewish population, only about 2,000 each year make the move to Israel.

"We have to keep working here with those people who have chosen to stay," he said, adding that anti-Semitism did not impinge on Jewish welfare efforts. "We have to deal with their emotional, cultural and educational needs."

Elbaz also said that Jewish non-government organizations

in France had much to learn from US and Israeli community organizations and their leaders, many of whom are speakers at the WCJCS conference, which ends Tuesday.

"[The Jewish NGO sector in France] is not as developed as it is in the US and Israel," said Elbaz, highlighting that French universities did not run courses in communal leadership.

"The French Jewish community is fairly new compared to other countries, with more than half a million of the Jews arriving from Morocco and Algeria following World War II," he continued. "Our goal here is to explore the subject of community management and

learn from what is being done elsewhere."

Pierre Kletz, director of the graduates unit at the Mandel Leadership Institute in Jerusalem, which coordinated last week's seminar, told the *Post* that welfare problems facing the Jewish community in France were similar to elsewhere and included providing care for the growing number of elderly citizens and assistance for those living in poverty.

"There is an image that Jews outside of Israel are comfortable financially," commented Kletz, who made aliya six months ago and previously held a variety of academic positions in France. "But like any-

where else, the middle class is shrinking and the gap between rich and poor is growing."

Kletz said that problems specific to French Jewry included many elderly and lower income families living in run-down immigrant dominated neighborhoods, such as in the northern suburbs of Paris.

"Many of these people really suffer when all those around them are watching Al-Jazeera and tempers rise," he said, referring to France's large Muslim population that has been at the center of race attacks against French Jews.

Even with xenophobia towards the Jewish community in France, Kletz said welfare

organizations still had an obligation to provide services to those outside the Jewish community. He highlighted that many of the French delegates here for this week's conference, which also includes professionals from thousands of Jewish communal service organizations worldwide, were involved in Jewish organizations that also assisted greater French society - with a handful of attendees themselves not being Jewish.

"It is our duty as Jews to help people even if they are not Jewish," he concluded.

The WCJCS is a non-political, non-governmental organization of Jewish communal



MICHEL ELBAZ (Courtesy)

workers who are engaged in a variety of communal, educational and social services devoted to strengthening Jewish life and community both in Israel and the Diaspora.