Opinion: Hope triumphs over hate in Halle
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Just two days after last week’s Yom Kippur attack on their synagogue, I visited the Jews of Halle to spend the Sabbath with the community. My visit was rooted in the understanding that an attack on one synagogue is an attack on all of our synagogues, and — as this particular terrorist clearly demonstrated — what begins as an attack on the Jews inevitably moves on to attack other communities, as well.

Halle’s synagogue building sits adjacent to the old Jewish cemetery. Actually, the building was originally the Jewish funeral chapel, but was repurposed as a synagogue after the war. The previous synagogue, a majestic edifice of five towers and onion domes, was burned on Kristallnacht in 1938, and only the original arched entrance of that building remains as a memorial — albeit moved 100 metres from its original location, to make room for apartment buildings. There is a plaque on the sanctuary wall of Halle’s synagogue that recalls the Jewish community members who died in the First World War. Their first names indicate their sense of national belonging: Ernst, Heinz, Friedrich and Adolph. Two decades after their deaths while fighting for the Fatherland, their surviving family members had their businesses boycotted and their citizenships revoked, end either fled to other countries or were murdered.

The names of today’s community members are different than the ones who fell in battle more than a century ago. Now, the Halle Jewish community is composed of Leonids, Mashas, Alexeis and Tatianas — immigrants to Germany from the former Soviet Union who were settled through government welfare programs to small towns like Halle. They live with a vulnerability associated with their status as a double minority: immigrants and Jews. Their rabbi, Elishe Mendel Portnoy, moved to Germany from Nikolaev,
Ukraine, when he was 20 years old. I first met him when I worked as a teacher in Berlin some 20 years ago. Elishe Mendel (in those days, Oleg) was a student in our fledgling Jewish Studies program. He now serves as a rabbi for a few small communities in the Saxony-Anhalt region, including Halle.

The community members told me that the terrorist rang the bell for entry. He was standing outside the exterior wall that surrounds both the synagogue and the adjacent cemetery; the synagogue building is separated by a small courtyard from this wall. The security guard was sitting in front of his monitor in the synagogue’s vestibule and saw the man on the surveillance camera. He noticed the large gun, but thought that, maybe, this was a police officer they had requested from the city for protection on their holiest — and best attended — of days. But the guard hesitated to open the door because he didn’t see the familiar “Polizei” uniform, and that moment of delay meant that, instead of entering the building, the shooter lost patience and began shooting at the door from the outside.

When the congregation heard the gunshots, the cantor urged the 50 or 60 people to run to the upstairs apartment and lie down on the floor until the threat passed.

Outside the synagogue, the terrorist shot and killed Jana Lange, and then drove two blocks down Schillerstrasse to the Kiez Döner Bistro and killed a 20-year-old named Kevin.

In the minutes after the shooting, the police informed the community that they would have to stay put in the building, as the city was on shut-down while the terrorist was still at large. The community embraced this reality; after all, on this holy day where would they be other than in synagogue? They continued the service from the point where they had been interrupted, and on that Yom Kippur the Jewish community of Halle said every word and sang every song in the prayer book.

I asked Halle Jewish community members if this event made them reconsider their future in Germany. They seemed unified in the understanding that anti-Semitism is not only a German reality, but a global problem; and it is not limited to one ideological approach or to one end of the political spectrum.

“We will be at risk of anti-Semitic attacks no matter where we go, and our faith is the only thing that will protect us,” an elderly man said, as he pointed at the thin wooden door that somehow kept out a bloodthirsty terrorist. He is certain that nothing short of a divine miracle protected him and his friends.

My Shabbat in Halle reminded me that hope triumphs over hate. There is no bitterness in the voices of the local Jews; while there is resignation to a lifetime’s experience of being targets of irrational hate, there remains a resolve to be strong and true to their faith. They embrace the solidarity that surrounds them; a solidarity from the local non-Jewish citizens of Halle, a solidarity that would have been bitterly foreign to previous generations of German Jews. I was moved to see the owner of Kiez bistro and survivors from the synagogue share tears and an embrace. I was honoured to lead a pre-Shabbat candle-lighting ceremony for more than 2,000 people who keeping vigil outside the synagogue. At that ceremony, I explained that, in Jewish tradition, candles serve a dual function: we light in memory of the dead, and we light in hopeful prayer that our families be blessed with peace.

Every Jewish community in the world ranks security as a top concern, including ours in Montreal. Millions of dollars will be spent in an effort to avoid, or at least minimize, the damage of the next attack. More and more, communities turn to government funding for these security measures; staying alive, after all, shouldn’t be a luxury reserved for wealthy communities. As a Jew in Canada, I — and many others — live a paradox familiar to the historical Jewish experience. I deeply appreciate the freedoms and blessings of living in this society, while at the same time urgently feel the expanding reach of anti-Semitism. As the Jews of Halle taught me, one can be at the same time wary and hopeful.