

Serge Klarsfeld - Why France's Most Famous Nazi-hunting Jew Is Now Embracing the Far Right

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Serge Klarsfeld has played an outsized role in exposing France's collaboration with the Nazis during the Holocaust. He used to unwaveringly condemn the contemporary French far right for its racism and antisemitism. But now he's praising Marine Le Pen for her 'allyship' with Jews

Last week, the other shoe dropped in France, one loud enough to be heard across France and which underscores the slow but significant shifts in its political landscape.

Both shoes belong to one of France's most respected and renowned figures, Nazi hunter Serge Klarsfeld. With [his wife Beate](#), Klarsfeld revealed with terrifying exactitude the role played by France in Nazi Germany's Final Solution, pursued with tireless persistence those who served as cogs in its infernal machinery, and condemned with unwavering clarity those postwar movements and individuals blinded to or besotted by the ideologies responsible for those dark times.

Klarsfeld, one of France's most prominent Jews, has begun to gravitate towards the same party he once shunned, the far-right RN, or National Rally led by Marine Le Pen. It's a fascinating, but disturbing transformation, informed most likely by the adage that the "enemy of my enemy is my friend." In this case, it is a response to the pro-Palestinian movements in France, which like those around the world, have become a dominant force in the streets of the country wake of the Israel-Hamas War.

At the same time, the number of antisemitic incidents in France has metastasized, with more than [1,500 reported antisemitic acts](#) since the Hamas massacre of more than 1,200 Israeli men, women, and children on October 7. While most of these acts are limited to painted graffiti and hurled insults, others have led to physical violence. Remarkably, the number of such incidents already triples the total number of antisemitic acts such incidents in all of 2022.

Israel At War: Get a daily summary direct to your inbox *Protesters at a pro-Palestinian rally, in Paris earlier this month.* Credit: Thomas Padilla /AP

Yet the first indication of Klarsfeld's changing attitude dropped a year before the massacre when he traveled to Perpignan to receive the city's medal to mark his many accomplishments. This was far from the first honor awarded to Klarsfeld, but it was the first time such an honor was presented, in the person of Perpignan's mayor, Louis Aliot, by a member of the Rassemblement National. The RN, or National Rally, is the extreme right-wing political party led by Aliot's ex-partner, Marine Le Pen.

The family ties hardly end there: Marine Le Pen inherited the party, and its toxic ideological baggage, from her father Jean-Marie Le Pen. In 1972, the elder Le Pen co-founded the RN's predecessor, the Front National. Le Pen [was joined by fellow right-wing militants like Pierre Bousquet](#), an avowed antisemite who had served during World War II as an officer in the Waffen SS's Charlemagne division, formed by French volunteers who had sworn their loyalty to Hitler.

Le Pen's past, especially on the subject of French Jews, was only slightly less checkered. He has been repeatedly hauled into court and repeatedly found guilty and fined for Holocaust denialism. Most insidious has been his insistence, one he has never surrendered, that the gas chambers at Auschwitz [amounted to "a detail of history."](#)

French far-right Front National leader Marine Le Pen and her father Jean-Marie Le Pen at an event in Lyon, central France in 2014. Credit: Laurent Cipriani /AP

When Marine Le Pen acquired the keys to the party, she was determined to stop driving it into electoral brick wall built by her father. [As Aliot acknowledged in an interview](#) several years ago, antisemitism was the sole obstacle blocking the FN's path to power. "It's antisemitism which prevents people from voting for us. It's only that...from the moment you blast open this ideological lock, you free up the rest."

With her eyes on the ultimate prize, Le Pen has since been blasting away at the lock. From the purging of the old guard of antisemites to the rebranding of the Front National as the Rassemblement National, Le Pen has worked methodically as her party's "débiabolisation" or "demonization." Despite her setback in 2017—aided by an embarrassing performance in the election's only presidential debate, Emmanuel Macron won more than 66 percent of the popular vote in the second round—Le Pen nevertheless persisted.

The persistence has paid off in spades. Though she again lost to Macron in their 2022 rematch—by a less dramatic margin, however—the RN won 89 seats in National Assembly, making it the largest opposition party. It had become clear that Le Pen's earlier excommunication of her father from the party for his serial denials, as well as her own declaration that the Shoah represents the "*summum de la barbarie*," or the "height of barbarism," made her and her party, if not fully mainstream, certainly less marginal.

So much so that Serge Klarsfeld is now willing to frequent at least some of them. Responding to the storm of controversy that erupted after this visit to Perpignan, Klarsfeld insisted that he considered Aliot—who never fails to mention that one of his grandmothers was Jewish—[an ally in "the struggle against antisemitism, anti-Zionism and hatred of Israel."](#)

Yet Klarsfeld still refused to support Marine Le Pen. Along with his wife Beate and son Arno, a well-known lawyer, he signed an open letter published in the newspaper *Libération*, titled "No to Le Pen, the daughter of racism and antisemitism," in the run-up to the presidential election of 2022. Lambasting her politics of exclusion and racism, [the letter warned, "Don't be fooled: she has not changed."](#)

But apparently Klarsfeld has since changed.

National Rally leader Marine Le Pen, center, at a march against antisemitism in Paris, France, in November. She attended amid fierce criticism that her once-pariah National Rally party has failed to shake off its antisemitic heritage despite growing political legitimacy. Credit: Christophe Ena /AP

When Le Pen vowed to join the march against antisemitism in Paris last month, political figures on the left and center expressed their outrage. Yet Klarsfeld then dropped his other shoe. In an

interview in *Le Figaro*, he insisted that while the extreme left had abandoned the fight against antisemitism, “we have seen that there are many decent people in the RN.” As for Le Pen, Klarsfeld [was equally clear](#). Not only has she “affirmed her solidarity with French Jews,” but more important, “in difficult times one needs allies.”

Confusingly, this is the same Klarsfeld who said just last month that [racism was baked into the DNA of the far-right](#). Short of a sudden genetic mutation in the RN, how can we explain Klarsfeld’s volte-face? He clearly believes his embrace of Realpolitik makes strategic sense during our volatile times.

This is at least debatable, but what is indubitable is that such a change does not make moral sense. Jews must never ally themselves with a party whose public appearance has become “correct” but whose policy goals remain exclusionary and plebiscitary, and whose political values still smack of authoritarianism and, *mais oui*, racism.

Marine Le Pen and her party have not changed. Nor must Jews in the stance toward such ideologies, even or especially when the times seem darkest.

Robert Zaretsky

P.S.

- Haaretz. Dec 20, 2023 4:23 pm IST:
<https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2023-12-20/ty-article-opinion/.premium/why-frances-most-famous-nazi-hunting-jew-is-now-embracing-the-far-right/0000018c-86ab-dd61-a3ad-c6efcc260000>
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