

Michel / 44

Fashion photographer Michel Haddi recently found himself the target of hate crime when a swastika was painted on his door...

My background is pretty complex. My mum is born in Algeria, in Oran, and she is a total Muslim. She came to Paris in the 1950s before the independence of Algeria. My father was a very typical Frenchman, French, Catholic, and he did the war in Algeria, so I never understood the whole combo where men went to Algeria, killed a lot of Arabs, came back to France and actually didn't even marry my mum, but here I came, and he left two years later.

My mum she put me in a kind of Catholic school, and it was like a place where displaced children would be there, so, obviously when I was in this place, I had to fight for myself. Even the nuns they were not very kind to what you might call people who are dark. In this orphanage I got everything, I got hanged, I got whipped, I got the dogs unleashed on me, I mean you know, if... I got it all. So I suppose I saw life, a lot of things happening in my life about this period, and it did always touch me and hurt me to hear how people behaved.

And I remember my step-father, when he was telling me the story that when he was a little boy of five years old and the Germans came in his village in France and they took this little boy of five years old, and they took five guys which, they were partisan, **and they shot them, right in front of my stepfather. Right in front of his eyes.**

So all my life I've been going through that, I've seen it, you know. I've smelt it. And when I was growing up, always the same, it's because of my curly hair and my tan. The people they will say to me, 'You're a bloody dirty Jew,' or 'You're a bloody Arab.' And I would look and think, my God, it doesn't stop. It doesn't stop.

So you see the interesting thing it's when two weeks ago I saw a swastika on my door, I mean like a big one, and I look at it and I said I cannot believe it. And it was not on doors from other people, it was on my door. And I looked at it and I said, I'm lucky that I'm a strong guy emotionally, but I'm thinking and I said, wow, if it was an older man or older woman who had been through this in the camp, they would have had a heart attack.

What did really upset me a lot is the fact that my girlfriend is Jewish. And I'm marrying her. And this, I was thinking about her. Her, why? Because she is from Holland, and her family, you know, had to run from the Nazi(s). And she was crying on the telephone when she heard what happened to me. And she doesn't want to come back here. That's it. She said, 'I'm so upset what happened to you, I didn't even tell my family what happened to you because they will be so upset because they have been telling us to be careful because it will happen again.'

So I had to tell her, 'Darling don't worry about it. I will do what I have to do and I will be a strong guy about that and I'm not going to put my head down.'

I mean this is like something like out of a bad dream. But at the same time in all fairness I accept it, and in a very detached manner I will do what I have to do. I mean, you know, I go to the police, I write article, I invite a TV station, and I said, no, no, I'm not going to let that pass by, like many people, like a few people told me, 'Just forget it.' No, I'm not going to forget it.

And that's my life has been like that. I mean, from my father being Catholic, from my mum being Muslim, from my boys being from the Church of England, and from my fiancé being Jewish, and our children will be Jewish. So it means that at the same table, this is what I'm trying to explain; at the same table, we'll have different kind of religion.

And if you talk to my boys, I've got two boys from my first marriage. I taught them one thing only; compassion. I tried to explain to them, if you don't understand too much about religion, I don't really care about it. What I do care is that you have one word in mind for every human being in this planet, it's called compassion. The rest, I don't really care.