



CONGRESS CONTACT

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Non-Jewish business leaders target antisemitism through FAST initiative



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WHAT STARTED IN THE SPRING OF 2004

as a woman's concern about the rash of hateful incidents aimed at Jewish communities in Toronto and Montreal has turned into a major initiative founded by non-Jewish business leaders to fight antisemitism.

Elizabeth Comper was horrified by reports of a spate of antisemitic vandalism against a cemetery, synagogue and Jewish day school in Toronto, and the firebombing of the United Talmud Torah school library in Montreal. So she and her husband, BMO Financial Group CEO Tony Comper, decided it was time to take action.

They launched Fighting Antisemitism Together, also known as FAST — an initiative to educate young people about the dangers of antisemitism and other forms of hatred.

They recruited the who's who of corporate Canada to join them in their efforts, all of whom are donating their time and money to help fight the spread of this dangerous hatred. Significantly, not a single one among them is Jewish.

"We wanted to send a message to the Jewish children of Canada," Elizabeth Comper told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, "that non-Jewish people and non-Jewish leaders absolutely do care about them... The fight against antisemitism is not just a Jewish issue. It's for every Canadian."

FAST is a "pointedly non-Jewish offensive," Tony Comper said in a speech at the Empire Club in June. "In the circles most of us move in, antisemitism wears a more sophisticated face. The time is past for smiling

politely and letting the bigot 'have his opinion.' If the truth can make us free, it should also make us bold," he told the crowd of 400.

The Compers have raised more than \$200,000 to date. To find the first initiative



Tony Comper, CEO of BMO Financial Group and co-founder of FAST, told the audience during his speech at the Empire Club in Toronto that the resurgence of antisemitism in Canada is a crisis that must be resolved by non-Jews.

under the FAST banner, they approached the Canadian Council for Israel and Jewish Advocacy (CIJA), which led them to Canadian Jewish Congress National Community Relations Director Len Rudner.

Following extensive consultations with educators and school board representatives from across the country, Rudner and CJC National Communications Director Wendy Lampert created the concept for an innovative

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2004 antisemitic vandals' case pleases frustrate community



Homes and Jewish community institutions were attacked in a spree of antisemitic vandalism in the spring of 2004.



MORE THAN A YEAR after Jews in Toronto were horrified by a spree of antisemitic vandalism against homes and Jewish community institutions, community members were full of frustration when all three defendants in the case were convicted of simple mischief, rather than under the special provision in the Criminal Code for mischief related to religious property.

In March 2004, a series of antisemitic incidents took place, including the overturning of headstones in a cemetery as well as graffiti and other damage to synagogues, schools and UJA Federation of Greater Toronto signs. Two young offenders and an 18-year-old, Steven Vandermeij, were arrested for these actions. Two of the original charges against each defendant were laid under the religious property provision, which stipulates motivation by bias, prejudice or hate and requires a more significant sentence.

"While we welcome convictions in this case and commend the police for laying the appropriate charges, we are frustrated that the results do not seem to take into account the traumatic effect of these incidents on both the Jewish and wider communities," said CJCONT Chair Joel Richler.

In the trial of the two youths, Ontario Court Judge Walter Gonet acquitted the teens of the more serious charges while convicting them on simple mischief, citing their intention simply to get themselves on television. In the Vandermeij case, the Crown did not pursue the charges of willful promotion of hatred.

"This series of incidents was an attack on the hearts of all those who abhor hatred," said Richler. "Motivation can be deduced from the nature of an act, and the fact that the graffiti included swastikas and symbols of the SS tells us that hate was an element of this crime. We are disappointed that in the case of the two youths, the judge felt the legal level of bias required for conviction wasn't met," he added.

In the Vandermeij case, Richler noted that "the Crown's decision not to pursue the more serious charges deprived our community of the chance to find out whether convictions could have been made in this case. If breaking windows and painting antisemitic graffiti on synagogues and desecrating a Jewish cemetery aren't sufficient grounds to proceed under the special provisions of this law, what is?"

The youths were sentenced June 24, and Vandermeij will be sentenced July 4. ■

Fighting hate at Royal St. George's College

In late April, four Grade 10 students from Toronto's private all-girls high school Branksome Hall learned the dangers of spreading hatred on the Internet and the importance of speaking out against intolerance. They were subjected to antisemitic vitriol in an online forum set up outside school hours by students from Royal St. George's College, a Toronto all-boys private high school. CJC National Community Relations Director Len Rudner helped both schools deal with the aftermath. The article below, written by Len Rudner about this incident, appeared in the May 4 edition of the National Post newspaper.

When a number of students at Royal St. George's College in Toronto recently created an online chat group on MSN that featured Nazi symbolism and special rooms with titles such as "Reichstag" and "gas chamber," four Jewish girls at another school, Branksome Hall, felt compelled to act. They wrote a firm, mature letter to the group, stating in essence that racism was not funny. The antisemitic responses they received were deeply disturbing.

The administrators of both schools, once alerted, responded with commendable alacrity. An investigation was launched at the boys' school, which has now led to the suspension and expulsion of a number of students. Meetings with students were held at both schools to help them understand the situation. The reaction of the Royal St. George's parents has been unequivocal: They have balanced their concern for the students who behaved so poorly with a principled understanding of the necessity of applying appropriate consequences.

When the wider student body at Branksome learned of the seriousness of the incident, they literally embraced their four fellow students and let them know that they were among friends. As a guest in that room, I was privileged to see their response, and was overwhelmed by it.

That there is antisemitism present in our schools should come as no surprise. They are, after all, only a microcosm of our larger society. Such attitudes must be combated with all the resources at our disposal. It is time for our schools to recommit themselves to anti-racism education so that our students can avoid the pitfalls of intolerance and hate.

The actions of the four students at Branksome Hall demonstrate the sort of courage that must be exercised. How hard it must have been for them to come forward with what they learned, especially at an age that places such a high value on conformity. The school staff also deserve to be commended. The motto of Branksome Hall is "Keep well the road." The motto of Royal St. George's College is "Respect, Responsibility, Voice." Both schools were true to those ideals.

We cannot know what motivated the young men to engage in such destructive activity. In one form or another, they will bear responsibility for their actions and for the impact they had on four girls and, by extension, the wider community.

As we continue to work to end racism and intolerance in all of its guises we should nonetheless take the opportunity to thank the people who did the right thing. Yasher Koach. ■

CJC continues battle for funding of faith-based education

For more than twenty years, Canadian Jewish Congress Ontario Region has been at the forefront of the effort to garner public funding for students in Jewish day schools. Following the celebration of the creation of the Equity in Education Tax Credit for parents of students in private schools in 2001, the community was dismayed by the Ontario Liberal government decision to cancel the tax credit two short years later.

"This is an incredibly frustrating fight," said CJCONT Vice Chair Igor Ellyn, who has been working with community partners to change the situation. "We can't stop working until we find a permanent solution for day school parents," he noted.

As part of strengthened efforts to find that solution, CJCONT has been working in earnest as a member of the Multi-Faith Coalition for Equal Funding of Faith-Based Schools. The coalition includes a group of two dozen faith-based organizations seeking redress for the inequities that face parents of children in Ontario faith-based schools.

CJCONT has been involved in the drafting of several new funding proposals that have been presented by the Multi-Faith Coalition and the Ontario Association of Jewish Day Schools to the Ontario Minister of Education and the Education Policy Advisory Committee of the Progressive Conservative Party, respectively.

"Parents continue to be financially penalized for wanting a faith-based education for their children," Ellyn said. "CJCONT, its community partners, and fair-minded citizens of this province cannot allow this issue to be ignored," he added.

"Ontario is the only province in this country that provides funding for one faith-based school system at the expense of all others," Ellyn said. "This is a top priority for CJCONT, and that will not change until the system does." ■

SIGN UP FOR *Yesterday* at Queen's Park



Canadian Jewish Congress recently began offering *Yesterday at Queen's Park*, a daily e-mail digest of statements made in the Ontario Legislature on issues of interest to the Jewish community. To sign up to receive this e-mail when the Legislature resumes sitting in the fall, contact **Steve Adler**, Acting Public Policy Director for CJC Ontario Region, at sadler@on.cjc.ca or at (416) 635-2883 ext. 175. ■

National Happenings

A digest of recent issues and events

Jewish-Native Relations: CJC National President Ed Morgan and CJC National Director of Government Relations Eric Vernon met with Assembly of First Nations Chief Phil Fontaine and three of his advisors in Ottawa as part of an effort to build relationships between the two communities and develop a framework for joint action. Morgan was invited to speak at the AFN's annual general meeting this July, and plans are underway for Jewish community leaders to visit native communities.

OSCE Conference in Cordoba: CJC National President Ed Morgan and National Executive Vice-President Manuel Prutschi participated as part of the official Canadian delegation in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's conference on antisemitism and other forms of hatred, held in Cordoba, Spain, in June. CJC submitted a report to the government urging support of the declaration that recognizes the "continuing importance" of the OSCE's three special representatives on antisemitism, Christianophobia and Islamophobia. Canada has agreed to support the declaration.

Trial of David Ahenakew: Saskatoon, Sask. CJC National Community Relations Director Len Rudner attended the trial in the case of former Aboriginal leader David Ahenakew, who has been charged with willfully promoting hatred against an identifiable group by comments he made during a speech at a Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations conference and to a reporter afterwards. In his conversation with the reporter, Ahenakew called Jewish people a "disease" and said Hitler was justified when he "fried six million of those guys."

Conference on Jews in Arab Lands: Paris, France. CJC CEO Bernie M. Farber took part in a conference where Jewish representatives from 14 countries around the world, including Italy, France, the U.S. and Great Britain, gathered to re-energize international efforts to obtain legitimate recognition of Jews as refugees from Arab lands. ■

EDITORIAL

Jewish refugees also deserve justice

WHEN WE THINK OF REFUGEES TODAY, our minds turn to Rwandans, Sudanese, Bosnians and the Palestinians, to name but a few. Clearly, we must be sensitive to their narratives and continue to find ways to resolve their plight or compensate them appropriately. But there is one refugee group that has not been able to get its story onto the world stage: Sephardic Jews originally from Arab lands, tens of thousands of whom were forced to flee with little but the shirts on their backs.

According to Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa (JIMENA), nearly 900,000 Jews lived in Middle Eastern and North African Arab states in 1948. Today, 99% of those communities no longer exist, the history of their lives there virtually erased from the historical record. And while the vast majority of those refugees who fled found refuge to rebuild their lives in the newly formed Jewish state of Israel, their narrative remains compelling. Their story must be returned to the history books; failure to do so is a failure of truth and justice.

Recently, CJC was privileged to be part of a historical gathering in Paris. Jewish representatives from 14 countries around the world, including Italy, France, the U.S. and Great Britain, gathered to reopen the narrative of those Jews, who today number nearly one million. We heard stories of human rights abuses from dictatorial and extremist Islamic regimes; we heard about oppression, murders, arbitrary detention; we heard how these Jews, who at one time lived comfortably among their Muslim neighbours, were hounded and persecuted until they were forced to leave – a direct result of the founding of the Jewish

state of Israel. We committed at that moment that we could no longer remain silent and that we would work with our respective governments to place the story of these Jewish refugees back on the international radar screen.

To this end, Canadian Jews can point with some pride at Prime Minister Paul Martin, who in an interview with the *Canadian Jewish News* last week acknowledged that Jewish refugees from Arab lands must officially be recognized as such. This statement, the first by a Canadian Prime Minister and one of only two other such statements from Western leaders (U.S. Presidents Carter and Clinton also recognized Jews from Arab lands as legitimate refugees), will now set the needed precedent and benchmark for other democratic governments to follow.

The Prime Minister's announcement accurately reflects Canada's role and responsibility as Chair of the Multicultural Working Group on Refugees. In the coming months, Canadian Jewry, through the offices of CJC, will play a significant role in moving this agenda forward. CJC will be reconstituting its National Jews from Arab Lands Committee, and we anticipate that many descendants of these Jews will take up the torch of history passed to them, helping to bring a measure of justice for their parents and grandparents.

Through this committee, we hope to educate MPs, the media and Canadians in general to the legitimate rights of these forgotten Jewish refugees – hopefully allowing Canada to be a principal partner in bringing justice where it is deserved. ■

STANDING UP FOR CANADIAN JEWRY



CJC CEO Bernie M. Farber recently addressed the Emunah Women annual Family in Israel (Mother in Israel) Dinner in Toronto honouring Jack and Susan Kahn. Farber provided an update on the current status of Canadian Jewry.

FAST (continued from page 1)

product for teachers of students in grades 6, 7 and 8, called *Choose Your Voice: Antisemitism in Canada*.

The resource kit includes a series of lesson plans and information inserts for students aged 11 to 14 about the dangers of stereotyping, antisemitism and other forms of racism. The printed materials are supported by a video which includes interview segments with a variety of people, including Holocaust survivors and a former white supremacist-turned anti-racism advocate. The materials are linked to the Ontario curriculum requirements as set out by the Ontario Ministry of Education.

“We wanted to create a unique product that teachers could relate to and would feel positive about using and that would reach kids at an age when they are really beginning to form their views on these issues,” Rudner said.

“The aim of the lessons will be to show kids that in dealing with hatred, the choices they make have real consequences – for themselves, and for those with whom they interact,” added Lampert.

CJC has been in touch with several of the major school boards in Ontario, all of which have expressed interest in the product, which

will be launched in September. A French-language version is also planned.

“It is unique for a group of business community leaders who are not Jewish to specifically target a Jewish community cause,” said CJC National President Ed Morgan. “CJC is thrilled to be a part of it.” ■



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