

ROBERT LANTOS SPEECH
BNAI BRITH – MONDAY DECEMBER 8, 2008

It is truly an honour for me to be introduced by my friend and colleague Paul Gross. We have known each and worked together for 15 years. Paul is English Canada's only real triple threat. He is a talented writer, a skilled director and our biggest star. Over and over again, Paul has proven that Canadian audiences are hungry consumers of distinctly Canadian stories and characters - so long as the stories are well told and entertaining. With Passchendaele, Paul has shown that even a World War One movie with an unpronounceable title cannot deter them from coming out in huge numbers - provided of course, Paul Gross writes, stars and directs.

Two years ago Paul was a member of a Canadian delegation of film makers and actors that accompanied me to Israel - and I do not think it is pure coincidence that his next project is set in Jerusalem.

I would like to thank the Honourable Jim Flaherty for being here tonight at a challenging time and especially for speaking about me with warm and glowing words.

I would like to thank my friend Heather Reisman for finding time in her impossible schedule to take on tonight's hosting duties.

I would like to thank my friends Peter Munk and Gerry Schwartz for supporting me by co-chairing the event.

I would like to thank family and friends and especially those of you I have never met for coming tonight.

And finally, I would like to thank Frank Dimant and Bnai Brith for honouring me.

Now let me tell you why I am here tonight.

My parents and I immigrated to Canada in 1963. We arrived to Montreal in June. It was a hot summer and my mother heard about an affordable camp in the Laurentians called camp Bnai Brith. She looked into it, but affordable for others was still prohibitive for us - at which point Bnai Brith offered to take me for a month for free. And so it was as a camper at Bnai Brith that I learned my first words of English, made my first Canadian friends, learned to build a fire, paddle a canoe, roast marshmallows and got my first kiss - all pro bono.

So when Frank Dimant asked me to be this year's honouree I was in no position to politely decline - as is my custom when approached for events such as tonight's. Frank did not know it, but he had leverage. I had a long standing debt to Bnai Brith. When he offered me tonight's honour he gave me, on a silver platter, the opportunity to return a mitzvah.

Tonight I would like to talk about history. I have the utmost respect for history, because it is our wisest teacher. It is only through history that we can grasp and interpret the events of today.

I was born on the dawn of Communism, in post war Hungary. For centuries, Hungary had lurched from one autocratic regime to another. Jews were regarded with more or less equal distaste by all of them. The majority of the Jewish population sought peace and acceptance through assimilation. They distanced themselves from identifiable Jewish practices. Some officially converted. Hungarian Jews were determined to be Hungarians, not Jews. They thought they could trade in their Jewishness for safety and shelter.

Hungary's enthusiastic embrace of the Nazi Empire and the ruthless massacre of most of the Jewish population by Hungarian volunteers in the last few weeks of the war brought a tragic end to that delusion. To the blood thirsty Hungarian Arrow Cross executioners, it made no difference whether their Jewish victims were religious or secular, practicing, assimilated or converted. To them, once a Jew, always a Jew.

There is a scene in my movie Sunshine where the hero, Olympic Fencing Gold Medalist Adam Sors, formerly called Adam Sonnenshine, is tortured to death. The character of Sors and the scene in question are based on fact. Hungarian Jewish Olympic Fencing Champion Attila Pecsaur was killed exactly as our Adam Sors. The hero of Sunshine was not saved by his name change or by his conversion to Catholicism, not even by Olympic Gold. For his murderers, once a Jew was always a Jew.

Yet, despite the lessons of the Holocaust, the survivors, my own parents among them, imagined Communism was yet another opportunity to shed their identity and seek equal standing. Communist doctrine dismisses all religion as the "opium of the masses". Hungarian Jews saw in this Marxist logic a chance for acceptance. They hoped that the new Stalinist dictatorship might be a safe haven.

I myself spent my childhood without knowing that I was Jewish. We had a Christmas tree and once a year my Uncle Tibor – a survivor of the Malthausen Death Camp – donned a red suit and beard and Ho, Ho, Ho, Santa came to me too. Hanukah was never mentioned. In fact, I never heard the word Jew spoken until second grade, when a kid in my class called me "a filthy Jew". That led to an altercation at school and later, a question at home: "What are Jews and why are they filthy?" Communism may have been able to suppress official religion, but it could not make a dent in anti-Semitism.

A year later my family managed to leave Hungary. Our ship docked in Montevideo, Uruguay. I was the only immigrant and the only Jew in my new school. Here, my Jewish education really took off.

My fellow students were well informed. From them I learned that my people were hoarders of gold, sadistic crucifiers, loan sharks and generally responsible for all of Latin America's economic woes.

Such crimes could not be ignored. Someone had to pay. And so it was that I became the designated ambassador of a people I knew virtually nothing about. Then, in 1961, the capture and abduction of Eichmann by the Mossad in neighbouring Argentina kicked up the temperature a notch or two.

I was now charged with kidnapping and hostile invasion. But for the first time in my life I felt proud to be a Jew. Giving expression to my new sentiment lead to frequent hostile after school encounters. No matter. A bruise here or there did not get in the way of my feeling that I was part of something important.

One day, reinforcements were brought in. After school, I saw a van parked in front of the exit with a black swastika painted on its doors. A man speaking into a megaphone stood next to it demanding to know if there were any Jews in this school. A bevy of enthusiastic fingers pointed in my direction. Instantly, I knew what to do. I ran. Back into the school, out through the back exit, across a park and along the beach, I ran and never turned around to look.

I look back now on those days with gratitude. I became parched with thirst for information about this nation of Jews with the temerity, the smarts, the sheer cojones to mount such an operation. A people who were not prepared to let a mass murderer get away, no matter what the consequences. And I learned essential survival skills – when to fight – and even more valuable – when to run. These skills have served me well. I do not know where I would be without them.

The Lantos family's next stop was Montreal. I fell in love with Canada on arrival. In camp, in school, everywhere, I was surrounded by immigrants. There was no shame in being Jewish. I could say it out loud in public without fear of retribution. I joined a Jewish Waterpolo Team, the Montreal YMHA. Eventually, we became Canadian Champions.

Now, water polo is not for the faint of heart. The rules only apply to that which the referee manages to see –which, when it comes to underwater activity – is not much. But win or lose, no matter how aggressive the underwater action, no one ever called the Montreal Young Men's Hebrew Association Water Polo Team dirty Jews. Just dirty. It was liberating. I loved this new country where I could hold my head high.

But we must heed the lessons of history. There is a scene in my next movie, an adaptation of Mordecai Richler's *Barney's Version*, where Barney is being trained in the intricacies of canvassing for Jewish causes by his Uncle Irv, a seasoned veteran. An eager student, Barney gets a crash course in the psychology of fund raising.

"Never visit your target in the office where he's king shit and you're just another shmuck looking for a handout. You lure the lion out with food" says Uncle Irv.

"I'll give you the target's annual income. Not the numbers on his tax returns - the *real* numbers."

And then Uncle Irv hands Barney the clincher:

"You slam dunk him on the Holocaust. It could happen here, you tell him. Israel is our insurance policy."

If you think that quoting from my own movie is in part promotional, you are not entirely wrong. How can I resist such an opportunity, such a captive audience?

But Uncle Irv is right. It can and in fact has happened here. Witness, the torching of a Jewish school in Montreal, the systematic intimidation of Jewish students by Islamic extremists on some of our campuses, the storm trooper tactics used at Concordia University to prevent two former Israeli Prime Ministers from speaking. In the meantime, extremist organizations meet on campuses to spread hate propaganda and openly call for the extermination of what they call the Zionist entity.

In a world awash with a tsunami of born again anti-Semitic hate, none of this is surprising. What is remarkable is that it all goes on with impunity, coddled and sheltered by some of our preeminent academic institutions. Thinly disguised as anti-Zionism, anti-Semitism has made a blockbuster comeback. It has become the staple of politically correct ideology. Traditional anti-Semitism raises the specter of Hitler and the Holocaust – and no one wants to be caught on the wrong side of that one. Anti-Zionism, on the other hand, is fashionable and politically correct.

But what is anti-Zionism? Essentially, it is ideology that would deny Jews their right to form a Jewish state. In other words, Jews do not qualify for what is the birthright of all other peoples. For years, our own country had been reluctant to take an unqualified stand against Israel's sworn enemies - the hate and violence obsessed anti-Zionist jihadists. I will always be grateful to Prime Minister Harper for bringing to an end Canada's neutrality and with that, it's complicity.

I am also grateful to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, President of Iran. It is he who - by squarely aiming his vitriol at all Jews - publicly and on the record has finally put to bed the false distinction between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. By targeting Jews and not bothering to distinguish between Zionists and those who are not, he has at last called a spade by its true name.

Which brings me back to why we are here tonight. Bnai Brith relentlessly identifies anti-Semitism, whenever it rears its head. It shines a public light on the perpetrators and challenges those who aid and abet them. History has taught us the consequences of trying to co-exist with those who would prefer us dead. History has taught us that left unchecked, anti-Semitism won't just blow over. If we tolerate it, the hearts of those who hate us will not soften. They will not cease and desist if we just mind our own business. Those who are committed to our destruction do not discriminate between the religious and the secular, between Zionists and those Jews who wash their hands of Israel. History has taught us that no amount of self flagellation will ingratiate a Jew to his executioners. Many of my Jewish peers; writers, directors, actors, producers and studio executives, are keen to distance themselves from the Zionist ideal. Yet, by betraying their own cause, their own people's fundamental rights, they do not endear themselves to the forces of hatred, whose violence they seek to justify. I know many Jewish intellectuals who perform high wire acrobatics. They buy into the anti-Zionist double speak which proclaims that somehow the concept of a Jewish state is by its very nature a racist ideology. On the other hand, those who are determined to exterminate this state along with all its inhabitants are freedom fighters.

These Jews are deaf and dumb to the lessons of history. No Jew can escape the fires of anti Semitism, whether it calls itself by its real name or goes by its anti-Zionist modern stage name.

Bnai Brith stands tall and confronts the forces of hatred. For their courage and integrity I applaud Frank Dimant and Bnai Brith. It is an honour to be recognized by you.