



Bronfman pull support for York University over pro-Palestinian mural

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Upset by a mural at York University that he finds offensive to Jewish people, Paul Bronfman, a leader in the film and TV production industry, has told the school that his company will no longer help its arts students.

Mr. Bronfman's decision is the latest twist in a long-running controversy over a pro-Palestinian acrylic painting hanging over one of the entrance foyers of the campus student centre.

It depicts a person wearing a scarf with the Palestinian flag, palming a couple of rocks and staring at a bulldozer as it nears a tree.

Mr. Bronfman is a director of the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies (FSWC), a Toronto-based foundation that has been critical of the mural.

In an interview, he said he heard about the mural after receiving a weekly e-mail from the FSWC. "It outraged me," he said.

He said he hoped that other people would join him and "put some pressure on York."

FSWC president Avi Benlolo said he had heard a number of business people mulling whether to keep helping the school, and of Jewish families that no longer want to enroll their children at York.

Mr. Bronfman said he had contacted the university administration and warned that he would withdraw his support if the mural did not come down. He said he was told that the administration had no authority over what was displayed in the student centre.

"They gave me a bunch of political rhetoric ... a bunch of political nonsense," he said.

His company, William F. White International Inc., provided free filmmaking equipment to York students, and also invited them to training seminars.

"Mr. Bronfman has notified York University of the withdrawal of this support," university spokeswoman Joanne Rider confirmed.

She said legal and human-rights experts have advised the administration that it cannot force the removal of the mural.

The mural falls under the jurisdiction of the student centre, said Gayle McFadden, vice-president, operations, of the York Federation of Students.

"This artwork is not hateful and is the artist's depiction of the resistance to the occupation of Palestinian land," Ms. McFadden, who is also chair of the York University Student Centre, said in an e-mail to The Globe and Mail.

"This painting is not anti-Semitic, as it is merely critical of the state of Israel and its continued occupation of Palestine."

The dispute comes within a broader context where Jewish students say criticism of Israel on campuses is so relentless that they no longer feel safe.

"I pass by the mural almost every day – it's located in one of the most central, populous areas on campus," said Danielle Shachar, a York student who has complained about the painting and says it is symptomatic of a toxic campus climate against Jewish students.

Some students are no longer willing to wear overt displays of their faith, such as Star of David necklaces or kippas, Mr. Benlolo said.

He said the mural, with its depiction of a rock-holding person, "is inciting hate against Israel, it's inciting violence."

While acknowledging the distinction between criticizing Israeli policies and anti-Semitism, Mr. Benlolo said the attacks on Israel are so focused and one-sided that they amount to singling out Jews.

Mr. Bronfman echoed the feeling in his interview. "This mural has nothing to do with criticizing Israel. It's purely anti-Semitic, hate propaganda. It not only infuriates me as a Jew but mostly as a Canadian. It should outrage Canadians."

The mural was conceived about two years ago, as part of an arts contest in which about 20 murals adorning the student centre were picked by a jury of students and faculty, Ms. McFadden said.

The artist, Ahmad Al Abid, a 2013 business graduate, did not reply to a request for comment.

On the website of the student centre, he explained: "My inspiration for this piece is the ongoing issue in Palestine where illegal settlement expansions have become common. These expansions come at the expense of uprooting century-old olive trees, trees intertwined with the roots of the Palestinian people."

Lorne Sossin, dean of York's Osgoode Hall Law School, posted last fall on the school website a rebuttal to Mr. Benlolo. Noting that he was "a proud member of York University's community and the Jewish community," Mr. Sossin wrote that "the idea that any group, be they students or outside advocacy groups, should be able to unilaterally declare the views of others in our community as 'hate,' and call on the university to censor them, cannot be a point of departure for building a community."

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