



Exclusive Interview with Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center CEO

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The Simon Wiesenthal Center is one of Judaism's most stalwart and recognizable organizations. And at Canada's Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center, impassioned individuals are working together to support the crucial work provided by the SWC.

Jspace recently caught up with Avi Benlolo, president and CEO of FSWC, to learn more about the group's efforts, the rise of anti-Semitism, and Canada's strong relationship with Israel.

How does the Canadian Friends support the work of the Simon Wiesenthal Center?

Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center (FSWC) is a leading Canadian non-profit human rights foundation directly representing over 30,000 members. FSWC is committed to countering racism and Antisemitism and to promoting the principles of tolerance, social justice and Canadian democratic values through advocacy and educational programs

including student workshops, Freedom Day, Speakers Idol, Tools for Tolerance and our widely acclaimed new Tour for Humanity mobile Tolerance Education Center.

FSWC is affiliated with the Simon Wiesenthal Center, an international Jewish human rights organization headquartered in Los Angeles. The international Wiesenthal organization has won two Academy Awards, has built two Museums of Tolerance (with a third being built in Jerusalem) and is an NGO at the United Nations, UNESCO, OAS, OSCE, the Council of Europe and the Latin American Parliament.

While most of our funds remain in Canada to support our efforts locally, FSWC is also a co-producer of the academy-award winning Moriah Films; our financial support of Wiesenthal's documentary film arm supports the development of educational films about the Holocaust, antisemitism, Israel and related topics for mainstream audiences. FSWC also provides funding for the new Simon Wiesenthal Center museum in Jerusalem, which is now being built.

Why is the work of the Simon Wiesenthal Center still crucial?

The dramatic rise in Antisemitism across Europe and the increasing tide of anti-Israel defamation must be confronted effectively and truthfully. With offices in the US, Europe, Jerusalem, South America and here in Canada, the Simon Wiesenthal Center has an incredible reach and the ability to raise awareness and speak out against the rising tide of hatred faced by the Jewish people. Indeed, the Simon Wiesenthal organization is regularly cited in media and listened to by world leaders around the planet. We are doing our best to sound the alarm and advocate for a more tolerant, less divisive world.

Why is this work important specifically to you?

My academic focus in university included in-depth research on the Holocaust, Antisemitism and racism, as well as documenting testimony from multiple genocide events around the world. This course of study provided me with a deep understanding of how the Jewish people have been wronged throughout history, as well as a profound respect for the values of freedom and human rights for all people. My work at FSWC is grounded in these concepts, as well as the conviction that the best way to ensure tolerance and human rights is by educating people at a young age about the importance of these values, and of the tragic consequences of hatred and bigotry.

Canada is famous for a strong relationship with Israel. Why is this so?

While I certainly cannot speak for the Prime Minister, I believe this government truly understands that Israel is an outpost of freedom and democracy surrounded by countries that not only hope to destroy the Jewish state, but by many which are also actively involved in destroying each other in the most horrific and unthinkable ways. I think Mr. Harper sees that the threats against Israel are also threats against all western democratic nations, and a real danger to the values we cherish as Canadians and as free people living in a largely secular society. Israel is the canary in the coalmine of a global village which is becoming increasingly smaller every day; an attack on Israel is, in the most significant way, an attack on every human being who believes in freedom, democracy and human rights. Our current government understands this in the way that few politicians do.

What are some of the most important issues Jews face today?

The Jewish people are facing three major existential threats today. First and foremost, the rise of Antisemitism has now evolved into violence all over Europe. From the attack in Brussels on the Jewish museum, to the horrific attack in Paris on the kosher supermarket and the most recent shooting and murder at the synagogue in Copenhagen, Jews everywhere are being physically threatened at levels unseen since World War II. In all of these attacks and in many others, the perpetrators were all Islamic fundamentalists. Tragically, the few remaining Holocaust survivors scattered around the world are starting to relive a nightmare they thought had ended; we would do well to heed the warning signs that their generation ignored.

Secondly, Israel faces a desperate existential threat from Iran as it continues to build nuclear weapons and threatens to further destabilize an already fragile Middle East. Iran and its proxies, Hezbollah and Hamas, have all threatened Israel and the Jewish people with extermination. I see no reason we should not take them at their word; should they develop the means to do so, this hateful Antisemitic triumvirate will undoubtedly do its best to make good on this threat.

Finally, the rapid growth of Antisemitism by radicalized left wing students and Muslim groups on university campuses, as well as unions and churches, has become too overwhelming to ignore. I still cannot understand how these groups continue to disregard the tremendous slaughter taking place in almost every corner of the Middle East, to focus only on Israel. The studied neglect of some of the most horrendous problems around the world, including the slow dismantling of Tibet as an independent nation, and the fact that 20 – 30 million people are living as slaves, mainly in Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Africa, does not receive any attention or world sympathy. The ongoing defamation calling Israel an apartheid state, which is not only false but ignores so many countries across the Middle East which truly do practice apartheid, should be of grave concern to us all. The question we must ask is why Israel is singled out for such hate, while despots, theocrats, slave-owners and torturers are given a pass. The answer seems clear to me. It is instructive to remember that the 'Zionism is Racism' meme started under the auspices of Kurt Waldheim's tenure as Secretary General of the UN; Waldheim was an unrepentant Nazi. Again, the connection is clear.

Are you working on any important projects this year?

In addition to FSWC workshops and programs for students which teach about the Holocaust, genocide, heroes, bullying and leadership, as well as student oriented special events like Speakers Idol and Freedom Day, -which sees 3,500 students join us every year at Toronto's Yonge-Dundas Square in a fantastic celebration of freedom, justice and human rights, I am most excited about our newest initiative called Tour for Humanity (www.tourforhumanity.com). Tour for Humanity (T4H) is a mobile Tolerance Education Center designed to bring our workshops on these topics to students and communities outside of the Greater Toronto area, and to inspire them to make positive changes in their schools and communities. In 2014, its first year of operation, T4H delivered this message to more than 50,000 students and communities across Ontario.

In addition, one of FSWC's most important endeavours is the annual "From Compassion to Action" mission to Poland and Israel. This mission is designed to bring politicians, Chiefs of Police and other community leaders to visit the sites of the Holocaust in Europe; in an age of Holocaust denial and, often, outright ignorance of the Holocaust and the history of WWII, it is critical that people in positions of power understand the consequences of unbridled hatred, and how easily society can crumble under its destructive influence. The next mission is scheduled for October 2015. After the first few missions to Europe, we decided to include Israel on the itinerary to end the missions on a hopeful note.