

Jewish groups work to counter Israeli Apartheid Week

By SHERI SHEFA, Staff Reporter

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TORONTO — Organizers of Israeli Apartheid Week have concluded their fourth year of anti-Israel programming on university campuses worldwide, but members of the Jewish community were intent on ensuring that their side of the story would also be heard.

Last week at the University of Ottawa, during a lecture titled “Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East,” Israel’s ambassador to Canada, Alan Baker, denounced Israeli Apartheid Week (IAW) as “crude propagandism, pure hypocrisy and cynical manipulation of the student body,” the Ottawa Citizen reported.

He called the event, organized by groups such as the Arab Students’ Collective, Solidarity for Palestinian Human Rights and the Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid, a “celebration of ignorance, both of the meaning of apartheid and a complete and utter lack of awareness of the state of Israel and what it means.”

In the Feb. 5 issue of the National Post, in an open letter written to David Naylor, president of the University of Toronto, where IAW was first launched in 2004, the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies expressed disappointment that the week-long event was allowed to occur on campus.

“Israel is a pluralistic democracy where Christians, Bahai, Jews, Muslims, Druze and others have freedoms and rights that are utterly lacking in neighboring Arab countries,” the advertisement said.

“Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination by claiming that the existence of Israel is a racist endeavour is anti-Semitic. Applying a double standard by requiring of Israel behaviour not demanded of any of its neighbours is anti-Semitic.”

Two days later, U of T ran an ad in the Post in response that defended the president’s decision to allow IAW programming to take place at his school.

“Cancelling events because of anticipated controversy rapidly changes the nature of the debate. Instead of public attention focusing on the actual positions of the speaker or sponsoring group (sometimes extreme and therefore lacking broad appeal), the focus shifts to the abrogated free speech rights of the affected groups and can create publicity and even sympathy for an extreme view.”

But Betar Canada’s executive director Orna Hollander said she’s worried about the fact that a full generation of students have been educated by IAW events.

“The rule of marketing is that if you say something between seven and 10 times, even if you don’t believe it or accept the philosophy, it is part of their knowledge bank now that Israel is an apartheid state. Even if they have no feelings about it, even if they are not angry about it,” she said.

IAW has been spreading to more and more campuses every year, and this year, organizers even managed to take their cause to the airwaves.

On Feb. 6, York University's non-profit campus radio station, CHRY 105.5 FM, produced a full day of IAW programming, called Anti-Apartheid Frequencies, that ran from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Some of the segments in the eight-hour event included "Israeli Apartheid Week: Students Strike Back," which focused on the role of "student-based resistance movements and the ways in which campuses can fight back," and "Amandla Intifada," which focused on similarities between the Palestinians and black South Africans.

CHRY, which is partly funded by a levy on York students, posted a blurb about the day's program on its website that said the objectives of Anti-Apartheid Frequencies "are to contribute to the chorus of international opposition to Israeli apartheid and to bolster support for the Boycott/Divestment/Sanctions campaign," which calls for an "end to the occupation and colonization of all Arab lands."

A day before the IAW programming aired, the station's website said that staff at CHRY "support these aims and are using this space to explore the importance and role of independent community media in this and other liberation struggles."

Two days later, that statement was removed and replaced by: "CHRY is a community-based campus station. Our mandate is to provide alternative programming."

Speaking with The CJN a day before Anti-Apartheid Frequencies aired, Robin Alam, CHRY's program co-ordinator, said the programming committee made sure it would be balanced and fair.

"We've been sure to invite different perspectives to the conversation so it isn't one-sided. Mind you, we are an organization whose mandate does dictate that we can look at things from alternative perspectives or things that aren't covered by the mainstream," Alam said.

Hillel of Greater Toronto's associate director, Tilly Shames, said she was contacted by the CHRY to take part in the programming, but she said she was reluctant, because it was clear that CHRY supports IAW.

"What we wanted to do was ensure that [IAW's] message didn't dominate the entire day and that every hour, there was a positive message about Israel or a message that contradicted the statements that were being made... We asked students to call in at different times."

Hollander and Hasbara Fellowships campus co-ordinator Ben Feferman said they were not approached about being on any of the programming, nor was anyone from their organizations.

"They didn't contact me," Hollander said. "The campus knows exactly who Ben and I are and exactly what our organizations do. They might have given you a song and dance about balance."

David Ashwal, program associate at Hillel at York, did take the opportunity to speak. He faced off against Daniel Freeman-Maloy, who has clashed with York's administration over his part in two noisy protests on campus regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Ashwal said he took part in the station's "Israeli Apartheid Week: Students Strike Back" segment, but when Hillel offered CHRY the opportunity to interview Benjamin Pogrund, who is on the editorial board of the Palestine-Israel Journal and writes about the Middle East and South Africa for Ha'aretz, the station refused to include him in the day's programming.

Omme-Salma Rahemtulla, CHRY's spoken work co-ordinator, confirmed that Hillel was the only pro-Israel voice represented during the eight-hour event.

But Shames said she was encouraged by the positive student response to the pro-Israel programming that Hillel provided at York.

About 20 students from York's international relations, political science and peace and conflict studies programs attended a lecture by Yuriv Oppenheimer, general director of Peace Now.

"It was clear that the students from those departments are looking for dialogue and that they're not looking for polarized messages on campus."

Hillel also ran a series of ads, titled "This is Israel," to promote the diversity of Israeli society in Excalibur, the Ryersonian and the Varsity, three campus newspapers at York, Ryerson University and U of T, respectively.

Rebecca Woods Baum, Hillel's Israel affairs director, said that students were thanking her for bringing the Peacemaker video game – which simulates the challenges of solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – to York, Ryerson and U of T, because it provided students with a positive message.

"A lot of people were put off by the other stuff that was going on, and they were happy to come and see the game and talk about it," Woods Baum said.

She said that some people were confrontational at Ryerson during the Peacemaker tabling session, but she said it gave Hillel an opening to talk about the issues.

"They come in with their biases, but we have a discussion. It never ends up in a yelling match. I think we're able to get our message out there in a calm environment, and I had some really great conversations with people."

Meanwhile, Betar and Hasbara went ahead with Islamic State Apartheid programming at York last week and set up a table to present images and videos that depicted human rights abuses in Islamic states, including stoning, honour killings, and executions of homosexuals.

"Essentially our goal and message was there are major human rights violations taking place in Islamic

states... Minority groups in these countries are in a really subordinate position and their rights are not being recognized and reinforced by the judicial systems in those countries,” said Anna Neuman, a Hasbara board member and York student.

“There were a few people who were screaming, but overall, the people I was speaking to were pretty open and trying to understand what we were trying to convey.”

Hollander said that while some students were upset by the material, they also received a lot of support from others who agreed with their broader message.

“We were even approached by the head of the [York campus group] Iranian Students for Human Rights, in terms of joining us next time. It was really encouraging at times.”