

Michael Englishman

NEO-NAZIS IN TORONTO¹

Michael Englishman [Engelschman] was born into an orthodox family in Amsterdam in 1921. His entire family, including his first wife, perished in Auschwitz-Birkenau. He managed to survive in Holland on false papers until he was caught and sent to the transit camp of Vught in 1943. Mike was liberated in April 1945, a survivor of four more camps, including Auschwitz-Birkenau and Dora-Norhausen. In the Netherlands he reunited with Rika, the wife of his best friend. They found her two children, who had survived in hiding. Mike and Rika married and came to Canada in 1952. Trained as an electrician, Mike eventually went into the electronics business.

Our store specialized in the repair of televisions, radios, tape recorders, etc. We also bought and sold second-hand units, and because of the nature of our business we were visited at regular intervals by police detectives to check on possible stolen radios, TV's, etc., that were brought into our store for repair. One morning, in the spring of 1963, a detective walked into our store, and asked for me. He wanted to speak to me in private. So, we went to the restaurant next door for a cup of coffee. He told me that he was not with the police force, but that he had served during the war with the Canadian Armed Forces in an Intelligence unit. That is how he knew about the horrors in the concentration camps. He also knew that I was a Holocaust survivor. What he did not tell me was how he got to me or who had referred him to me. Even today, I do not know. I will call him 'Irv.'

Irv asked me "do you know about a neo-Nazi party that has been started in Toronto?" If I had been wearing dentures, they would have fallen out of my mouth! I found his statement hard to believe. He said that if I wanted proof of this he would show me that evening where they met.

We met that night at Yonge Street and Davenport Road in downtown Toronto. He showed me the place and we watched several people arriving there to attend a meeting that was taking place on the main floor of a converted store. There were emergency exit doors. One of the doors was partly open. We stood right there eating doughnuts and drinking coffee, and listened to the main speaker who imitated Hitler in looks, mannerisms and speech. It was Germany 1933 all over again.

This came as a real shocker to me and for a while I did not know what to say. Irv and I decided to attend these meetings to find out what was going on. We also started to take all the license plate numbers from everyone attending these meetings. We found out that the so-called leaders and speakers usually arrived in rented cars. The speeches were the usual ranting and raving Nazi propaganda—stories about Jewish bankers, Jewish owned newspapers, Jewish landlords, unreliable Jewish businessmen and naturally the Jewish world conspiracy. These were the same words that brought Hitler to power in 1933. This time the main actors were John Beattie, who called himself head of the Canadian Nazi Party, and David Stanley. We also overheard discussion about the planning of a march in Nazi uniforms to take place in Allan Gardens, Toronto.

Not long after this, Irv called me with the news that swastika armbands and flags had arrived in the Post Office, and shortly after this, the neo-Nazis set the date for the march in Allan Gardens. Now I got my back up. I told Irv that we needed help and that I wanted to go to the Jewish Congress to inform them of what was going on. He said “go right ahead and see if you can get them to move.”

I spoke with Ben Kayfetz and Myer Sharzer who both held positions within the executive of the Jewish Congress. They told me that the Jewish Congress knew all about it. I then asked what they were planning to do about it. Their answer was that the position of the Executive was to do “nothing.” They thought that it would be much better if I would also keep my mouth shut for two reasons: first of all so as not to worry the

Jewish people and secondly not to give the neo-Nazis any kind of publicity. I was flabbergasted at first. Then I said to them, “you people have not learned a thing from the Holocaust. Because what you are doing now is precisely what brought the Nazis to power in Germany! From 1930 to 1945, the Dutch Jewish Congress played the same tune as you people are doing now. Thousands of Jewish lives could have been saved if they had only been told the truth.” I could not keep quiet and told Irv that I was planning to talk to the different Jewish organizations, *landsmanshaften* and *shuls*. He said, “I wish you luck. This is not exactly my cup of tea.”

I do remember that one of the first people I spoke to was Jacob Egit. Mr. Egit was the Executive Director of the Histadrut. When I explained what I knew and how I had obtained the information, he agreed to let me speak at their next general meeting. Would you believe that I was the only non-Yiddish speaking person ever to address their meetings? The result was that they promised to back me up all the way. The next groups I talked to were the Young Men’s Group of the Pride of Israel [Synagogue], the N-3 Group,² where Mike Berwald was one of the leaders, the Jewish Veterans, where Harvey Lister was in charge, and Sam Pasternak who was in charge of the General Wingate branch of the Jewish Veterans. Over a period of time I spoke to a large number of people and every one of them agreed that something should be done. Now that I knew the date was set for the swastika march in Allan Gardens, I contacted all the groups I had spoken to and organized a counter demonstration for that same day.

There has been a lot written about what took place on that day in Allan Gardens, but one thing stands out in my mind. It was a real pleasure to see the Nazis on the run instead of the Jews. It was Sunday May 30, 1965 when the neo-Nazis marched into Allan Gardens to hold a rally. From where I was standing, I could see the Nazis entering Allan Gardens from the corner of Carlton and Sherbourne Streets. John Beattie marched

in front carrying a swastika flag, followed by about thirty of his gang. They were wearing armbands with swastikas. As soon as they entered the park, the counter demonstrators surged forward, breaking through the police line. The police were trying to prevent a riot, but could not stop such a mass of people. The next day newspapers estimated this crowd to have been more than 6,000 people. Included in this group were a large number of Holocaust survivors.

This crowd meant business. They were in no mood to let the Nazis march around in the park. Emotions ran high. This was just too much for these people. As we came closer to the Nazis, the Nazis started to run toward the nearest exit at Gerrard and Jarvis Streets. Now the police moved in and arrested some of our people, and brought them to the nearest police station. I was told that Mr. Meyer Gasner, who was president of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Ontario Region was also inside the police station trying to get our people released. I thought I saw Mr. Midanik, an executive member of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Mr. Kayfetz and Mr. Sharzer in the park as well.

Only a few days after this incident took place, the Canadian Jewish Congress released a letter to the newspapers and to the Jewish organizations in the City of Toronto in which they distanced themselves from what had taken place in Allan Gardens. In this letter they went as far as describing us (the counter demonstrators) as “uncivilized.” The letter was signed by four of the executives of the Congress. This letter outraged the Jewish Community at large. Survivors stated that they had seen thousands upon thousands of Jews marching in a “civilized” manner into the gas chambers! To them the Canadian Jewish Congress had lost its credibility as leaders of the Jewish Community. Some of us questioned whether the Canadian Jewish Congress represented the Jews or the Nazis.

In a mass meeting of a number of Jewish organizations, a demand was made to the Canadian Jewish Congress to remove the people on the Executive who had signed the letter to the newspapers. Shortly after, there was talk of disbanding

the Canadian Jewish Congress. I spoke out against disbanding the Congress. I suggested that with democratically elected people, the Congress could properly represent the Jewish Community. In a mass meeting at Holy Blossom Temple that was chaired by Rabbi Gunther Plaut, the Jewish Community and the Canadian Jewish Congress came face to face. As a result of this meeting, the Canadian Jewish Congress promised to change their way of dealing with the Jewish Community. The Canadian Jewish Congress became a more democratically run organization. As a result of this meeting, the Jewish Community received much better representation at Canadian Jewish Congress.

Later on there was a show in a theatre on Bayview Avenue south of Eglinton. The name of the show, as far as I can remember was *The Deputy*.³

The neo-Nazis, unhappy with the play's betrayal of the Nazis, demonstrated in front of, and inside the theatre. Again, we Jews held a counter demonstration and some of us were inside the theatre. There was a good turn out of our men because we expected the Nazis to come inside the theatre to make a mess. The police came out in full force and if I remember correctly, they warned the neo-Nazis that their safety could not be guaranteed. They must have taken this warning seriously, because they turned back.

On January 29, 1967 we organized a large demonstration on Jarvis Street against CBC-TV. They were taping an interview with a German official named Adolf von Thadden who was well known for his Nazi past. This time the neo-Nazis were supposed to come out for a counter demonstration. Again the police warned them that they could not protect them, so these (brave) Nazis changed their minds.

The neo-Nazis continued their regular meetings which Irv and I attended faithfully at the side door. This way we found out that a speaker from an extreme right-wing group in the U.S. had been invited to speak to the neo-Nazis here. The place for this meeting was to be somewhere near Niagara Falls. Irv and I

decided to visit this place. We spoke to the owner of the hotel and informed him who he had rented his space to. We asked him to cancel this meeting, but he was reluctant to do so stating that this meeting was already booked. Then Irv, who looked like a plain clothed police officer, informed the owner that the police could not protect him or his hotel from the damage that could happen because the Jews in Toronto knew all about this upcoming meeting. I think the owner got the message and the meeting was canceled.

Now Irv and I started to discuss ways of stopping this neo-Nazi group from meeting regularly. We decided that the best way of doing so was to get our hands on their membership and mailing lists. Once we had these lists, we would make it known to them that we would publicize their names. In the meantime, we found out that there was a large house on Admiral Road that housed a number of neo-Nazis. I decided to have a look at the inside of this house. So, I put on my tool belt and took my tools and my field strength meter with me. This particular meter looked very impressive. I knocked on the door and one of my special neo-Nazi 'friends' opened the door and asked what I wanted. I told him that I was an electrical troubleshooter working for Hydro. I'd been sent to find some electrical trouble that was suspected to be in this house because of a very high meter reading. I asked him if I could come inside the house to check this out and possibly repair the trouble. Looking as impressive as I did, he let me inside. I managed to get into every room on the different levels of this house. Pretending to do some work, I noted all windows and doors leading outside. I now had a complete lay-out of the house. I told this man that as far as I could tell, their installation looked OK to me, but if there was another unusual reading I might

have to come back. He said that was OK with him.

One night when Irv and I were listening in on another neo-Nazi meeting, we heard that there was going to be a membership drive. All regular members were told to bring prospective new members to the building. I decided to become a registered member of the neo-Nazi party. This particular afternoon I walked into the building, but made sure that there were some people inside who were talking to the man who did the bookings. I needed some time to be alone, so I said to the man who was doing the bookings, that I would wait for my turn, but would it be OK with him if I looked around a bit. That was fine with him. I was very much interested in a side door that led to a stairway going to the upper floors. Sure enough there was a connecting door to where I was standing now. This side door was bolted with different dead bolts. I opened the dead bolts but left a regular lock on which I knew I could open from the outside. I walked over to the man at the desk and told him that I had to pickup something and would be right back.

I called Irv and told him that tonight was the night. I forgot to tell him that I had been inside the building and that I had prepared something. We met later that evening and Irv brought some heavy duty tools with him and a flashlight. I showed him the side door and he got ready to put his crowbar to work. I stopped him and just at this moment a motorcycle policeman came by on Yonge Street. I loved the kind of noise this motorcycle made because no one could hear as I put my foot to the door which opened at once. Irv stood there with his mouth wide open. We then went inside the building, making sure not to be noisy because I did not know if there was someone on the upper floors. We walked around inside. Then Irv said, "did you see that?" I said "what?" "Just watch the ceiling" he said, "wherever I go there is a light following me on the ceiling." Now I had a real good laugh! Irv had put his flashlight in his back pocket, but had forgotten to switch it off. The next thing we did was close the curtain on the big window facing Yonge Street. That felt much better! I showed Irv where the membership lists were

inside the desk, and the metal trays with the card index. We removed the trays and files and put them in the cars and left. Nothing else was taken because this was all we needed.

The next few days proved that there was no need for us to do anything with those names because the neo-Nazis themselves caused their own damage. They had called the police and the media and complained bitterly of how bad those Jews were to steal their membership and sponsor lists. This was the end of their meetings and activities because they were afraid that their names would be made public. It was also the end of this group, but later on other neo-Nazi groups started again.

As the years went by, it became clear to me that it was totally useless to try to get a conviction against a war criminal or a neo-Nazi activist. I had to find another way of fighting this disease. When the Holocaust Remembrance Committee started out with their program to educate students and other groups about the Holocaust this idea appealed to me. This could be a way to reach the younger generation and educate them about the Holocaust, instead of wasting my time chasing Nazis without the slightest possibility of getting a positive result.⁴

ENDNOTES

¹Chapter 15 in *Prisoner No.163256*, Unpublished Manuscript, 1996. In the possession of the author.

²For further explanation of these groups, see the article in this volume by Franklin Bialystok.

³Rolf Hochhuth's 1964 play, *The Deputy*, accused Pope Pius XII of inaction, if not complicity, in the murder of European Jewry.

⁴Mike Englishman has spoken to groups about his Holocaust experiences since 1988.