

From *Israzine* Nov., 2014: ["Zionism, An Indigenous Struggle: Aboriginal Americans and the Jewish State"](#)

David Ahenakew (1933 -2010) was a Canadian First Nations leader who left a significant legacy of achievement in advancing educational opportunity among First Nations people in Saskatchewan. His career included a term as Chief of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, and another as National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations [AFN]. His achievement was crowned by the award of the Order of Canada. However his public career was fatally compromised by his expression of antisemitic feelings. Accusations against him of promoting hatred against Jews led to two trials that achieved much notoriety and to the revocation of his membership in the Order of Canada by the Governor General. The Ahenakew affair has much to say to us concerning antisemitism in contemporary Canada.

According to one version of the story related by Ahenakew, he first learned about "the Jews" as a teenager in Saskatchewan from both returning First Nations veterans of the Second World War and from local residents in Saskatchewan. In Ahenakew's other version, the roots of his attitudes toward the Jews stem from his experience in the Canadian Forces from 1951-1967, during which period, he was stationed in Germany in 1957, and discussed the issue of the Jews with Germans he met. Either way, Ahenakew was exposed to a fairly standard antisemitic narrative that he accepted as true. According to this narrative, as he would relate it:

The Second World War was started by the Jews ...The Jews damn near owned all of Germany prior to the war. That's why Hitler came in. He was going to make damn sure that the Jews didn't take over Germany, or even Europe. That's why he fried six million of those guys, you know. Jews would have owned the goddamned world.

During his career with the Canadian Forces, he was also stationed with the United Nations peacekeeper force in the Gaza Strip, where it is not unlikely that he picked

up a Palestinian anti-Israeli narrative (also held by many contemporary anti-Semites) that he also adopted as his own. As he stated:

And look what they're [Jews] doing now; they're killing people in Arab countries. I was there, I was there.

Further into the interview which constituted the main evidence against him at his trial, he reiterated:

Well, because I saw the Jews kill people in, in the Egypt when I was over there. And the Palestinians, the Egyptians, the Arabs generally, eh. I saw them fucking dominate everything.

Finally, he gave expression to a fairly standard contemporary antisemitic narrative that Jews controlled things, especially the media, in North America, as well:

...who in the hell owns many of the banks in the States, many of the corporations, many, well look it her [sic] in Canada, ASPER...ASPER, he controls the media...Well, what the hell does that tell you? You know that's power.

All these remarks, which triggered Ahenakew's first trial, were made in a question and answer session after a lecture he gave at a meeting of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations on December 13, 2002. They were reported by the Saskatoon Star Phoenix and were quickly picked up by the Canadian national media. Because of these remarks Ahenakew was charged with promoting hatred in June, 2003.

In a magazine article published soon afterward, he was quoted as once again accusing the media, which he likely held responsible for his troubles, of being controlled by Jews:

“When a group of people, a race of people, control the world media, something has to be done about it,” he wrote.

When he was put on trial in July, 2005, Ahenakew attempted to excuse his remarks, blaming them on his diabetic condition, a bad reaction to a change in medication, and his having drunk some wine previously. He was convicted of promoting hatred against Jews and fined \$1,000.00. Even though the amount of the fine was set fairly low, in order not to make him into a “martyr”, the aftermath of his conviction, on July 8, 2005, Ahenakew accused the Canadian legal system of systemic bias against First Nations. As he stated:

My case was as much about racism against First Nations as it was about alleged racism against Jewish people...First Nations have never received a fair trial in Canada’s judicial system.

On July 11, 2005, he was stripped of his Order of Canada. Ahenakew was quoted as attributing the revocation of his Order of Canada to “the pressure put on the advisory committee by some of the Jewish community, including a letter writing campaign and the lobbying by the Canadian Jewish Congress...the decision by the Advisory Council is a clear indication of where the power in this country lies”.

Approximately one year later, in June, 2006, the Saskatchewan Court of Queen's Bench overturned his conviction and ordered a new trial on the grounds that while "Mr. Ahenakew's comments, on any standard, were shocking, brutal and hurtful," the judge had failed to properly take into account the context of Ahenakew's anti-Semitic statements that came out in an angry confrontation with a reporter, and, therefore, may not have constituted “willful” hatred.

A new trial was held in 2008, as a result of which Ahenakew was acquitted of the charges against him. In the court's decision, issued in February 2009, Judge Wilfred Tucker characterized Ahenakew's anti-Semitic remarks as "revolting, disgusting and untrue", but basically accepted the defense's contention that the confrontational context of the remarks did not constitute an "intent "to incite hatred. The Crown did not choose to appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada, which disappointed many within the Jewish community who supported such an appeal because the Ahenakew case was considered by many Jewish observers to be similar to the well-publicized hate speech cases of James Keegstra and Ernst Zundel. As B'nai Brith Canada Executive Vice President Frank Dimant stated at the time: "We urge the government to step in and take the opportunity to review hate legislation in light of ongoing manifestations of hate in this country."

One thing the Ahenakew affair certainly brought into focus was the presence of antisemitic attitudes among First Nations in Canada. Although, in response to the charges against David Ahenakew, a number of prominent First Nations leaders, like Matthew Coon Come and Phil Fontaine, thoroughly condemned his antisemitism, there were other first Nations voices that supported Ahenakew. For example, the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, whose Chief Ahenakew had been, proposed Ahenakew's reinstatement as a Senator in that organization, which Ahenakew declined when considerable negative political pressure was exerted against the reinstatement . Manitoba aboriginal leader Terry Nelson, who has himself accused the Canadian government of attempting to commit genocide against First Nations, and who has publicly associated himself with Iran's attempt to impugn Canada's record on human rights, asserted that Ahenakew was a victim of a Jewish-controlled media and stated that if First Nations people resorted to violence it was the Jewish media that would be to blame.

What did the Ahenakew Affair mean to the relations between First Nations and the Jewish community in Canada? First of all, it meant that Jewish leaders were paying more attention to the Canadian First Nations community and listening to their concerns with greater sensitivity. One small token of this was that, prior to criminal charges being filed against Ahenakew, Dimant spoke of the possibility of dealing with Ahenakew not through the ordinary Canadian justice system, but rather through procedures of "Indian restorative justice", involving sentencing

and healing circles.

Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) had established relations with representative First Nation organizations like the Assembly of First Nations at least since the 1980s. This was entirely consistent with its philosophy that discrimination against one group is discrimination against all and that the CJC had an obligation to intervene in larger societal issues, especially those respecting human rights. Nonetheless, in response to the Ahenakew affair, the Canadian Jewish communal leadership seems to have devoted special attention to the First Nations community. CJC President Ed Morgan and CEO Bernie Farber thus met with AFN chief Phil Fontaine in Ottawa on May 16, 2005. Both Morgan and Farber participated in the annual General Assembly of the AFN which met in Yellowknife on July 7, 2005. As Farber stated, “the Ahenakew case has solidified our relations with First Nations.” He was further quoted as saying that CJC was cooperating with First Nations on issues like land claims and residential schools. Furthermore, CJC sponsored several trips to Israel by aboriginal leaders.

Morgan’s speech to the AFN’s General Assembly, held on the very eve of the Ahenakew verdict, dealt in general with things the Canadian Jewish and First Nations communities held in common and how they could better understand each other. In his prepared remarks, Morgan spoke at length concerning the Ahenakew affair and its implications for Jewish-First Nations relationships:

I cannot help but be moved by how decisively and articulately the messages came to us from aboriginal peoples across Canada in the wake of his [Ahenakew’s] ugly rant. We were inundated with calls, e-mails, faxes all conveying the same message of condemnation on the one hand and of solidarity with us on the other. They knew that the pain he had caused, though aimed at one group, had hit a much broader target including their own community and Canadian society at large. They understood the irony of a representative of one minority community that has experienced discrimination targeting another such community for a hateful diatribe. They knew that, in the words of one chief, “silence was not an option”, so they spoke...The Ahenakew affair began with hate but thanks to the

aboriginal peoples of this country it ended with...support, mutual respect, and enhanced friendship.

Morgan concluded this section of his remarks by pledging:

...that the Canadian Jewish Congress will be more active on aboriginal issues and we will seek new and creative ways to work together to achieve our common goals. We have much to teach, and much to learn from each other.

Anita Bromberg, Bnai Brith Canada National Director of Legal Affairs, echoed Morgan's Jewish commitment to First Nations when she stated, "But as we have said, there is a silver lining, namely, that we have worked closely with the aboriginal community to build a Canada based on tolerance and understanding and will continue to do so." Alan Yusim, another Bnai Brith Canada official, emphasized the excellent relationships the organization has built up with Aboriginal groups across the country. "These relationships are stronger than ever as we move forward with many joint initiatives," Yusim said.

Compared to the hate speech affairs of Keegstra and Zundel, whose overt antisemitic activities and trials were conducted over a period of decades, the Ahenakew affair seems relatively simple and straightforward. Though the evidence shows that Ahenakew held anti-Semitic views, as well as disparaging views of other groups, such as Asians, Blacks, Eastern Indians, and others that he had expressed privately for years, there was only one major public incident lasting a bit more than two minutes. Why, then, all the fuss?

It seems most likely that the rapt attention Jews in Canada paid to this case is directly related to its having come after the long drawn out frustrations of the Keegstra and Zundel trials, and reflects the Jewish community's concern that the Ahenakew case was yet another in a series of legal precedents that had been set that, in the words of Bnai Brith Canada's Steven Slimovitch, "constitute a dangerous precedent in which the standard of conviction could be set

inappropriately high.” And indeed, in the years since Ahenakew was ultimately found not guilty, it has been noted that Provincial Attorneys General have been reluctant to approve hate crime prosecutions.

It is also likely that the Jewish community became as deeply aroused as it was due to Ahenakew’s absorption of the anti-Israel narrative in his antisemitic remarks. These remarks reflect a contemporary global trend in which anti-Israel and antisemitic narratives have been merged. It is for this reason, among others, that one of the primary public actions by the organized Jewish community of Canada has been to sponsor trips to Israel for First Nations leaders.

In a Canada that has become highly sensitive to expressions of prejudice against defined groups of people, the Ahenakew case has taken its place as an example of the real penalties to be paid by a person in the public eye who transgresses the boundaries of hate speech, even if the Canadian judicial system could not formally convict him of a criminal offense.

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