

## CHAPTER ONE



MY YEAR AS STUDENT COUNCIL VICE-PRESIDENT

(AN OLD CHINESE CURSE: MAY YOU LIVE IN INTERESTING TIMES)

**There I was**, one day a left winger scrapping and scoring for the Chilliwack Chiefs of the B.C. Junior Hockey League, then what seemed like a very short time later, the arena no longer had ice, but the games were just as intense, the battles just as hard-fought.

Instead of trying to dig out the puck from the corner, I found myself crushed at the front of a crowd trying to prevent an accused war criminal from speaking on our campus. Instead of getting a two-minute penalty for obstruction, I found myself with a one-semester suspension for “vexatious conduct” and “sticker-ing” on campus, then a five-year expulsion for attending the student council to which I was elected. Instead of talking to reporters from local papers about my fight with another team’s goon, I was interviewed about Concordia University’s ban on free speech. Instead of referees I had to deal with campus security guards and the Montreal city police. Instead of hockey, I was playing politics.

◆ ◆ ◆ THE PROTEST ABOUT former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s visit to Concordia University kicked off the semester under a new left wing student council and executive. We took office in June and our slate followed in the footsteps of previous left wing Concordia Student Unions (CSU). During their

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terms they had set up a free vegan cafeteria, “The People’s Potato”, successfully challenged the commercialization of campus space and sent many into a state of uproar with a pro-Palestinian and anti-capitalist student handbook titled Uprising. We’d spent the summer preparing a new (less contentious) handbook and learning our job. While things were busy, they were quiet. We knew things would heat up once the Fall semester began, but no one guessed how incredibly hot the atmosphere would get in our very own version of global warming.

As CSU vice-president responsible for media, one of six paid elected positions, it was my job to get our message out, but I was only vaguely aware of this “warrant” for arrest that appeared on Concordia campus and in downtown Montreal a day or two before Netanyahu’s arrival:

**WARRANT for the arrest of BENJAMIN NETANYAHU, former Prime Minister of Israel; on the charges of crimes against humanity and crimes of war.**

*This warrant, dated September 9, 2002, permits the immediate arrest of Benjamin Netanyahu, former Prime Minister of Israel, on the charges of crimes against humanity and crimes of war.*

*According to verified sources, Mr. Netanyahu will be in Montreal on September 9, 2002, and will be in the vicinity of the Hall Building at Concordia University between 10am to 3pm.*

*Mr. Netanyahu is to be arrested on sight by either competent authorities or ordinary citizens and residents.*

*Canada’s own war crimes legislation authorizes the arrest and trial of war criminals for offenses committed outside the country. As Prime Minister of Israel between 1996-99, and as an official of the Israeli government, Mr. Netanyahu is alleged to have committed — or to have been directly complicit in — gross abuses of human rights in the Palestinian occupied territories and the state of Israel. These crimes*

are tantamount to crimes against humanity and crimes of war, under widely recognized and internationally accepted definitions of both the Government of Canada, as well as the United Nations.

Mr. Netanyahu's alleged crimes include:

- Authorizing extra-judicial executions throughout his term as Prime Minister.
- Authorizing the torture of over approximately 2,500 Palestinians in Israeli jails, leading to the deaths of several detainees and injury to many more. The International Convention against Torture — ratified by the state of Israel — as well as the Convention on Civil and Political Rights explicitly prohibit torture under any circumstances.
- Authorizing over 249 house demolitions in the occupied territories — unequivocally prohibited by the 4th Geneva Convention — constituting a war crime in the form of collective punishment.
- Authorizing the construction of 6,500 settlement-housing units in the occupied territories — in contravention of several United Nations Security Council resolutions as well as Article 49 of the 4th Geneva Convention — and increasing the number of illegal settlers in the Palestinian occupied territories by 9%.
- Authorizing the deadly and disproportionate use of force in September 1996 against unarmed demonstrators protesting his order to blast a tunnel under Al-Haram Al-Sharif (Temple Mount).

All of the above-cited crimes are documented and verifiable, by both eyewitness and expert testimony.

Upon arrest, Mr. Netanyahu is entitled to competent legal counsel and due process. He is also entitled to a fair and impartial trial.

Legal authorities in Canada — the federal and provincial governments and their respective law enforcement agencies — are bound to uphold this warrant by virtue of federal statutes. Failure to do so constitutes gross neglect of duty and is criminally punishable.

Those who obstruct or impede the arrest of Mr. Netanyahu, or the

implementation of this warrant, are guilty of “aiding and abetting” which is a criminal offense.

*This warrant is issued in the genuine interest of ending the crimes of occupation in the Palestinian territories and the state of Israel, in a spirit of solidarity with the courageous resistance and intifada of the Palestinian people, and with the aim of achieving a just peace between the peoples of the Middle East.*

One of the many ironies of the Netanyahu incident at Concordia was that none of what transpired on our part was planned. In fact, I'd argue that the whole thing was a series of stumbles. The first of these occurred when the pro-Israel student club Hillel asked the student union executive for permission to use the biggest hall on the downtown campus for the upcoming Netanyahu lecture. The CSU had booked the space for the entire orientation week and so Hillel had no option but to come to us with their request. It was our first contentious issue. In an effort to be fair we voted unanimously to give up the room for the noon-hour meeting. The only dissent came from the orientation coordinator who happened to be Jewish; she argued, “This is going to wreck the whole orientation week.”

Right up until the day of September 9th, I didn't know what was going to happen — in the frenzy of orientation week organizing by opponents of the visit went largely unnoticed. As far as I knew people would gather to protest and that would be that. There had been some leaflets, a story in the university paper and some mention of a protest in the mainstream media, certainly nothing out of the ordinary that would foreshadow the events to come.

The night before the protest, I saw police setting up a metal detector on the main floor of the Hall Building (CSU offices are on the sixth floor). Another taste of what was to come came shortly after when I was yelled at by anti-Netanyahu protest organizers

for agreeing to give Hillel use of the hall. Only then did I sense the possibility that something significant was about to take place.

◆ ◆ ◆ THE NEXT DAY is a glorious September morning, one of the last hot days of summer. Setting off for school, I get there at 10:00 a.m. and can't help but notice there are snipers on the library roof as well as riot police setting themselves up on Rue de Maisonneuve, which runs in front of the Hall Building where the Netanyahu meeting is supposed to take place.

The side street adjacent to the main building is abuzz with energy and discussion so I hang out, engaging in a few of the lively, sometimes heated, but mostly friendly debates that Netanyahu's visit has sparked. Forty-five minutes later, as more protesters arrive, someone shouts out, "to the other side" and about 50 of us march swiftly towards the sole entrance to the Netanyahu talk on the other side of the building. We arrive to find about a hundred or so people milling about, some waiting in line to get into the talk. We keep moving, right to the front of the line and I end up at the very tip of the pincer movement near the door — kind of like finding yourself in the opponent's corner battling for the puck against a six-foot-five defenceman.

For the first time that day the atmosphere changes to one of confusion and confrontation. We chant slogans and the pro-Netanyahu crowd shouts back. The crush of bodies and the jostling that takes place means I am now in a position, with several other protestors, of effectively blocking the entrance. My only comparable experience was a mosh pit at a Hole concert years ago at the famous old Commodore Ballroom in downtown Vancouver. It is a tight spot, uncomfortable, scary even, as we got locked between the swell of a growing crowd and a barricade of steel and police.

## My shorthair clean-cut hockey-player

look had saved the day

Anger is now visible and very audible as those people blocked from entering the talk target us. I can't move and the temperature of the confrontation continues to rise. Then suddenly some huge security guards pull me out of the crowd, forcing me in the direction of police waiting a short distance away. I am immediately handcuffed. Warning signals race through my brain — this is definitely not going to look good — a CSU executive member arrested! The first thing that pops into my head is to tell the cop that “I just lost my ticket” and amazingly he immediately releases me back into the crowd. My shorthair, clean-cut, hockey-player look had saved the day! Had I looked Arab would he have released me?

The scene at the entrance continues to be one of mass confusion, but most people determined to enter the building to hear Netanyahu speak find their way in. Not wanting to tempt fate I head back to other side of the building. I spend a few minutes trying to calm down — my adrenalin is pumping like the Quebec Peewee Tournament semi-final when my Montreal team went into double overtime against the hometown squad. My girlfriend and I then enter the Hall Building through the back entrance. Since classes are taking place on the upper floors students are still being allowed in.

Outside, the crowd of protestors has swollen to four or five hundred, now outnumbering the Netanyahu supporters. A sit-down protest blocks all possible automobile entrances. In a pivotal move, a group of about 50 to 100 protestors branches off from the main demonstration. On entering the Hall Building they discover that barricades block most of the mezzanine and the escalators leading to the main floor. On closer inspection, it turns out that these “barricades” are on wheels and without security guards to back them up. In a quick move, a few barricades are pushed aside, allowing some of the protestors to take control of both escalators (to and

from) the main floor. A second area under the complete control of protestors is the “high ground” on the mezzanine, where a balcony overlooks those entering the building to attend the lecture. Inside protestors, whose numbers have swollen to about 200, begin chanting. Everyone who enters the building to attend the talk must walk 150 feet or so past protestors chanting anti-Netanyahu slogans from above. For a while I am one of those people on the mezzanine. In contrast to later media reports, nothing is thrown and I hear no anti-Semitic comments or chants.

Within minutes of the mezzanine occupation, about 15 riot cops appear beneath us on the main floor, blocking the stairs. I continue to participate in the demonstration for about fifteen minutes, then some students trying to attend classes, who are nervous about their safety, request that I talk to a security guard. Based on their concerns I do a quick survey of the whole scene, both inside and out of the Hall Building and things are pretty bad. The welfare of students and staff seems, at best, an afterthought to the security guards and police on campus. I decide that the most useful thing I can do is to go to my 6th floor office to write a quick leaflet about what is unfolding at our school, while the events are fresh in my mind.

Just as I finish writing the few hundred words and start printing I hear booming sounds from below and catch the first unmistakable whiffs of teargas. The scene that follows is one of panic and confusion. Protestors and students on the lower floors scramble to higher floors, while students attending classes head in the opposite direction to escape from the fumes. But no one can get out of the building because the police have blocked all exits. I organize about a hundred students and lead them in the direction of the CSU offices, where we are able to open some large windows to access breathable air. After about fifteen minutes of mayhem, the

police finally allow people out through the Mackay Street side exit and Netanhayu's talk is cancelled.

Disoriented and upset, especially about the tear gas, I make my way to the front of the building, where about a thousand protesters face four or five hundred people who had waited in vain to see Netanyahu. At one point a line of riot cops is forced to separate the two groups — that's what I am told — as I am preoccupied with distributing leaflets printed amidst teargas and confusion. Forty-five minutes later, the protest winds down, but an anxious crowd of reporters and camera operators remains. As the CSU media rep I make myself available to them before finally finding time to meet my friend Mike, who is visiting from Vancouver.

Hungry and tired — he from traveling and me from one amazing day — Mike and I head off to eat. Looking up from a za'atar, I see my face staring back at me from the television set. What have we gotten ourselves into? That night there are meetings to strategize about our media response, but everything we talk about is rendered irrelevant, as a short time later Rector Frederick Lowy announces a university moratorium on the discussion of the Palestine-Israel issue. The next day we hold a press conference where at least a dozen media outlets show up to find out what has happened at Concordia on the fourth day of the new school year.

● ● ● THE NEXT MONTH is a whirlwind of activity, as the world appears to converge on Concordia. Television cameras are everywhere almost all the time. Reporters from media outlets across North America, Europe and Israel call day and night. As CSU media vice-president I experience a real life crash course in crisis management. It is exhilarating and exhausting.

● ● ● ON OCTOBER 16, 2002, we decide to set up an information



table about the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The table is part of the Concordia Student Union's education and mobilization campaign in the lead-up to the October 31, 2002, international student day of action against the FTAA — activities approved by Concordia students through a referendum earlier in the month. On that fateful afternoon two CSU employees set up shop in the mezzanine of ConU's main building, an activity which, according to Concordia's post-Netanyahu regulations (nine days after the protest the Board of Governors [BoG] decided to expand the ban that the Rector previously announced) is dangerous, inflammatory and therefore verboten. The right to conduct student affairs in the two busiest areas on campus has been taken from us. The mezzanine space, however, is supposed to be returned to students as of that morning's BoG meeting.

When the table is set up we are told that the BoG people have backed off their commitment to return the space, but we don't care. Enough is enough. We never accepted the legitimacy of the BoG's decision (with administrative backing) to take away this space from students and clubs.

Shortly after the table is set up, I am accosted by the "Don" — Donald Boisvert, Concordia Dean of Students. He asks me to whom the table belongs. Since the CSU executive is spearheading the campaign and I am the lone executive member present, I "fess up" and take responsibility for this terrifying outbreak of democracy.

I assume the position. With my legs at a right angle to the floor, back straight, numerous flyers strung out across the table and my lungs full of enough oxygen to vociferously denounce the FTAA to passing students, I go to work. In response, Con U security guards decide the situation requires serious backup and soon thereafter the Montreal police arrive. Looking somewhat uncomfortable as

they survey the situation — one measly table with a few hundred flyers and a lonely ex-Chilliwack Chiefs Junior A left-winger, current CSU vice-president, they nonetheless ask me to leave since, they insist, I am trespassing. This strikes me as funny. My presence in the busiest spot on the campus where I pay fees, study and am an elected employee of the duly certified student union is being defined as “trespassing” — a concept peculiar to a feudally derived, capitalist notion of property rights that the poor police officers are sworn to uphold on pain of joining the unemployment lines. Nevertheless, with dozens of supporters watching and reporters on their way, the police pass on the arrest option demanded by the Con U security horde.

Three hours later, when all the leaflets have been distributed, the table is removed and I head upstairs to CSU offices to study for a mid-term exam. About 15 minutes afterwards, coincidentally once the reporters and most supporters have left (with the exception of one French CBC television crew, who luckily stayed outside in their van, and are able to catch footage of what follows), security chooses once again to confront me.

The ConU security horde busts into the CSU communications office where I am copying notes. (The fact I was doing so the night before an exam later becomes public knowledge, sharply reducing the effectiveness of playing the sympathy card with my professor after I bomb the test.) The security horde demands I leave the building, but I decline their offer. As a student and elected CSU representative, it’s my democratic right to be in the student council offices.

Two minutes later a few Montreal police officers knock on the door and, after an exchange of pleasantries, politely ask me to leave. Again, I pass on the offer. They read me my rights, handcuff me and then escort me out of the building to nineteen awaiting

## The police graciously help me into their cruiser and question me briefly

police vans and a paddy wagon! Nineteen. Do they know about my reputation as a tough guy from junior hockey? Or had they heard my nickname in peewee (where I played on a line with Canadiens star Mike Ribeiro for one season in Montreal) was Le Train de Vancouver.

On the way out a handful of supporters follow us (ConU security horde, police and yours truly) chanting, “shame, shame, shame.” The police graciously help me into their cruiser and question me briefly. I am told not to hang out with such a bad crowd and am released with the warning that Concordia security will charge me criminally if I return to campus within the next 24 hours.

There is one big problem with this request: that exam the next afternoon. (Not to mention the complete absurdity of arresting me after I had already removed the “trespassing table” which was only a problem because security decided to make it one.)

Immediately after being released, about ten of us gather and decide that we can’t allow this situation to go unchallenged. An urgent action is needed, so those who are still allowed by the security horde to step foot on campus go about preparing for a protest the following afternoon. The campus is plastered with pictures of the previous night’s arrest. A hundred or so students show up for a short outdoor protest, which increases by another hundred when the protest moves inside for some free food. The theme of the protest is “help Yves Engler attend his exam” and some placards are adorned with the slogan “Lowy [Concordia’s Rector] out! Yves in!” Later, dozens of people accompany me to my exam. Too bad a few of the better students couldn’t have helped me write it — my excuse for a poor mark is a lack of sleep due to all the excitement.

The entire experience is surreal, unlike anything that has happened to me since my hockey days. It’s like having a great game

when I seem able to skate around or through every opposing player. But instead of hearing a thousand fans cheering, I have become the focus of attention all across Canada. My arrest makes national TV newscasts that night and the story appears the following day in both national newspapers. I get phone calls from parents of my friends back in Vancouver. I get phone calls from my parents. I get phone calls from people I have never heard of before. It's like I am famous simply because I have stood up and said "I have the right to voice my opinion and the university can't stop me." Such a fuss for something that I had always thought was a basic democratic right.

◆ ◆ ◆ ON NOV. 1, 2002, 11 of us are told we face internal university charges over the anti-Netanyahu protest. (A few people — not me — also face criminal charges.) I am accused of being present on the mezzanine on Sept. 9, of "vexatious" conduct, of handing out leaflets on Oct. 16, and putting up stickers on university property. In other words, I am charged with being a student activist. Sanctions sought include expulsion from the university.

◆ ◆ ◆ AFTER MY ARREST (no charges were laid) for the anti-FTAA table the continued ban on discussion of Israel-Palestine issues attracts wide attention with almost unanimous media condemnation of the university's restrictions on free speech. Even the editorial board of the Montreal Gazette, normally no friend, takes our side. The ConU administration has succeeded in turning us into the proud defenders of free speech. We invite two members of Canada's Parliament to challenge the ban, but the administration goes to court to prevent them speaking on campus. The scorn heaped on the university finally becomes too much and less than a week later the ban is lifted.

◆ ◆ ◆ THE POSITIVE MEDIA attention we receive from our free speech fight soon ends, however. The day after the moratorium on Israel-Palestine discussion is lifted Hillel has a table on the Hall Building mezzanine where they distribute anti-Muslim, anti-Palestinian pamphlets and a recruiting brochure for the Israel Defence Forces. The uproar (which was obviously calculated) is immediate. An offended student files an internal charge against the Hillel club, under the university code of conduct. A couple of days later a motion comes to student council asking that Hillel's budget be frozen and its club privileges suspended until they apologize. I and two other executive members speak (we don't have a vote) against the motion, but it passes (only eight of 28 councilors are present) and the media onslaught, which had quieted somewhat, resumes. Again, I have to deal with media from around the world. Again, the CSU becomes the target of editorials from across Canada. We face wild accusations of dictatorial behavior and anti-Semitism.

◆ ◆ ◆ LATE IN JANUARY the hearings for our university charges begin. I am found guilty of vexatious conduct during the Sept. 9 protest and placing stickers for the anti-FTAA rally. My penalty is to be a one semester suspension and a \$500 fine. An appeal is immediately launched, but most interesting, the day after my "conviction" is announced, two of the three student tribunal members who have found me guilty attend a press conference where they announce that a member of the administration coerced them into making the decision.

◆ ◆ ◆ EVEN WHEN WE aren't trying to be political events seem to have a way of attracting attention and making life "interesting" — to say the least. In March, the annual Art Matters exhibit

organized by Fine Arts students includes an artist's representation of George Bush wearing a cowboy hat with the Twin Towers protruding, penis like, from his pants. The banner dominates the same mezzanine space that protestors had occupied Sept. 9th. Many, mostly supporters of the upcoming war in Iraq, are not amused and yet again, I am dealing with reporters from across North America. The campus has become the flashpoint of differing views. Once again Concordia is synonymous with left-wing student activism.

● ● ● THE TRUTH IS I never planned for any of the events that took over my life that year. The truth is, a few short years before I was playing junior hockey and was not involved in any way with politics. The question is how did I get from there to here?