

INTERVIEW: 'RACE TRAITOR' AUTHOR ELISA HATEGAN

Wednesday, 18 March 2015

This week, the former member of the Canadian White supremacist group Heritage Front who went on to help bring it down [announced that she was stepping away from political activity](#). And what activity it has been! Before she made the announcement, we were able to get in touch with her about her book on her life, *Race Traitor: The True Story of Canadian Intelligence Service's Greatest Cover-Up*, that we encourage everyone to pick up!

In the 1990s, a young Romanian immigrant Elisa Hategan was a prominent figure within neo-Nazi circles in Canada as a member of the racist Heritage Front and with her work with Holocaust denier Ernst Zundel. She was a speaker at rallies, a writer of several articles and she has also appeared on television programs like The Montel Williams Show. When things started to take a dark turn with the Heritage Front however, and she began to rethink her own perspectives about who she is and what direction she was going in, she not only left her old group, she provided enough information to anti-racist activists and government agencies to bring the Heritage Front down. Problem is, when you are providing help to a government agency that is working against you, that tends to make things that much worse. Over a decade after she left the hate behind, she has written a book about her life and experiences, Race Traitor: The True Story of Canadian Intelligence Service's Greatest Cover-Up.

You did something unique in writing this book. You didn't just write about how you got out of the white power scene, you also talked about how the government was complicit in its growth for whatever ends. Why do you think you are maybe the only one that has ever talked about this, despite how much it seems to happen?

I think that, for better or worse, I am simply a product of being in the right place at the right time to witness not only the growth of the most organized, violent white supremacist group Canada has ever seen, but also its downfall. And ironically, both that exponential growth and downfall came as a direct result of the activities of Canada's own intelligence agency, CSIS.

There was nothing intrinsically special about me other than my gender and my young age. I was a stupid, wounded little girl. But being the only girl inside the Heritage Front core group, a vulnerable sixteen-year old Romanian immigrant from an abusive household, allowed me the opportunity to be taken into the fold and into their trust. For over two years I was very close to the leadership of the Heritage Front and to Ernst Zundel, who used me for free labour inside the Toronto house from where he distributed Holocaust-revisionist propaganda all over the

world. Being that I was a runaway kid who needed their protection, it was easy for them to trust me. They treated me as their own kid, encouraged me to give speeches at rallies and paraded me around each time there was a media interview as the “softer face of the Heritage Front.” It was easy for HF co-leader Grant Bristow, who was later revealed to be a CSIS agent, to confide in me and teach me the psychological terror tactics that he had used to terrorize people in the anti-racist community. He took me for granted; he never saw me as a threat.

The reason this book is unique is because there just haven't been that many individuals who have witnessed what I have, and took the risk to become whistleblowers. Of course, there are tons of people who are undoubtedly aware of the role intelligence agencies often play in the building-up of terrorist groups, but don't get the opportunity to witness first-hand how such a process actually works. I felt it was very important - crucial actually - that beyond describing the step-by-step process of radicalization and indoctrination that a vulnerable young person might experience into an extremist group, to go higher. To reveal that often times, intelligence forces and police departments are complicit in fostering and even facilitating hate group activity.

In recent years we have seen a lot of the older, more established organizations fall apart (National Alliance, Aryan Nations, etc.) due to their elderly leaders passing on and those that are left incapable of maintaining them because of infighting, greed or just flat out incompetence. In your opinion, do you feel it was pretty much inevitable?

When it comes to hate, people will reach for whatever they think is the anti-establishment movement of the day. A hundred years ago it was the Klan. Twenty years ago, the neo-Nazi movement. Today, young white men are flocking in droves to the radical Islamic movement. I find that when it comes to impoverished, little-educated young people with inferior self-esteems, blaming others is a typical response. Hate does not know boundaries – it traverses race, religion and creed. People who have nothing always want whatever they can't have. They will hate and kill for it – even if it's just a utopian version of an idealized world, a fantasy where they will be recognized, appreciated and loved. But the paradox is, the less love you have within yourself, the more desperately you crave it. And somehow, you think that you can earn that love by proving what a bad-ass you are.

Of course it was inevitable that the white supremacist movement would fall apart, albeit the organized version of it. Skinheads who go to jail quickly realize that nobody from their group will actually visit them. As the old leaders die off or go silent due to lawsuits, the young increasingly turn to the virtual world. And the truth is, most people are more sensitized now to go out in public and admit they are racists. They're cautious to call another race a derogatory name, other than behind an anonymous handle on hate forums such as Stormfront.

But racism is alive more than ever before, especially as members of what used to think of itself as a majority realize that they are indeed the minority now. The hate is internalized, spewed via the internet, but it's still there. And that's what makes the extreme right-wing movement so dangerous globally – as the numbers of immigrants in Europe and North America grows, so do the ranks of extremist political groups such as the National Front in France or Greece's Golden Dawn, which actually came in *third* in the January 25, 2015 elections.

That leads me to another question. You are pretty vocal in encouraging others who are in those scenes to get out. You pretty much appeal to the fact that, as you wrote in an article on Anti-Racist Canada, "We all want to be happy. We all want to be loved. We all want to have a purpose. But in order to truly achieve those things, you have to open yourself up to the world." I see a lot of times when I deal with persons whether they are still in or trying to get out, that ultimately they are in situations in life where things are pretty much hopeless and they are looking for a way to gain purpose. I saw that with you as I was reading your book. Have you been able to talk one-on-one with people trying to get out and what has the experience been like?

How have conversations with those that have similarly left the white power scene been?

I buried my head in the sand for nearly two decades because I was terrified of facing the truth. I suffered from PTSD for at least 4-5 years after I left the Heritage Front, and I was scared the nightmares would return. I know the raw, hateful energy of people in extreme movements, and I didn't want to be touched by it. So no – with one exception (another girl who had been recruited by the same movement) I purposely avoided having conversations with others trying to get out. I hoped that by publishing an open letter to others via the Anti-Racist Canada site, or by doing interviews with groups like the One People's Project, that I can reach out to others virtually while at the same time keeping myself from being affected by hate.

For almost 20 years I insulated myself in a protective cocoon of artsy friends, creative groups, literary projects, and shut out that other, uglier side of the world I knew all too well. But eventually I realized that – as one of the few people who are fortunate enough to have left a movement, fought back and been able to articulate my experiences – I had no choice but to give testimony about the psychological process of radicalization and violence.

But I still have my limits. I've been asked several times to be part of a very important group called the Against Violent Extremism (AVE) Network, who do wonderful work and bring together former extremists and victims in order to educate the public about the dangers of hate and radicalism. And yet, as much as I'd love to participate in a project involving many courageous people, I still remember the hate all too palpably. To be honest, as a lesbian and a

Jew who knows what some of the ex-radicals in AVE would have done to me back then, the idea of participating has pushed me to the edge of my boundaries.

What about yourself? How do you feel you have dealt with moving on past those days?

As I mentioned before, for many years I pretty much buried my past. I lived in different cities, went by different names, and tried my best to have a “normal” life, whatever normal might have meant to me at the time. In other words, I didn’t speak about my radical past to anyone other than my closest friends, many of whom still didn’t know the nitty-gritty details until the book came out.

In the last few years, I became friends with another girl who had been part of that movement. Like almost all the girls I’d met back then, she was in her early 20s and brought into the group by a boyfriend. She stayed in it a couple of years, grew disenchanted with them and ultimately left. Her way of dealing with what she had done was to become an anti-racist speaker for several years. She would go up on a stadium, state “I was a neo-Nazi” and relive the experience over and over again, something that affected her deeply on an emotional level. But it was a strategy she had found to cope, her way of absolving her guilt.

We had lunch together last month and she confessed that even now she couldn’t forgive herself. At first, I didn’t understand why she would still be tormented by guilt – after all, she hadn’t done anything criminal/illegal while in the group and she more than made up for her mistakes by doing anti-racist activism for years afterwards, something commendable. But then I understood what it was about – back in the 1990s she hadn’t actually *done* anything proactive to shut down the group. She just walked away – she didn’t provide info to police or try to testify against anyone in court, as I had done. She took the easy way out. So no wonder she was still haunted by her demons. In my case, I was a lot younger than her when I became recruited (at barely sixteen, arguably still a child) and when I did leave the movement, I tried to take down the entire criminal organization by turning against them and using the law to send its leaders to prison.

Although it was incredibly painful and scary to still be a teenager and testify against a man you once thought of as your surrogate father, it enabled me to truly forgive myself later on – if only because I knew that I had something proactive and struck them at the core. I’d hit them hard enough that they never recovered, and after further legal troubles, the Heritage Front disbanded in the early 2000s. Canadian Intelligence’s ‘Operation Governor’ was disbanded in large part because I had exposed Grant Bristow’s role in building up the movement.

In the book you talked about your life as a gay woman, and in particular the realization that you were gay. Given the old life would you say that of all of your transformations that was particularly rough for you?

I am grateful for the realization that I was a lesbian because, as painful as it was, it helped me identify very strongly with the “other side”, so to speak. I had repressed it for years, but as my sexuality developed in my later teens I realized that I didn’t want to obey the leadership and date men. I was the only girl in that movement who never had a boyfriend the entire time I was involved. Since they were grooming me for a leadership position, people like Wolfgang Droege and Ernst Zundel were concerned that it might look bad somehow. Zundel in particular tried to fix me up with Anne Hartmann’s son Eric, and we hung out a couple of times, but the most we did was hold hands. Anne Hartmann, by the way, was a virulent anti-abortionist and top member of the Northern Foundation, the far right late 1980s group which also included many skinheads, Holocaust-deniers and even Canada’s current Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

When Grant Bristow, The HF’s ‘Head of Intelligence’ started targeting women – and lesbian activists in particular – for sexual harassment and sent skinheads to stalk them, I immediately identified with the women rather than the Heritage Front. This realization opened my eyes about the violence behind their racist rhetoric, and helped trigger the eventual chain of events where I spied on the Heritage Front and gathered evidence to shut them down.

The other ironic thing is, my father was Jewish. He died when I was only 13 years old and I didn’t even know much about his side of the family until I started digging into his past, years after I left the Heritage Front. I discovered the Jewish identity back in 2001, when I went back to Romania for the first time since emigrating to Canada at age 11. When I found out that I was half-Jewish, it triggered a soul-searching journey of self-discovery: I began genealogical research, met relatives, studied about Judaism. It ultimately led to me identifying as Jewish and undergoing a conservative Jewish conversion ceremony two years ago.

The book has been available for a few months now. How has the book been received so far?

I first released it in eBook format only, thinking I might be able to persuade a publisher to pick up print rights. Immediately it sold a few hundred copies (I priced it low, at only \$3.99 so it would be accessible to all). A Jewish community leader in Toronto, Bernie Farber of the Canadian Jewish Congress, wrote a letter on my behalf to the director of Random House Canada, trying to persuade her to take a look at the book. We never received a single reply. Random House being, of course, the publisher who had rejected my manuscript two years earlier with the line “I can’t see a broad market for this book,” and stating that the issue of racism and white supremacy was dead in Canada.

So I had no choice but to publish it in print in October 2014, because people were asking for a physical copy. I sold about 100 copies right away, and then things died down for a while. I became very depressed and felt hopeless, thinking that perhaps the mainstream media and publishers were right – that the story of what happened in this country didn’t matter anymore.

Mainstream journalists told me, point-blank, that they were only covering stories involving Muslims as terrorists. Any mention of white supremacists, etc., was buried by their editorial staff.

Even this past month, after a terror plot involving a shooting at a shopping centre by three white supremacists was uncovered, Canada's own Minister of Justice Peter MacKay refused to call them terrorists. He stated they were only lone, murderous misfits, and was quoted as stating: "the attack does not appear to have been culturally motivated, therefore not linked to terrorism." We live in a climate where the mainstream press has been racist and Islamophobic by carefully screening all terror attacks by skin colour: only Muslims can be dangerous. When a Christian massacres almost 100 defenceless youth on Utoya Island in Norway, murders innocents outside a Kansas City synagogue (on the heels of Holocaust-denier David Irving's talk two weeks earlier), plots a Halifax Valentine's Day massacre or shoots 3 innocent Muslims in Chapel Hill execution-style, they just misguided, lone misfits.

But there is a growing backlash against this overt racism, and this has led to voices in alternative media to be heard increasingly more. I would say that so far I've sold approx. a thousand copies of my book in the past twelve months. It's not a great amount, but for a self-published book it's not bad. Most of all, I've been very grateful for the new friendships I've made with people who have written me and informed me that I made the right decision to come forward with my story.

I want to note also that there is another book you have written also titled Race Traitor, but this was a fictional account. Would you want to talk about what led you to write that and what would you want to see people take from it?

Back in 2010 when I finished writing my memoir, I entered negotiations with Penguin Canada over it. Over several discussion meetings with their editorial and marketing team, I grew increasingly scared about what might happen if I went public with my story. Penguin's editors demanded that I nurture a platform, i.e. do speaking engagements and public appearances, but didn't offer to pay for the security I might need. They also wanted to acquire my book without really offering me any compensation that could pay for such security. So when I walked away from the deal, after one month of negotiations, I was too scared to go forward on my own.

I took about three months and converted the manuscript into a fictional narrative, a thriller – it was around the time *Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* had come out and my literary agent at the time thought he could sell a thriller easier than a memoir most Canadian publishers had dubbed as irrelevant (according to them, white supremacy didn't exist anymore).

As it turned out, the thriller didn't sell and I parted ways with my agent. However, I don't regret publishing it because it allowed me to speak about the real issues of far-right extremism for the

first time in almost 20 years. Under the guise of fiction, I could also speak of attacks that happened back then – particularly a horrific rape organized by an HF leader – without having to go by Penguin’s litigation department. The other reason I was scared of publishing the memoir was because I was trying to protect my partner and family. I’m not eighteen anymore, I have more to lose now and I have to consider that others might be hurt because of my decision to publish the book.

However, the thriller was a flop and everybody who did read it kept asking me about the REAL story. I was still too scared to tell it until last spring - that’s when I fell into a deep depression and all I could think of was to kill myself. That is when I realized, since I wanted to die anyway, that I had nothing to lose. So I published the true story of what took place in the 1990s.

Ultimately, what do you want people to get out of the book and the work you have done and are still doing?

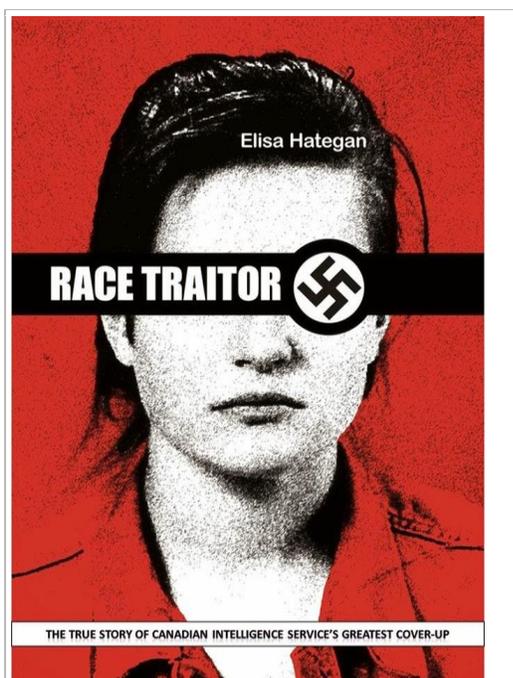
It’s an easy answer – people have to remember that history which is forgotten is doomed to repeat itself. Case in point is this terrible, intrusive new legislation brought forward by Canada’s right-wing government – Bill C-51 would strip Canadians of all basic privacy and anybody who protests or is an activist will be at risk of being labeled a “terrorist.” If they pass this law, CSIS (Canadian Intelligence Security Service, our version of the CIA) will be able to detain people without warrants, seize bank accounts, tap phones and all communication without restraint, etc. It’s a frightening law that has drawn criticism from over 100 law professors, countless lawyers, even right-wing and ex-CSIS agents. And yet so many Canadians have bought the BS fed to them by the media and think that such loss of privacy is a “necessary evil” to protect themselves against terrorism. “What are you afraid of, if you have nothing to hide?” is the simplistic, repetitive response when confronted with the realization of what’s about to happen.

As a young girl, a teenager, I witnessed our intelligence agency co-found, finance and direct a group of violent skinheads (many of them ex-Airborne Regiment soldiers) who terrorized, stalked and assaulted innocent community activists. To this day, Canada doesn’t have an efficient overseer to this spy agency. An ex-CSIS agent was in the press just a few days ago stating that “CSIS sanitizes its files before handing them over to SIRC” (the agency that is supposed to oversee CSIS).

These people have gotten away with burning barns, blowing up Quebecois separatists’ offices, creating and financing a white supremacist terrorist group, spied illegally on Aboriginal movements such as Idle No More and anti-fracking protestors, and now they are about to gain a legal carte blanche to potentially terrorize political opponents with impunity.

My book is only a small drop in the wave against the increasingly right-wing political regime that Edward Snowden described as having the “weakest framework for an overseer of

intelligence agencies in the Western world.” And because of this, because of having been exploited and brainwashed as a girl, because of the crimes and wrongdoings I saw being perpetrated against innocent people, I have no choice but to stand up and tell my story.



***Race Traitor: The True Story of
Canadian Intelligence Service's
Greatest Cover-Up***, by Elisa Hategan

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One People's Project will have
paperback editions available at our
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