

**“Concerned Edmontonians” protest**

# Hayes lectures: greed and stupidity

by Glenn St-Germain

On October 7, 1970, Billy Hayes was arrested at the Istanbul Airport for attempting to smuggle two kilos of hashish out of the country. He was imprisoned and sentenced to just over four years.

With 53 days left in his sentence, the high court in Ankara changed his sentence to thirty years. He managed to obtain a transfer to an island prison, from which he escaped in October 1975.

When he returned home, he became an instant celebrity. A book he wrote on his experience in Turkey was made into a Hollywood motion picture; both were entitled *Midnight Express*.

Eleven years after his return to the west, William Hayes makes his living as an actor, and speaks about the *Midnight Express* experience on the lecture circuit. On September 16th, he spoke at the University of Alberta, in SUB Theatre.

American writer and actor William (“Billy”) Hayes spoke about his experience in a Turkish prison and his life afterward to a packed SUB Theatre Tuesday night. The lecture and preceding screening of the film *Midnight Express* were protested by a group who called Hayes and the movie racist.

Hayes gave his version of the events surrounding his arrest, incarceration, escape, and return to America, explaining along the way how they were distorted by the film version of his book.

In the movie, Hayes remains in a jail in Istanbul until he escapes by killing a prison guard who was attempting to sexually assault him. In reality, he was transferred to an island prison, stole a rowboat, rowed across 20 miles of sea to the mainland, and crossed the Turkish-Greek border at night a few weeks later.

When he returned to the United States, he expected a quiet return to a normal life. Television cameras were waiting at the airport when he finally made it back home. He became a celebrity; an offer to make the movie *Midnight Express* was made before he had finished writing it.

“I couldn’t believe they made a movie,” he said. “I was made a hero for something I wasn’t proud of.”

Hayes said his motivation for attempting to smuggle out two kilograms of hashish in foil-wrapped cakes taped to his body was greed, “with stupidity as an underlying factor.”

“I thought I could get away with it.”

He added there were several things about the film he did not like. Some of the points were addressed in the handbill passed out by protesters.

Entitled “Billy Hayes: Drug Smuggler Turned Hero!”, the leaflet distributed by a group calling themselves “Concerned Edmontonians for Racial Hatred and Drugs” denounced the film and lecture.

“All this is done at the expense of a nation and its decent people,” read the handbill.

Hayes addressed the topic of the handbill and protest in his lecture, agreeing with the protesters’ statement that the movie is unfair to the Turkish people.

“It does not portray Turkish people rightfully,” he said. “There is not one good Turk in the film.”

He added that he would have liked to have the film show nice Turks to counterbalance the negative portrayals in the film.

“The book is my story. (The film-makers) took my story and used it to make a political statement.”

“The movie... portrays the Turkish nation as dirty and inferior,” read the handbill. “This constitutes



Protesters interviewed by CBC

photo Keith Zukowski

a racial prejudice, in fact the film is racist and anti-Turkish.”

The purpose of the handbill was to protest the racist presentation, according to group spokesman Kadri Kaleli. He did admit, however, that he was surprised that Hayes presented a different view than the film.

“I have nothing against him (Hayes) personally,” he said, adding he was still suspicious about certain details of Hayes’ version of the story, most notably his escape.

“How do we know he didn’t exaggerate in his book?” he asked.

Lindy Sisson, Promotions Coordinator for the Students’ Union, was a bit surprised at the action of the protestors.

“I can understand why they’re upset at the movie,” she said, “but why they’re doing it to Billy Hayes is beyond me.”

She added that the group had not discussed what Hayes was going to say prior to the show.

“Why didn’t they just come to

us? Billy Hayes supports half of the things in the paper,” she said, referring to the handbill.

She also noted that the handbill accused Hayes of being a homosexual.

Hayes also spoke about his experiences after returning to North American society. His current vocation, acting, has helped him overcome some of the experience of his incarceration, in that it helps him connect with people and break down the emotional blocks he had built in prison. He also lectures at high schools and universities in the U.S. and Canada, sharing his experience about self-discovery, the rediscovery of things we take for granted, and widened perspectives on life.

“I want to affect people,” he said.

This came out in the question and answer session following the lecture. Hayes said the main reason for the lecture was to share his experience and to correct the film’s distortion of the events in his life.

Several questions were posed by members of the Edmonton Turkish

community, challenging Hayes’ statements about the Turkish prison system and justice system. Hayes agreed with the protestors’ concerns about the film’s negative portrayal of Turks as people, but condemned the justice and prison systems as inept and hypocritical.

The audience burst into applause at several points during the discussion, especially when Hayes successfully defended himself against accusations from hecklers regarding the authenticity of his story.

Hayes conveyed to the audience the feel of an ordinary person who has gone through an extraordinary experience. Hayes was 23 when he was arrested, and thought he could get away with smuggling drugs.

“Basically, I wasn’t thinking,” he said.

The main message he got across to the audience was one of responsibility:

“Do what you like with your life, but know what you’re doing!”

Hayes didn’t know what he was doing in 1970 and paid the price. He wants to help others avoid making that mistake.

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