

Reel Corner: Interview with Deborah Lipstadt

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Transcribed by Word Wizards, Inc.

WIFV: It has been 16 years since the sensational libel trial in the UK pitting you against Holocaust denier David Irving, and nearly 13 years since your book, [History on Trial: My Day in Court with the Holocaust Denier](#), was published. So why did the producers of DENIAL decide to make this film now, and how did they and director Mick Jackson make all this happen?

LIPSTADT: Yes, it is 16 years since the trial, which is important. The history of how it happened, I will tell you in a compact fashion. The producers happened to come across the story of my trial. One of them was surfing the Web, looking at colleges. His son was applying to college and he saw a story on the Emory University page about a historian who had established a website about her libel trial, and he read it. And then they saw there was a book, so they got the book and they read it.

And the other producer, at that point, had also been listening to Ahmadinejad's speeches in the UN. And the two of them came together, and they said 'Denial in the UN, denial in the Academy, what is going on here?' So they read the book and they reached out to me. One came to visit me at Emory. And then I was speaking in LA, and they came to hear me, and they began to approach me about optioning the book. And in all our discussions I got to know them a little bit; I knew some of their other work.

But my emphasis was, this is a story about truth and you have got to stick to the truth. And whether I could trust them not to say – well, you know – 'what we are going to do is, in the final court scene we will have someone present to the judge the plans of someone (who meets Barrister Rampton on the corner) and says "Here are plans for the gas chambers.' Or for Rampton to come in and say, 'We have [the actual] plans for the gas chambers.' Didn't happen that way.

Everything that happened in the film, it is true. You know, there are certain liberties, things are collapsed. I may have gotten a phone call in my office and instead they have me getting it while jogging. But every single word that is in the courtroom scene, every single word that comes out of [plaintiff] David Irving's mouth is as he said it.

WIFV: That is incredible.



Author Deborah E. Lipstadt (right) with actor Rachel Weisz, who is portraying Lipstadt in the film DENIAL Photo courtesy of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

LIPSTADT: Yeah. Because how can you write a screenplay? David Hare [the screenwriter] was terrific on this issue and he understood this so well. How can you write a screenplay about truth -- and play with the truth to say -- well, it's not exactly as it happened, but it is our interpretation of it as it happened, that kind of thing.

WIFV: So would you say that DENIAL comes very close to both the substance and the spirit of your book? Do you think it genuinely captured the trial's historical significance and honored the dead and the survivors alike?

LIPSTADT: I think it comes very, very close. Look, the movie I would have made, would have been four hours long -- and that would have been the short version!

WIFV: Of course!

LIPSTADT: You hear that probably from everybody you interview, right? And I think that there are portions of the story I would have loved to have seen in there. There is the great support I received from Emory University. They supported me long before we knew this would be front page news, long before we knew this would be a movie and everything in between. And they supported me because they thought this was something important. They told me we expect our professors to be great researchers, great teachers and morally engaged-- and this is that. I would have liked that to be in there. I would also have liked more examples of how this man [David Irving] twisted the truth. We have that wonderful example of *Jodentransport aus Berlin* [Jewish transport], but we had 35 examples of that. So [ideally] I would have liked 20 of them in the film! But by and large, those are small gripes.

WIFV: With its complex exploration of so many issues, what would you like audiences to take away from this film?

LIPSTADT: I think the film has a very important -- I don't want to say -- 'message.' I think films with messages are either documentaries or bad movies, you know? But I would hope the takeaway for the movie is, first of all, this: there are facts and there are opinions and there are lies. If I say to you it's my opinion that the earth is flat, I can say that over and over again, but that doesn't make it an opinion; it is based on a lie.

And what deniers were trying to do -- and David Irving was their key for this -- was to enter the conversation as an opinion. When he stands up in that public lecture and says [what he does] -- he wants to debate me, and I won't debate him. It is a terrible moment for me because I feel like I'm losing control, I don't have control of the situation, and the students think -- oh, he must really have something to say.

WIFV: It must have been so difficult to restrain yourself.

LIPSTADT: But I had to, I had to. But I didn't know what to do. Rachel [Weisz] asked me how it was for me, and I said I was like a deer in headlights, and she captures that. You look at her eyes in that scene ...

WIFV: She does.

LIPSTADT: Yes, she really does.

WIFV: She was brilliant.

LIPSTADT: Oh, yes, she was. They would say, 'So who will play you in the movie?' And I'd say I don't care if you are a man or a woman or a giraffe or whatever, I just hope you get someone of the caliber, the fine acting caliber of a Rachel Weisz and the professionalism of a Rachel Weisz and the humanity of a Rachel Weisz.

WIFV: Well, you beat me to my next question because I was going to ask you, what did you feel when you saw Rachel Weisz up there on the screen and with a Queens accent, no less!

LIPSTADT: Well I had watched, I was on the set a lot so I saw some of those things being done. But when I saw the whole thing together -- the first time I saw it -- they were screening it before a test audience in New Jersey. And I flew in for that. I was in Chicago for a meeting. I didn't go to dinner with people. I just got on a plane, flew to New Jersey, saw it and then flew back the next morning to continue the meeting. And when I walked out, everyone was there because it was a test audience, but I walked out before the audience responded because they were afraid someone would recognize me or know it was me or something.

And standing out in the Multiplex, as I was rushing out to get into the car to go back to Chicago, I said to them (Mick Jackson was there and Russ and Gary, and Andrew Karpen from Bleecker) -- I said 'we will talk tomorrow, I can't talk.' I was just so overwhelmed by the whole thing. And when I saw it with Howard Shore's music -- the music, it was just -- the whole thing, I think, was very, very powerful. And I am getting very positive reactions from academics who were trained not to like anything!

WIFV: That's hilarious. Well, I thought the film was amazing.

LIPSTADT: I think that Mick really let the story evolve on its own. He came very close to what was true. Look, they even copied my ring! [shows a large, beautifully crafted silver ring on her finger]

WIFV: That's unbelievable.

LIPSTADT: Rachel wore my scarves – not this scarf, but I have that orange scarf upstairs [in the hotel room]. You know, all to just get it right.

WIFV: And her hair!

LIPSTADT: Yes, yes. Someone said her hair was red and bushy. I said, 'Yeah, during the trial, my hair was red, just like now.'

WIFV: Did she capture your feistiness?

LIPSTADT: I think she did.

WIFV: And your determination?

LIPSTADT: I think she did. And she talks about it as being a very liberating role to play because she said, 'You know, I am a Brit and I am, like, reserved and all of that, and this gave me a chance to be upfront.'

WIFV: An upfront, feisty New Yorker.

LIPSTADT: Yeah. Well, did you see The New Yorker, Talk of the Town? Where she [Rachel Weisz] says [about me] 'you're not a wallflower'? At one point in an interview with The LA Times she called me a 'pain in the ass,' which, of course, I thought was a great compliment. And I think she meant it as one.

WIFV: For that ordeal, you needed to be a pain in the ass!

LIPSTADT: That is exactly right, that is exactly right.

WIFV: So let's talk a bit about the serious aspects. In your scholarly opinion, in general, what really seems to motivate most of these holocaust deniers; why do they do it?

LIPSTADT: I think that it is the same thing that motivated most of the killers during the Third Reich – anti-Semitism. At its heart, Holocaust denial is nothing but anti-Semitism – oh, with a veneer of, for many people, racism, certainly that, too. But they are anti-Semites, so they look at the world through glasses and lenses that have an anti-Semitic veneer to them. And they see the Jews having

done this awful thing in order to get money to get a state, whatever it might be, and it's anti-Semitism. And anti-Semitism is prejudiced; and prejudice, pre-judges. It's [all about] don't confuse me with the facts; I have made up my mind. And so it's illogical, it is irrational, it doesn't make sense. But it is really anti-Semitism.

WIFV: Is it also a form of control and power?

LIPSTADT: Well, it is certainly a form of control. As I've said, you know, you have facts, you have opinion and you have lies. And they are trying to enter the conversation as an opinion and to migrate over into a fact. And you know, if I said to you the earth is flat, that is my opinion. And you would say that is not an opinion; that is crazy. They are trying to take a lie, and make it sound like an opinion, so that it can then migrate into the world of facts. And they are intent on doing that. Look, they are not the only ones. We have Sandy Hook deniers. Now there are people denying the murder of those little children.

WIFV: That is so disturbing.

LIPSTADT: We have 9/11 deniers, that it was all done by the CIA or the Mossad, and the Jews were warned not to come there. We have vaccine deniers – it is based on junk science – but you know, that vaccines cause autism or whatever. It is all over the place.

WIFV: So what do you say to the fact that there are still so many deniers out there and that state sponsored deniers are heavily involved in international politics?

LIPSTADT: Well, certainly in Iran you still have state sponsored denial; and then you have denial of their denial, where they say 'we are not really denying.' It is very disturbing.

But there is another phenomenon which I think is even more disturbing -- and that is, if the David Irving and Iranian kind of denial is hardcore denial, you also have softcore denial. So you have people who say, oh, I am tired of hearing about the Holocaust. And you have other people who say, I am tired of hearing about slavery.

Slavery was a central element of our country. I didn't have any family here during slavery, but I grew up in this country, I was born in this country, I am part of this country. I have to recognize the significance of slavery in shaping this country and shaping the lives of African Americans, even those born many generations after slavery. To say 'too much slavery, I have heard enough,' or to

say 'I have heard enough of the Holocaust' or 'You Jews are always talking about the Holocaust' is

a denigration, and that's a form of denial. I think it doesn't matter where you stand and who you are. I think that people have to be very careful about using the Holocaust for political advantage, as a way of attacking others.

And that is why I am so glad they took such care in making the film and were so sensitive about the film. [I'm talking about] everyone who was involved [in DENIAL] – the producers, David Hare, Mick Jackson, Rachel Weisz and the other actors. You know, in Toronto, when they came out on the stage after the premier of the film, a thousand people stood up and gave the actors, the producers and the director a standing ovation. And then everyone sat down and Mick Jackson said, 'Oh, and we have Deborah Lipstadt here,' and the whole place erupted!

WIFV: Wow!

LIPSTADT: It was amazing, amazing, amazing.

WIFV: I am getting goosebumps.

LIPSTADT: Yeah, I got goosebumps. It was really an amazing moment.

WIFV: I thought Tom Wilkinson, as the brilliant barrister, was phenomenal.

LIPSTADT: Yeah. Here we are in a thousand seat theater and someone passes him the mic and asks, "What was it like to film at Auschwitz?" and he says, 'I don't need the mic, I have been on the stage often enough.' And he just talked – I can't even remember the exact words he said. I am sure someone taped it. And he talked about, you know, what an awesome responsibility it was for an actor and what an awful place it is. And Rachel talked about how she was just struck by the vastness of the place and the industrialization of killing. And the producers did something very important. They brought the entire crew there a day early and we spent a day visiting the camp and the museum. Instead of getting there at 5:00 pm and then the next morning they say okay, you are on the set, let's start filming. So it gave people a day to see the place, to acclimate, and to somehow adjust, and I think that was very important.

WIFV: And I thought it was very moving, that you said *Kaddish* at Auschwitz.

LIPSTADT: Yeah, yeah – I said the memorial prayer, *El Malei Rahamim* – God Full of Mercy. And that is exactly what happened. That is exactly what happened.

WIFV: Thank you so much.