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Human-rights advocate is 'Justice Hunter' in new doc

Renowned city lawyer David Matas gets documentary about his life... and looks pretty good in cape and tights, too

By: **Kevin Rollason**

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Most people who take on global injustices don't wear a cape and tights.

Internationally known Winnipeg lawyer and human-rights crusader David Matas is not most people.

The Justice Hunter, as he's depicted in a new children's book with that title, wears his familiar round wire-frame eyeglasses. But his regular street clothes have been replaced by a blue top emblazoned with a capital D inside a red Star of David, blue tights and a red cape.



The book is a companion to a documentary about his life and advocacy, also titled *The Justice Hunter*, produced by local filmmaker Yolanda Papini-Pollock, who authored the book, as well.

B'nai Brith Canada is honouring Matas by hosting a screening of the film and launch of the book Tuesday evening.

"I didn't write the book," the tireless 81year-old Matas said with a chuckle as he took a short pit stop at his home in Winnipeg.

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of Falun Gong, a spiritual movement in the atheist communist state.

Matas then flew to England as B'nai Brith's representative at the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance meetings, which was attended by 35 member and eight observer countries.

Then Matas was off to South Korea for a meeting with government officials about the Falun Gong issue, which was also the purpose of his appearance at a November hearing before the House of Lords in London.

He's not bothered by the dizzying pace required to do the work.

"Over the years, I have advocated for positions which haven't materialized while others have. When the government makes changes, they don't say, "David Matas supported it." I've come to realize successful advocacy is getting people to say things you said and adopt (them as if) they said it themselves."

Papini-Pollock has known Matas for several years, but only recently decided to create the documentary and children's book.

"The man, in a word, is a legend."

-Marty York

"I think he is one of the most incredible people ever," she said. "The deals with his fights against antisemitism, his work against Nazi war

criminals in Canada, his help for the refugee community and his work with Falun Gong. But there's so much more he has done.

"I would need to have a sequel to get in all of the other issues he has taken on."

B'nai Brith communications director Marty York said Matas has worked with the organization since being appointed chair of its League for Human Rights in 1983.

"The man, in a word, is a legend who has been on the forefront of so many important causes," said York.

"David is generally a quiet individual, but he speaks loudly and eloquently, and fiercely, when need be... David has literally made it his mission in life to bring criminals to justice."

Matas was born in Winnipeg in 1943.

He initially graduated from university with a mathematics degree and followed that up with a master's degree in economics from Princeton University. After that, following his late uncle, former Manitoba Court of Appeal Justice Roy Matas, he decided to become a lawyer. He graduated from Oxford University in 1968.

But, instead of immediately being called to the bar — which occurred in 1971 — he first served as a law clerk for the chief justice of the Supreme Court of Canada and began working on a doctorate in economics at Princeton, which he decided not to complete.

Matas became a barrister in England in 1969 before being called to Manitoba Bar in 1971. He began working as a special assistant with the

newly created Solicitor General's office before joining a Winnipeg law firm in 1973.



RUTH BONNEVILLE / FREE PRESS

David Matas's tireless career as a lawyer and human rights advocate is being featured in a new children's book and documentary.

Since 1979, Matas has been a sole practitioner.

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Among other honours, Matas has received the Governor General's Confederation medal and Manitoba Association of Rights and Liberties' outstanding achievement award, been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize and inducted into the Order of Canada.

And while he no longer represents clients in court based on an agreement with the Law Society of Manitoba (the reason for the agreement has not been made public) — which he admitted to having breached and was disciplined for earlier this year — he continues to practise as an independent counsel assisting other lawyers.

As for future advocacy, Matas says "there's always something. Thankfully, my health has held up. I'm still dealing with current events. It's not realistic to see, in my lifetime, the end of all human-rights violations, but I'm hoping to encourage people to get involved to advocate.

"Unless we continue to do that, human-rights violations will not be going away."

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Kevin Rollason *Reporter*

Kevin Rollason is a general assignment reporter at the *Free Press*. He graduated from Western University with a Masters of Journalism in 1985 and worked at the *Winnipeg Sun* until 1988, when he joined the *Free Press*. He has served as the Free Press's city hall and law courts reporter and has won several awards, including a National Newspaper Award. Read more about Kevin.

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