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HEADLINE: Was he **courageous**, or just plain crazy?;
Why would any sane filmmaker approach random New Yorkers to talk
about a Jewish conspiracy theory, asks SIMON HOUPT

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BODY:

How many Jews died in the Sept. 11 attacks on the World Trade Center? If you ask the New York City medical examiner's office, you won't get an answer: Officials were forbidden from collecting information on the religion of the dead. A scan of the victims' names - including **Levin**, Jacobson, Lutnick, Kestenbaum and so on - suggests a number in the hundreds. Yet despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, in the days after Sept. 11, the word in some circles was that no Jews were killed, that they'd somehow received advance warning of the attacks. The belief has persisted, often coupled with dark references to the conspiracy theory outlined in the book ***Protocols of the Elders of Zion***.

So a couple of years ago, filmmaker Marc **Levin** hit the streets of New York with his camera to dig into the myth's resilience, to engage people in conversation and see what happened. Sitting now on a leather couch in his 17th-storey office just north of ground zero, **Levin** says he figured, "If you can talk about sports and girls and sex and money on the street with people, why can't you talk about religion and hate and all these heavy things?" The result is his new documentary ***Protocols of Zion***, which has its Canadian premiere tomorrow night at the Toronto Jewish Film Festival.

Levin, 54, is well versed in conspiracy theories. Through more than 20 years of making documentaries (PBS's *Frontline*), dramatic TV series

(*Street Time*) and feature films (*Slam*) that gave voice to those on the margins of society, his work has brought him into contact with some of the most extreme beliefs out there.

Yet he was still taken aback when he kept hearing about **Protocols** in the months after Sept. 11.

For those unacquainted, **Protocols** is the likely source of the theory of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy. Created by the Russian Czar's secret police in the late 1800s, when they were looking for a scapegoat to blame for political upheaval, **Protocols** is a collection of writings that purports to be the minutes of a secret meeting of Jewish elders held to reaffirm a plan to run the world.

When **Levin** first read **Protocols** in the early 1970s, it seemed a joke, like some sort of hallucinogenic edition of R. Crumb's Zap Comix series. But that was before he knew that it had been taken seriously by powerful people like Henry Ford, who gave away a free copy with every new car in the 1920s before realizing it was a fraud and ceasing the promotion.

Protocols is so incendiary that some people in the Jewish community urged **Levin** to abandon the project because they were worried it would incite attacks against Jews. A few of his investors asked him to change the title of his film, worried that it would popularize the book.

But in the fall of 2002, an Arabic language newspaper in Patterson, N.J., republished **Protocols**. This was around the same time that a 41-part miniseries, a dramatic adaptation of the book aired on Egyptian television. **Levin** discovered the book is available for sale at Wal-Mart. The notion of hoping **Protocols** would just go away on its own, seemed increasingly absurd.

"In the end, look, light is the great disinfectant," says **Levin**. "Open it up. Yes, there will be a few that have never heard of it, that discover it, that embrace it, that may even see parts of this movie where they see someone and think, 'That lunatic is saying something I believe in.' But that's a risk you take."

Levin's lunatics include professional haters such as Shaun Walker of the neo-Nazi group National Alliance, Frank Weltner of JewWatch.com and the Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, a long-time anti-Semite who attacked Jews in a notorious October, 2003, speech for inventing human rights and democracy as a way of vaulting

themselves into a position of equality with other peoples of the world.

"I'm attracted to extreme characters, of all types," admits **Levin**. One of his first films was *Portrait of an American Zealot* (1982), about the growing power of the Christian Right. " I guess it's an intensity that I relate to. I disagree with a lot, depending on what the ideology is behind it, but there is something I respect, in a weird way, about people that aren't just thinking about shopping, and kind of normal, middle-class consciousness of what constitutes success and making a good living."

Levin puts on-screen not just the professionals but also the less articulate masses that he found on the streets of New York spouting inchoate hatred. One man, who insists that 33 cents of every bottle of Pepsi sold goes to Israel, points to Mayor Michael Bloomberg as proof that Jews run the world. When confronted with the fact that Bloomberg's predecessor was an Italian named Giuliani, he yells back, "Jew-liani! Jew-liani!"

"It's a brilliant performance," admits **Levin**, chuckling now. "It's a great punch line. He won the crowd, he won me at that moment. That's a New York moment. That is part of why I went out. People said, 'Are you stupid, are you crazy, are you courageous?' It was a sense of, Hey, this is New York. If you look at the faces in the crowd, it's such a motley mix of humanity. If we can't find some way to jam on the streets of New York, then what hope is there?"

On the other side of the country, though, he hit nothing but walls. His requests to meet with Louis Farrakhan and Mel Gibson were denied. Even an attempt to get some Jewish creative leaders in Hollywood together to rap about Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* - people such as Larry David, Norman Lear, Rob Reiner - met with polite but firm rejections. "I think I was naive in a way," **Levin** says now. "I was well aware of the ambivalent history of Jewish identity in Hollywood - the sense that the guys that created Hollywood, some of these Jews who came from Europe, did everything they could to de-Judaize themselves, both in their personal lives and in the movies that they made. They created this Norman Rockwell image of America, and that is part of the immigrant experience as well. But I guess I naively didn't think that it would be 60 years later, in the third or fourth generation, played out as alive as maybe it is."

Levin himself isn't a practising Jew, and this is only the second time that he's explored Jewish themes in his work. He had his bar mitzvah,

as did his children, but he has strong issues with any organized religion. He recalls that when he first visited Israel in the early 1970s, standing at the Western Wall, "I was just overwhelmed by the contradiction, by whether more people have been helped or saved by God, or killed in the name of God." Despite those doubts, there's at least one concrete result of **Protocols**: For the first time in many years, inspired by his work on the film, **Levin** just joined a synagogue.

Protocols of Zion screens at the Bloor Cinema, 506 Bloor St. W., at 8 p.m. tomorrow (www.tjff.com, 416-324-9121).

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