

Opening Up

The Canadian Museum for Human Rights' amazing journey from idea to icon.

Written by Gail Asper

On September 19, 2014, the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (“the Museum”) opened its doors to the world in Winnipeg, Canada. Fourteen years in development, the Museum is Canada’s first national museum to be established outside the Ottawa capital region—and the first museum in the world to be focused on the evolution of human rights in Canada and around the world.

As I looked out on the crowd of donors, dignitaries, volunteers, human rights advocates, and community, business and government leaders who were in attendance at the opening ceremonies, I couldn’t help but think back over the past 14 years and reflect on this amazing odyssey. My eyes filled with tears as I thought of my late father, Israel Asper, O.C., O.M., Q.C., LL.D., who had conceived of the idea in the summer of 2000 and had spent every waking moment of the last three years of his life working to make his dream a reality. It was incredibly tragic that neither he nor my mother, Babs Asper, who passed away in 2011, were here for this thrilling moment.

It seemed like only yesterday it was 1997—when my dad stepped back from his role as chair of Canwest Global Communications Corp. (the international media company he’d developed from nothing), and he expressed concern to me about the rise of anti-Semitism and racism in the world. He felt it important to develop a student program for young Canadians that would teach them about the Holocaust, with a view to sensitizing them to the consequences of racism and complacency. And so, using his private charitable foundation, the Asper Foundation, we established The Asper Foundation Human Rights & Holocaust



PHOTO BY IAN MUCCAUSLAND

FIRST PERSON
GAIL ASPER

Studies program. The program involved taking Grade 9 students, some Jewish, others not, through a specially developed education program, culminating in a trip to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

Although I was working as general legal counsel and corporate secretary at Canwest Global Communications Corp., I was very keen to become more involved in this exciting and impactful program.

We soon hired a full-time executive director, Moses (Moe) Levy, to expand the program; our only goal at that time was to bring as many students as possible to Washington.

What concerned me was that the program had a very American focus and I felt we needed to take the students to Ottawa. My father concurred, but to my amazement and Moe's, back in 2000, Ottawa's institutions had no human rights content. Efforts to explore the Holocaust in the new War Museum had been cancelled and the Museum of Civilization contained no

content relating to Canada's major human rights documents, such as the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, or failures such as the residential schools.

On July 18, 2000, my father and Moe Levy contemplated the creation of a new "Museum of Tolerance." Within hours, my dad selected the ideal site for such a museum: a vacant parking lot at the historic forks of the Red and Assiniboine rivers. In typical entrepreneurial zeal, he urged Moe to get this piece of land tied up by the end of the week and to his credit, although it took *a bit* longer, the land on which the Museum now stands was indeed the land my father spotted within a few hours of the very first discussion of the idea.

Moe was dispatched to develop a thorough feasibility plan that would involve analyzing every aspect of the project: cost to build, cost to run, prospective visitorship, content, funding options, governance and revenue sources. In the end, he produced a massive three-volume study that was presented to then prime minister Jean Chrétien. He endorsed the idea of the Museum wholeheartedly and committed \$100 million to build the project, subject to it being matched by the private sector and other levels of government.

Moe and I had crisscrossed the country, talking to countless individuals and groups to determine their support for the Museum. We explained that the basic galleries would include



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an introduction to the concept of human rights, a gallery on Aboriginal issues, a full exploration of Canada's human rights history, a gallery for the Charter and other significant Canadian human rights documents, a gallery dedicated to the Holocaust (followed by galleries dealing with the world's response to the Holocaust), a gallery highlighting other major human rights violations, and galleries exploring human rights issues of today and the modern defenders of human rights.

In addition, we focused on the Museum's main goal: to inspire all visitors to take personal responsibility for the protection and advancement of human rights here in Canada and around the world.

The exhibits were enthusiastically supported by the many groups we spoke to, which included Aboriginal groups, many ethnic groups, women's groups, gay and lesbian organizations, the Canadian military, disability groups, and the Francophone community, to name but a few. And

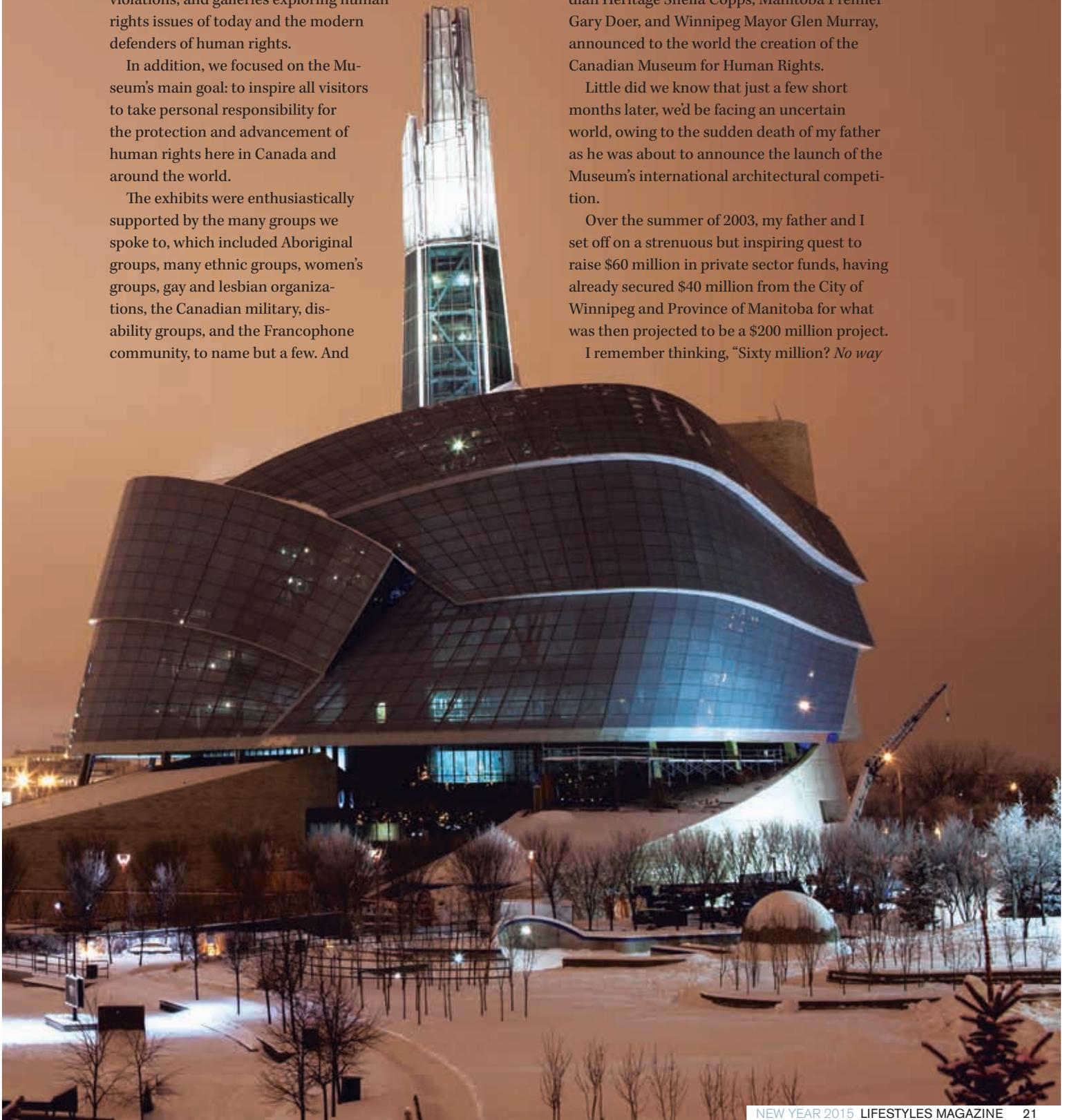
the overwhelming support we received would prove essential given the perfect storm that lay ahead.

On April 17, 2003, before a crowd of several hundred curious guests, my father, standing shoulder to shoulder with Minister of Canadian Heritage Sheila Copps, Manitoba Premier Gary Doer, and Winnipeg Mayor Glen Murray, announced to the world the creation of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights.

Little did we know that just a few short months later, we'd be facing an uncertain world, owing to the sudden death of my father as he was about to announce the launch of the Museum's international architectural competition.

Over the summer of 2003, my father and I set off on a strenuous but inspiring quest to raise \$60 million in private sector funds, having already secured \$40 million from the City of Winnipeg and Province of Manitoba for what was then projected to be a \$200 million project.

I remember thinking, "Sixty million? *No way*



we can raise that!” My previous fundraising experience, as chair of the Winnipeg United Way and the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre capital and endowment campaigns, had been limited to raising \$10 million per campaign and I knew it was *not* going to be easy, considering this was a totally new and not well understood concept. Furthermore, we had the added challenge of trying to raise money for a Winnipeg-based institution—not an easy sell outside of Winnipeg!

Undeterred, however, my father and I made the rounds over the summer and met with Manitoba’s business leaders and major foundations, gamely pitching the concept of the Museum to whoever would listen.

One key issue about which my dad was most adamant was that the building *had* to be an architectural icon that would be a symbol of Canada’s dedication to freedom, democracy, and human dignity. And the content had to be world class. He knew from the feasibility study that producing a mediocre product wouldn’t result in the kind of visitorship he envisioned. Hence the challenging capital budget.

Things seemed to be going along swimmingly and the prime minister continued to confirm his commitment to provide \$100 million in capital and explore how the operating budget could be addressed. Then the morning of October 7, 2003, my father dropped dead of a heart attack at age 71. His death was a huge, devastating blow to my mother, to my brothers, David and Leonard, to Moe Levy, and of course to me.

We were faced with a huge decision: abandon the project—after all, our leader was gone—or try to keep going.

And then a miracle happened. All the thousands of people we’d spoken to over the years started sending in donations, e-mails, and letters and made phone calls, urging us *not* to abandon the project and asking what they could do to help. I will never ever forget the feeling I had when a mere two weeks after my dad died, at Moe’s insistence, my mother and I ceremonially turned the sod at The Forks and launched the international architectural competition that would result in the selection of Antoine Predock’s magnificent design. I confess that had it not been for Moe’s determination, drive, and positive attitude, the Museum would have died along with my father.

We would face many, many more years of challenges, including changes in government,

rising costs, and anti-Semitic efforts to shut down the project. But because of the enormous, constant support from donors and volunteers, we kept working, knowing how important the project was to so many.

I must say, my mother, Babs Asper, who became chair of the Asper Foundation after my dad died, worked as hard as anyone to keep the dream alive. Had she decided to throw in the towel, we would have had to close things down. But she found *her* inner entrepreneur, rolled up her sleeves, went to work, and became one of our most successful fundraisers. It seemed no one could resist her charming smile as she reached deep into their pockets!

Kudos also must go to my brothers, David and Leonard, who as trustees continued to approve huge investments in the architectural competition, the content development, government lobbying, and fundraising and marketing costs. Their view was that as long as we were making progress, they’d continue their support.

Our biggest breakthrough came when Stephen Harper became prime minister—he was not opposed to having a national museum outside of Ottawa. This meant we could finally solve the thorny issue of who would be responsible for the ongoing operating costs.

And so, with the signing of the Definitive Agreement between the Friends of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights and the federal government, and the passage of Bill C-42 establishing the Museum in 2008, we knew we were finally assured of the Museum’s future. It was an incredible moment after eight years of being in limbo.

Over the last several years, I’ve had the privilege of sitting on the federally appointed board of the Museum, overseeing the construction of the breathtaking Predock building and the exhibit development, led by Ralph Appelbaum Associates, while continuing my role as national campaign chair. Thanks to the generosity of 8,200 donors from every corner of the land, not only did we raise the original \$60 million, we raised the *next* campaign goal of \$105 million. Then when costs went up again and a new goal of \$150 million was set, we raised *that* amount as well!

When people ask me what has kept me motivated to keep working to create the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, I answer that it’s because I’m incredibly grateful for all the rights I enjoy as a Jewish woman in Canada. I never take these rights for granted. I know they were hard fought for and I know rights are fragile and can be easily lost if we are complacent and indifferent.

I am so grateful to all the people over the years who have helped me along the journey, including the indefatigable Moe Levy, of course, but also my wonderful husband, Michael, and my two sons, Stephen and Jonathan. There were so many dark days when I could have easily given up, but thanks to their love and support, I was able to keep on going and see the Museum actually open and begin its mission of education and action.

As a corporate and commercial lawyer, this isn’t how I expected my life to turn out, but I can’t imagine a more fulfilling way to spend the last 14 years of it! **LM**