

Israel Asper's vision becomes reality with opening of Canadian Museum for Human Rights

By MYRON LOVE

It was a late July evening in the summer of 2002 when Israel Asper stood on a gravel parking lot at the Forks and designated the parking lot as the site for a new museum intended to educate visitors about human rights.

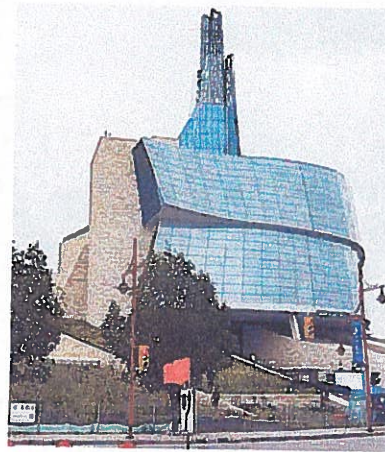
On Friday, September 19, Asper's dream became a reality as 850 invited guests and assorted media were on hand for the official opening ceremonies for the new Canadian Museum for Human Rights.

It has been a long and winding journey to this point, beset with criticism from some who are unclear on the concept as well as a seemingly constant demand for more money as the cost of the museum – originally pegged at \$205 million – ended up costing over \$350 million. The three levels of government put in a total of \$160 million, while Asper Foundation Executive director Moe Levy and Gail Asper, Israel Asper's daughter, spearheaded a private fundraising campaign led by the Friends of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights which raised \$147 million in private donations.

In addressing the attendees at the opening, Gail Asper noted that this campaign was the most successful fundraising effort of its kind in



IZZY ASPER
It was his dream, first broached 14 years ago, that led to the Human Rights Museum.



Canadian history. "This museum is a miracle," she said. "We have had support across the country from thousands of people who helped keep this dream alive."

Asper singled out for praise Moe Levy for his leadership role in the fundraising campaign. "Our father saw what no one else could see," she said. "He viewed a human rights museum right here in his beloved city as an agent for change in Canada and the world and Moe was his first believer."

"Dad gave Moe a to-do list that included arranging the permits and finding the money and Moe went out and did it. I have been privileged to have worked with Moe over the past 14 years as he went about convincing people what a museum such as this might become."

Continued on page 15. See "Museum".

Community news

Museum

Continued from page 1.

Asper recalled the day in April (the 17th), 2003, when Israel Asper participated in the ground breaking ceremony for the museum at the Forks. "Sadly, four months later, our father was taken from us," she said. "Our family had a huge decision to make – to continue with this project or abandon it. We decided to carry on as our father would have wanted."

(She also expressed sadness that her mother, Babs Asper, did not live to see this day. Babs Asper passed away three years ago.)

Asper also recognized the efforts of her brothers, David and Leonard, and thanked her husband, Michael Paterson, and sons, Stephen and Jonathan, for their ongoing support. She saved special praise for Prime Minister Stephen Harper whose decision seven years ago to accept the museum as a national museum – the first outside of Ottawa – was the final piece of the puzzle. That decision commits the Federal Government to fund the museum's annual operating costs.

Speaking for the Federal Government, the Honourable Shelley Glover, the Member of Parliament for St. Boniface and Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, saluted Gail Asper and her brothers for their successful effort to turn their father's dream into reality.

"This is the first national museum to be built outside the Capital Region and the first museum in the world solely devoted to human rights," she reiterated. "I am proud to say that, through the leadership of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, the Federal Government is a key partner in this project."

Glover noted that the museum will be shining a light on the darker areas of Canada's history. "It is the mark of a great country that we can acknowledge past wrongs and try to learn from our mistakes."

"This museum is a once-in-a-lifetime achievement."

Manitoba Premier Greg Selinger added that the museum "challenges us to learn about the importance of human rights and do something about it". He also praised the Asper Family and Prime Minister Harper for his decision to make this a national museum - with the ongoing federal support that decision entails.

He added that Manitoba's history makes our city the right place for a museum of this kind – noting that Manitoba has been a leader in French language rights, Metis rights and women's rights as well as more recent anti-bullying legislation.

Winnipeg Mayor Sam Katz described the museum as a "beacon of hope that we have all built together. The stories inside," he said, "are the stories of all of us, of where we came from and how we got here."

Hopefully, this museum will teach us how we can move forward together."

Canada's Governor General David Johnston expressed the hope that all Canadians will be able to come and experience the new museum. "I wish that every Canadian child has the opportunity to visit this outstanding place," he said.

The morning ceremony began with blessings from elders representing the Anishanabe, Metis and Inuit peoples. Internationally-known Canadian songstress Ginette Reno sang our national anthem. Interspersed between the speeches were performances by local singing sensation Maria Aragon



A scene from one of the four out of 11 galleries that was open to the public the weekend of September 20-21.



Members of the Rusalka Dancers and Sarah Sommer Chai Folk Ensemble at the opening festivities for the new museum Sept. 20

Jordan Nepon photo

(accompanied by the Highlights Performing Group) and a group called The Four Tenors with fiddle player Sierra Noble finishing things up.

The only sour note for the morning (other than a grey sky and periods of rain) were a small number of noisy demonstrators outside including some Aboriginal People demanding a Federal Government inquiry into missing and murdered Aboriginal women and a small number of Palestinians (even though this museum is not a Jewish museum and has nothing to do with Israel).

By any measure, the opening of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights is a tremendous success story which will have the intended positive impact on Canadians and people all around the world for many years to come.



The alabaster walls that line the ramps of the museum are breathtakingly beautiful.