



Gail Asper at the museum's launch.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Moving from “Bystander” to “Rescuer”

The Canadian Museum for Human Rights—with a focus on Jews, on women, on hunger and trafficking, on oppressed minorities around the world—is Canada's first national museum outside of Ottawa, the country's capital.

It opened in September in

the Canadian prairie city of Winnipeg, thanks to energetic advocacy from **Gail Asper**, daughter of the late media mogul and philanthropist **Israel “Izzy” Asper**, who had dreamed it up. She managed to bring this dream to life despite skepticism from Canada's eastern establishment and vociferous opposition from non-Jewish groups who felt their own struggles would be insufficiently represented.

Note the preposition in the museum's name. This place isn't just “of” human rights, examining past struggles, but has a mission to educate visitors *about* their rights—including the rights of all people to love, literacy and physical safety. Exhibitions make strong points about women's suffrage, freedom from fear of rape and of violence at home, children's right to schooling, racial and marriage equality and the history of marginalized ethnic groups in Canada, including the aboriginal people known as “First Nations.”

For marshalling bipartisan political support for the museum's role and raising the millions needed for its planning and construction, Gail Asper has been awarded the Order of Canada, a signal honor, and wears its signature small pin every day, along with two different pins created to celebrate the museum. “I'd like to be able to wear my own brooches one day,” she joked in a recent conversation. “I haven't had a free lapel in 9 years.”

On the day it first opened to the public, Asper set down her bright yellow knapsack for a conversation on a sunny bench outside the museum. The formal opening a couple of days earlier had some of its speeches—including her own, which she delivered (customary in Canada now) in both French and English—nearly drowned out by First Nations and anti-abortion-rights protesters. Though the museum was ringed with police, no one discouraged or shushed these

shouts. “People who feel their rights are being violated can become bullies,” said Asper.

Asper is no stranger to facing bias herself. When the Museum was under construction, signs were defaced with language like “Die Jew,” she said. “The police were notified, and the incident was never repeated.” The museum's non-Jewish supporters also got hate mail, with threats “that were horrible, threats with graphic, gross images. But it shows we have work to do.

“There are four participants in a human rights violation. There's the perpetrator, the victim, the bystander and the rescuer. Our job at the museum is to convert bystanders to rescuers.”

Asper predicts a crucial role educating teenagers. “Adolescents are at a terribly important moment. In grade nine I stood by while someone was being bullied. The victim tried to laugh it off, and I could see what was going on, but I did nothing. I was in a position of power and I didn't take action. I still think about this.

“You have to exercise your muscles as a human rights defender. Someone who at age 15 comes through the museum will be a future CEO or teacher or general in the army. You have to get into shape to stand up. To help teenagers, teachers across the country are getting human rights tool kits, like at Yad Vashem,” the world center for Holocaust research and remembrance in Jerusalem.

Paramount for Asper is this educational vision for the museum, and its chorus of first-person voices in the interactive multimedia exhibitions provide wide-ranging testimony, sometimes shocking. She uses herself as an example of how shielded many of us are. “I didn't know about the Acadian Expulsion. I had never been taught it,” she said, referring to the people who were forced out of Nova Scotia and shipped to England, France and the Thirteen Colonies in the mid-eighteenth century.

“I didn't know about **Nellie McClung**,” an early twentieth-century suffragist and activist for women's labor rights, “and she was from Winnipeg! Women were ‘persons’ regarding their responsibilities, but not with regard to rights. I was in my late 20s, and a lawyer, and I did not know any of this. I am annoyed when female politicians say ‘I'm not a feminist’. It's time for people to realize how much of a struggle this has been.”

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