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Statement from Gail Asper as it appeared in the Ottawa Citizen-January 18, 2011

As someone who has been involved in the Canadian Museum for Human Rights from day one, I can attest that my father, Israel Asper, believed that in order to understand why a country is worth having, you have to know where it came from, and that the rights we enjoy today are as a result of the heroic efforts of many ordinary people who took responsibility for the advancement of our human rights. My father believed passionately that only something as graphic as a well-done museum could bring these stories to life. It was -- and is our hope -- that if we are successful, people will be transformed by what they experience in the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, and will be inspired to take action in support of human rights here in Canada and around the world.

Contrary to Lubomyr Luciuk's Dec. 30 article in the Citizen, titled "There are many stories of human rights abuses to be told," to my knowledge, my father had no involvement with the Canadian War Museum or the entirely appropriate desire by the museum board and management to include an exhibit on the Holocaust as part of the Second World War gallery, and so he was not "thwarted" by anyone.

Although my father passed away over seven years ago, when the idea for the museum was in its infancy, three different prime ministers, five ministers of Canadian Heritage, two Manitoba premiers, two Winnipeg mayors and 6,000 private sector donors, as well as hundreds of volunteers saw the merit in this project and have worked hard over 10 years to make the dream of this museum a reality. And literally thousands have shown their support in other ways through community events held throughout the country.

While Luciuk may feel the museum is "sucking generously" on the "public teat" of the federal government, in fact less than one third of the \$310 million capital cost for this project will come from Ottawa, despite the fact this museum is a federal Crown Corporation. The federal government's \$100-million capital contribution, although substantial, is significantly less than the \$125-million raised so far from 6,000 donors in the private sector, \$40 million from the province of Manitoba and \$20 million from the city of Winnipeg. It should also be noted that the Friends of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights will continue to raise substantial funds from the private sector to ensure its success. And, when one considers the support to their other national museums, federal government support to the Canadian Museum for Human Rights is overshadowed, for example, by the approximately \$230-million spent recently to renovate the Ottawa-based Museum of Nature.

As a member of the board of the museum, I can advise that all of Luciuk's suggestions regarding museum content will be profiled in the museum, including -- but not limited -- to gender issues, ethnic discrimination (as evidenced by the Ukrainian internment), language and labour rights, aboriginal issues, sexual orientation and disability rights. There are in fact 12 different permanent galleries/zones, several dedicated to not just recounting the past but to reflecting on present human rights issues in Canada and around the world in order to educate and engage for the future.

Luciuk raises many other examples of human rights abuses that should be studied, including victims of Communism, and the content plan absolutely includes a study of these crimes against humanity. Although this museum is not a museum of genocide filled with one depressing gallery after another, there is a permanent gallery in which mass atrocities will be studied and it has always been the intent to include the Ukrainian famine clearly and permanently.

The museum has met with thousands of Canadians and is working with respected human rights experts to develop the content plan.

At the same time that does not diminish the need for a Holocaust exhibit which appears to be Luciuk's main point. Canada is one of the few western countries that does not study the Holocaust in its national institutions. Luciuk asserts that everyone is fully aware of the Holocaust so it doesn't need to be prominent. The board disagrees, but in any event, because a story may be well known doesn't mean it isn't an essential part of the world's human rights history (according to virtually every respected human rights expert) and therefore a highly appropriate and extremely relevant exhibit for this museum.

Instead of creating a divisive climate, I would urge Luciuk to give the Canadian Museum for Human Rights' dedicated board, management and staff an opportunity to work on and present at the appropriate time the museum's content in its full form.

Gail Asper
National Campaign Chair
Friends of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights