

Interview



CANADIAN MUSEUM FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

On overcoming indifference, why it isn't a museum of genocide, and Winnipeg's windfall

GAIL ASPER IN CONVERSATION WITH JONATHON GATEHOUSE

CANADA'S NEWEST NATIONAL institution, the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg, isn't scheduled to open until 2013, but it's already a subject of controversy. Over the last decade, Gail Asper has shepherded the project from a far-fetched dream to an almost reality.

Q: Your late father Izzy Asper was the driving force behind the Human Rights Museum. What was his initial vision?

A: His vision stemmed from his own background, as the child of immigrants who came to this country seeking freedom. From the

idea that this is a great country, but one, he was concerned, that is pretty complacent. Canadians are indifferent to how their rights have evolved. People like me, who didn't understand that women weren't always persons, or that Aboriginals couldn't vote until the 1960s. He wanted people to understand how this country came to be the tolerant country that it is now, and more importantly, to understand that if you are not vigilant with human rights, they can be lost.

Q: Since you took over the project after his passing in 2003, has that vision changed?

A: No, not at all. The vision that was first pre-



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sented to the world back in 2000 is the same vision that was adopted by three different prime ministers, two premiers, two mayors and 6,000 donors. The whole goal was, and is, to inspire visitors to take personal responsibility for the advancement of human rights here in Canada and around the world.

Q: *There has been controversy about some of the plans for the museum. Ukrainian and German-Canadian groups have complained that the sufferings of indigenous peoples and Jews during the Second World War are getting a "disproportionate share" of exhibit space. Has the backlash surprised you?*

A: Nothing that is being said now is any different from the concerns and hopes that were being expressed even before the museum existed. We have worked with all sorts of groups. The idea wasn't that we were going to impose a human rights museum on Canada. The idea was that we were going to listen to what Canadians wanted and work with them to deliver something that everyone could embrace. The inclusion of an exhibit on the Holodomor [the Stalin-induced famine that killed millions of Ukrainians in the 1930s] was always part of the plan. That is still the plan. But there is a tiny minority that

have taken a more acrimonious position on this. And that's been disappointing.

Q: *The Ukrainian-Canadian Civil Liberties Association has charged that one horror—the Holocaust—is being "elevated" above all others at the museum. What's your response?*

A: This is not a museum of genocide. The purpose is to explain what human rights are and how they can be lost. There is no better example of this than the Holocaust. A country like Germany, that was so cultured and educated, and had a democratic government—don't forget, Hitler was elected—was still able to descend into genocide because people were not vigilant. All the experts agree that no human rights museum could ever be established without a full examination of the Holocaust. It was fundamental to our notion of human rights today, the catalyst for the world coming together to say "never again," precipitating the anti-genocide conventions and the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Holocaust really shows how good people can be convinced to do bad things.

Q: *Do you think that anti-Semitism is playing a part in this?*

A: I haven't come face to face with the group

that is saying this, and I wouldn't want to accuse anyone of anti-Semitism.

Q: *Now politicians are getting involved, with several Liberals, and Joy Smith, the Winnipeg MP who was your champion in the Tory caucus, calling on the museum to rethink its plans. Doesn't this open the door to all sorts of complaints? Is there a danger of this becoming a museum of human wrongs?*

A: No. This has really been the only group out of the dozens and dozens who were approached for their support who have had any problems. The museum has been incredibly consultative and respectful of people's desires. If you're going to make people mad, why bother doing this?

Q: *It's not a traditional museum—it's meant to provoke and inspire and even upset people. Is there content in this museum that you are going to find personally challenging?*

A: I have no doubt that there will be certain slants and presentations that I won't agree with. That's exactly what we want this museum to be. But the expectation is that whatever is in this museum has to be truly well-researched and balanced. The architect, Antoine Predock, has built in an outdoor amphitheatre, and the expectation is that's where people will be protesting from the moment the doors are opened. I'm open to that. We've got free speech here.

Q: *Your job now as the campaign chair is to enlist private sector support for the project. How has that been going?*

A: The museum is a Crown corporation, but because of our genesis, and the fact that this will be the first national museum outside of Ottawa, our funding structure is very different. The federal government is providing less than a third of the capital cost. The majority of the costs, \$150 million, will come from the private sector. We're closing in on \$130 million, and we've got 6,000 donors, from grassroots fundraising to multi-million-dollar donors. We've been through a tough recession and it could have been an opportunity for people to renege on their gifts, but thank heavens, we've had virtually no loss.

Q: *There are some concerns about the museum's ability to pay millions in property tax to Winnipeg each year. Ottawa is providing \$21.7*

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million annually in operating expenses, but said it won't pay more. Who'll cover the gap?

A: Prime Minister Harper broke with decades of precedent to develop a national museum in Winnipeg and took on the operating costs—without which this museum would not exist.

Museum management is in positive discussions with the city and the province for additional funding. They know they are getting a windfall here—a great project that's going to provide a lot of tourism and employment and taxes for a small investment.

Q: *You mentioned tourism. Do you think it will draw people to Winnipeg for a weekend?*

A: I totally do. The conservative estimate is that this will draw close to 250,000 people a year from outside Winnipeg. We hired the finest museum planners to do a very thorough feasibility study. They came back and said this can be a very popular and important attraction for people around the world. There's the cultural tourists—a growing demographic—who are thirsty for knowledge and want something that is spiritually challenging. The other component is architecture. We were told unequivocally that an architecturally significant building will attract people. People wonder why there's a "Tower

of Hope." We were told that it would drive visitors. I'll never forget the report saying "people may not give a

hoot about human rights, but they love to go up towers." With the right marketing, I believe we have an unassailable tourism opportunity here.

Q: *The Aspers, through your family foundation, have given \$20 million, making you the largest single donors. But your family has gone through a reversal of fortune with the failure of Canwest Communications. Has that had any effect on the foundation's commitments?*

A: Not at all. My dad was very smart when it came to running his business and managing his assets. As Canwest's fortunes rose, he put money into this foundation. Our \$20 million is virtually paid.

Q: *You're still in fundraising mode. What's your best succinct pitch?*

A: I think that Canadians should be grateful for all this country has given them, and for all those who have come before them and put their passion and, sometimes, lives on the line to fight for the rights we all enjoy. This is a celebration of who we are. My dad was always afraid that Canadians reach for the middle, that we aim for mediocrity. He said that this museum has to reach for the stars or it's not worth doing. In order to do that we need the funds to achieve the depth and the excitement of the planned exhibits. We can't do that without the support of people from coast to coast. This is Canada's museum. ✦

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