

PETER C. NEWMAN | ALLAN LEVINE

MIRACLE AT THE FORKS

The Museum That Dares Make a Difference

THE CANADIAN MUSEUM
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS



Miracle at the Forks















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Figure.1
Vancouver / Berkeley

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*Dedicated to the memory of Israel Asper, OC, OM, LL.D. (1932–2003)
and Ruth “Babs” Asper (1933–2011), whose imagination, vision,
dedication, and perseverance transformed the Canadian Museum
for Human Rights from a dream to a reality.*

*And to the more than 7,800 generous donors and hundreds of
supporters who have worked tirelessly to ensure that the dream
did not die.*

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FOREWORD

WE WOULD LIKE to thank our late chair of the Asper Foundation, Ruth (Babs) Asper, who thought this story contained many lessons to be learned of perseverance and unwavering optimism and who encouraged the publication of this book. Our appreciation goes to her and to our other trustees, David Asper, Leonard Asper, and Richard Leipsic, for believing in us along this long journey that was fraught with many risks. We applaud the trustees for committing over \$20 million to the project and taking on all the development costs for the eight years before the museum was formally established as a national institution.

We thank the Right Honourable Stephen Harper, who believed that we needed a national project, the first outside the capital region, which would stand as a symbol of Canada's commitment to freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. We owe the creation of Canada's fifth national museum to him. We also thank the Right Honourable Jean Chrétien

for his pivotal support in the beginning and for giving us the opportunity to build on this idea, and the Right Honourable Paul Martin for taking us to the next level of support and encouragement. To all the ministers of Western Economic Diversification and Canadian Heritage and their staff, thank you for over a decade of tireless work, for believing in this project, and for helping make it a reality.

To the premiers of Manitoba, Gary Doer and Greg Selinger, and Mayors Glen Murray and Sam Katz and their staff, who eagerly signed on to this important project, thank you for recognizing the importance in the museum and for investing the necessary funds required to make it happen.

To our small team at the Friends of the Canadian Museum of Human Rights, board members, campaign teams, and volunteers across the country, we and Canada owe you our greatest appreciation. To the many thousands of donors from across Canada, whether for the

\$5 sent lovingly with an inspiring note or the many other millions donated, this is your museum. Thanks also to all the various communities that came together to speak with one voice in support of the museum.

To the chairs of the CMHR Board of Trustees, first Arni Thorsteinson and now Eric Hughes, and to the members of the board past and present, thank you for your leadership, courage, and commitment to ensure that all Canadians will regard this as an important investment in their future. And many thanks to Stuart Murray and his team, who have taken on one of the most complex and difficult challenges in museum making.

As we finish this long journey that started over fourteen years ago, we now take great pride in seeing the spectacularly designed Antoine Predock wonder and the brilliant exhibit design work of Ralph Appelbaum and his team as it unfolds.

Finally and most important, we reserve our deepest appreciation for our families—our

spouses, Michael Paterson and Barbara Levy, and our children, Stephen and Jonathan Paterson, and Adam, Samuel, and Sarah Levy—who endured our many absences and who gave us the encouragement over the years to pursue this dream.

We hope that when you read this book and follow the journey, so brilliantly written by Peter C. Newman and Allan Levine, it will serve as an inspiration and acknowledgment that anything is possible when you have passion, persistence, and an outstanding team committed to excellence. As the late Israel Asper noted many times, “Here we are reaching for the stars . . . to create an international architectural icon, a symbol of Canada.”

We hope and believe that we have delivered on this dream.

GAIL ASPER, O.C., O.M., LL.D.
President | The Asper Foundation

MOSES (MOE) LEVY
Executive Director | The Asper Foundation



INTRODUCTION

THE KEY TO reading this book is remaining open to discovery. It is designed to replicate the lively journey of a wanderer traversing the wilderness of the Red River's backcountry, and suddenly encountering a palace. The building has no recognizable shape, and seems to be wrapped in candy floss, but it draws the wandering visitor into its vertical embrace through a symbolic "pillar of fire" that pierces the prairie sky. Only at the last moment does the building reveal itself to be the world's first museum for human rights.

Standing among its mighty architectural roots and looking up, you are confronted by the visual impact of the structure's elephant-sized reality, located at the forks of two mighty rivers in the heart of Manitoba. Designed to astonish any visitor who expects to see the usual stuffy, square silhouette of a museum, its awesome dimensions hypnotize. This promises to be a unique institution for which there are no comparables. It is, quite simply, a dramatic architectural statement equal in originality to Australia's famed Sydney Opera House.

Its architecture expresses the commonality of mankind—a symbolic apparition of ice, clouds, and stone set squarely in a place where Aborigines have walked, talked, and traded for an estimated six thousand years.

Journalist Dan Lett accurately summed up the museum's key puzzle in the *Winnipeg Free Press* on December 24, 2011, by asking, "Whenever it finally opens, will one of the museum's displays be as compelling as the story of how it got built?" Most people won't have a problem agreeing with Lett's observation.

The lofty mission of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) is to place the issue of human rights under pressure—their past (to learn lessons); their present (to monitor progress); and their future (to resolve tensions between reform and inaction). According to its guiding principles, the CMHR also

aspires to offer its visitors an inspiring encounter with human rights while exceeding Canadians'



top The museum pierces the prairie sky and can be seen far and wide across the city.

above Israel and Babs Asper each devoted the last years of their lives to the dream of the CMHR.

expectations for balance, transparency, sound business practices and meaningful public consultation; fosters an appreciation for the importance of human rights, spurs informed dialogue and invites participants to identify the contemporary relevance of past and present human rights events, both at home and abroad; the museum exemplifies Canadians' commitment to freedom and democracy and aims to ignite an informed, ever-evolving global conversation; provides a safe and engaging space to cultivate respect, gratitude, understanding and ongoing improvement of this human rights inheritance... [and] connects its visitors with opportunities to explore the global development of human rights concepts and Canada's important role within it.

Such is the narrative arc of this amazing undertaking: how to discover and disseminate the notion of living and acting according to



universal rules that apply to people of all cultures, languages, and religions.

The unique structure fulfills the dreams and ambitions of its originator, the late Winnipeg-based billionaire and media mogul Israel “Izzy” Asper and his family: Babs, Gail, David, and Leonard Asper. Conscious of how the museum would best achieve its essential mission, they happily passed the torch to the federal government in 2007 so that the museum’s human rights mandate would be protected. Equally relevant are the fulfilled aspirations of the CMHR’s 7,800 patrons and volunteers who donated the \$146 million (and still counting) required to make this dream come true. Their dedication to the cause of human rights goes beyond rhetoric.

In the spring of 2003, the prospect of raising the enormous amount of funds required for such a gargantuan project seemed as improbable and intimidating as trying to scale Mount Everest on a dinner date. And it was. What it required was a “miracle at the Forks.” A quarter

of a million visitors are expected to view the museum in its opening year. But as the message that this is a must-see and must-tour spectacle spreads by word of mouth, it is certain that even more Canadians will want to satisfy their curiosity.

To the surprise of its worried planners and builders, and to the disappointment of its detractors, something remarkable has taken place: the museum lives. It was a brave and daring idea that some deemed far too risky to be Canadian. And yet it has materialized, contradicting the dire prognostications of some very sensible people.

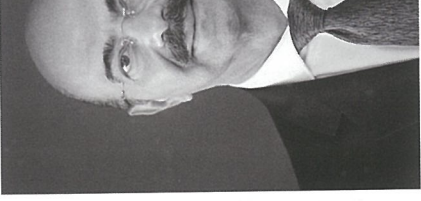
What makes the CMHR so fascinating—and the main reason it deserves a book—is that it is a museum like no other; its existence demands we pay attention to its mission: to make humanity more amenable to human rights and civil liberties.

It is no accident that the museum’s physical environment and superior acoustics echo

right Prime Minister Stephen Harper following his victory in the May 2011 federal election. In large part, the CMHR owes its existence to Harper.

middle right Following her father's death in 2003, Gail Asper became the driving force behind the CMHR.

far right Moe Levy, executive director of the Asper Foundation, wholly devoted himself to the CMHR project for more than a decade.



majesty and gravitas. Its architecture is stunning, but its stature will be judged by how effectively its occupants and visitors formulate and transmit the urgent need to improve people's individual and collective human rights. Even more adventurous and original in its unusual design than the spectacular Canadian Museum of History (formerly known as the Canadian Museum of Civilization) built in 1989 in Hull, across the Ottawa River from the nation's capital, the CMHR in Winnipeg has pioneered the groundbreaking notion of building national museums outside Canada's National Capital Region. The CMHR's exhibits include historical objects that imaginatively reconstruct the harsh realities of human rights abuses throughout history. The interactive displays set the mood, provide the context, and ably demonstrate the dilemma that the concepts of universal human rights have developed out of negative freedoms—as in the sense that people sought freedom *from* oppression in their

physical, economic, political, and spiritual lives. The world bursts with fault lines in the arena of human rights that deserve to be resolved and eliminated. The CMHR rightly emphasizes that it is not enough simply to be free *from* oppression; we must also be free *to* live, to work, to worship, and we must respect the rights of others to do so as well.

THE CANADIAN Museum for Human Rights owes its existence primarily to Prime Minister Stephen Harper. It was he who pledged that the Canadian government would provide the project's annual operating funding in perpetuity, funding that allowed the CMHR to fly its course. Although Asper and Harper never met in person to discuss the project, Asper's lieutenants—daughter Gail, wife Babs, sons David and Leonard, and his chief of staff, Moses (Moe) Levy—successfully carried the burdens of advocacy. Gail and Moe's extraordinary campaign was one of the most successful Canadian



top Architect Antoine Predock's original sketch of the CMHR.
above, overleaf The CMHR is designed to astonish any visitor.





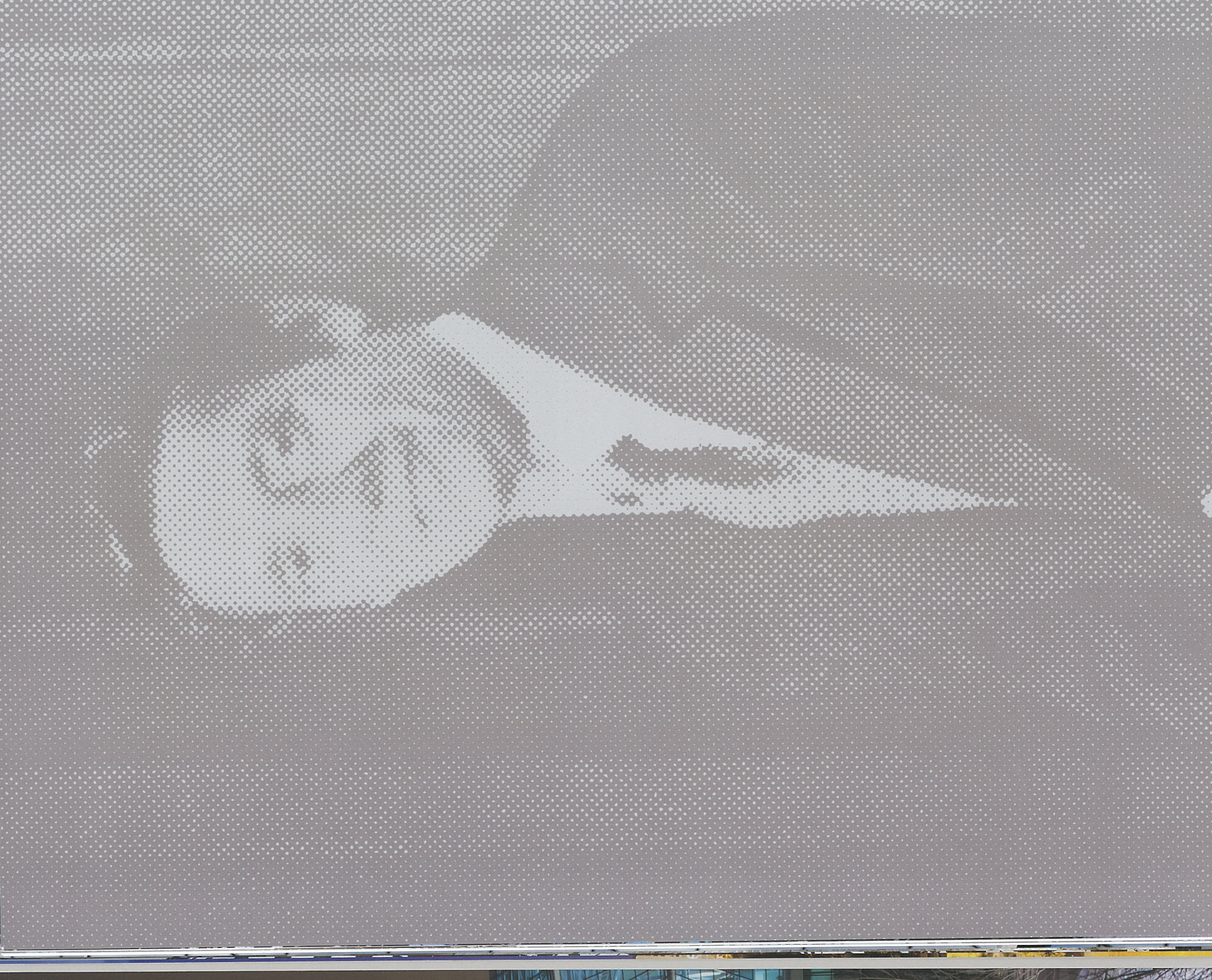
fundraisers ever. But their own contributions went beyond the financial, and they proved to doubters that Canadians appreciated the need for this kind of museum.

Izzy Asper's operatives didn't just lobby Ottawa; their mission was to obliterate the government's option of denial. Moe Levy was in the capital so often that he stayed in just about every one of the Château Laurier hotel's 429 rooms. The rumour whispered in Ottawa's corridors of power among the bureaucrats who counted was that if Gail and Moe had eased up, the project might have been expedited. That rumour wasn't true, but they did go so often that even the most soft-hearted bureaucrats glanced heavenward in exasperation whenever they appeared. Driven advocates they had to be, as they faced long odds: three prime ministers, a serious recession, an entrenched bureaucratic culture, severe cutbacks in federal spending,

and an untested team pioneering an unprecedented public-private fiscal structure.

Asper died of a heart attack at the age of seventy-one in the autumn of 2003 just as the architectural competition for the CMHR's design was about to begin. It was his lieutenants who carried the struggle for most of the project, but Izzy was its visionary originator.

above Aerial view of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights at the Forks and the Esplanade Riel over the Red River, October 21, 2011.



REACHING FOR THE STARS

IT IS A PUZZLE, even in retrospect: Why did Israel “Izzy” Asper, a Jewish multi-billionaire who did it all and had everything he could ever want—including a manor in Palm Beach—expend precious energy and contribute more than \$20 million to build a museum in Winnipeg, where the weather swings between winter and August? Housing permanent exhibits as well as scholars dedicated to the defence and definition of civil liberties, an institution of this style and class has never been attempted before—anywhere, anytime. One reason might be the difficulties posed by the mounting of exhibits of human rights, perhaps more challenging than throwing up the usual museum fare of dinosaurs from the Cretaceous era. And building a museum is not a cheap venture: the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) cost \$351 million at the latest count.

This unique quest followed standard Asper procedure. Driven by unrelenting self-

determination that rivalled the monomaniacal zeal of Captain Ahab, Asper and his devoted co-conspirators spent a nerve-destroying decade on the project. It is easy to call this quest an obsession, but in the Asper catalogue, nearly everything he did was obsessive: collecting George Gershwin memorabilia, doggedly pursuing the establishment of a third Canadian television network, or quaffing yet another of his “prairie martinis” (double raw gin on ice).

The Friends were quick to point out that this was not just another of Asper’s many diversions. The CMHR would be his legacy. Asper was well aware of the museum’s significance—not as a personal memorial (it is now in the hands of the Canadian federal government)—but as an institution of learning and teaching, as well as the preserving, of human rights. It would fill essential gaps of knowledge while making the world a more civilized place. In retrospect, for Izzy Asper, the museum was more devotion than obsession.



IMPATIENT FROM the day he was born, Izzy Harold Asper arrived prematurely on August 11, 1932, in Minnedosa, a puppy bush settlement in rural Manitoba. He had two older siblings: a brother, Aubrey, born in 1929, and a sister, Hetty, born in 1930. Izzy recalled feeling insulted because his parents, Leon and Cecilia, did not immediately rush out to show him off in nearby Winnipeg. His refugee parents, originally from Odessa—Cecilia immigrated to Canada in 1921 with her parents, and Leon arrived in 1924—were classically trained musicians who travelled for work during the Depression. Leon was a violinist and conducted a string quartet in the Canadian Pacific Palliser Hotel in Calgary, Cecilia was an accomplished pianist, and they both played background music for silent films in movie theatres. When the talkies arrived in the early 1930s, the Aspers purchased Minnedosa's Lyric Theatre and turned it into a movie theatre. Leon acted as the projectionist, while Cecilia was the cashier, and eventually they built a

small movie chain. The family occupied a large house in Minnedosa that had no indoor plumbing. A self-sufficient man, Leon Asper imported kosher meat from Winnipeg in his unrefrigerated van; the meat was often rancid by the time it reached the dinner table.

Izzy did not enjoy a happy childhood as he tried to bridge his contemporary, mischievous reality with a strict old-school father who preached duty instead of joy. In the mornings before school, he would scrape chewing gum off the movie house seats with a penknife. Young Izzy tried escaping from home when he was only ten but was soon returned by a friendly constable.

After his fourteenth birthday, Izzy rode his bike eighteen miles each evening delivering films, and by the age of seventeen he had taken over the management of one of his parents' movie theatres. At the time, downtown Minnedosa consisted of the Patricia Café, owned by Tony Evans (a former wrestler); the

elegant Tremont Hotel, a classy institution with a Sunday evening roast-beef special; and an ice cream parlour run by "Tubby" Anderson.

Although Izzy showed no particular promise in his youth, he accomplished enough for half a dozen lifetimes. But he never considered that he had met his potential. The museum was his last act, and he reached for the stars.

RIGHT FROM THE beginning of his life in Minnedosa, the home of only one other Jewish family (the Rykiss clan, who ran a dry goods store), Izzy Asper experienced vicious anti-Semitism, the long trail of which would haunt his personal life and his career. Izzy and Aubrey were frequent targets of hurtful rants from fellow students and suffered several beatings on their way to and from school.

During the 1930s, the climate of Winnipeg was riddled with anti-Semitism. Winnipeg's German Consulate was manned by two consuls, Heinrich Seelheim, from 1930 to 1937, who joined the Nazi Party in 1934, and Wilhelm Rodde, from 1937 to 1939, who already had been a member of the party for three years when he accepted the posting in Manitoba. Both actively supported Nazi policies and distributed anti-Jewish hate propaganda across the Prairies.

Winnipeg was also headquarters of the Canadian Nationalist Party, led by the professional Jew-baiter William Whittaker, who dressed in Nazi Party brown shirts and riding boots. In his racist tabloid, the *Canadian Nationalist*,

Whittaker reproduced the infamous forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which received much publicity a decade earlier when it had been the basis for dozens of defamatory articles in automobile magnate Henry Ford's newspaper, the *Dearborn Independent*. Whittaker lauded Hitler for "placing the Jew just where he belonged" and posted notices throughout the city labelling Jews "cowards" and the "Son of Satan." He was denounced in the editorial pages of the *Winnipeg Free Press* and by an assortment of local politicians, but this did nothing to stop him.

There were altercations and brief skirmishes between Whittaker's followers and young Jewish Winnipeggers, many of whom were members of the city's Anti-Fascist League's youth wing. In early June 1934, Whittaker announced plans for a large parade. On the day of the march, June 5, dozens of fascists and many more anti-fascists clashed in a bloody riot at Market Square. It was the worst violence in the city since the General Strike of 1919.

"Knives flashed in the fast waning sunlight, heavy clubs crashed against cap-protected skulls, and huge slabs of wood were torn from the stalls of the market gardeners and used as battering rams," the *Winnipeg Free Press* reported on June 6, 1934. "Badly outnumbered . . . the brown shirted Nationalists suffered heavy losses." Appearing in court bruised and beaten, Whittaker, unrepentant to the end, declared that the riot was "the first battle in the cause of Gentile economic freedom." On the other hand,

facing Babs and Izzy Asper, who married in 1956.

far facing Izzy Asper and Gerald Schwartz, his friend and business partner in the 1970s. Since 1983, Schwartz has been the CEO of the Onex Corporation, the private equity investment firm and holding company he founded in 1983.

adds Fred Narvey, then a twenty-one-year-old member of the Anti-Fascist League, it “was the first and last time that fascists tried to march in Winnipeg.”

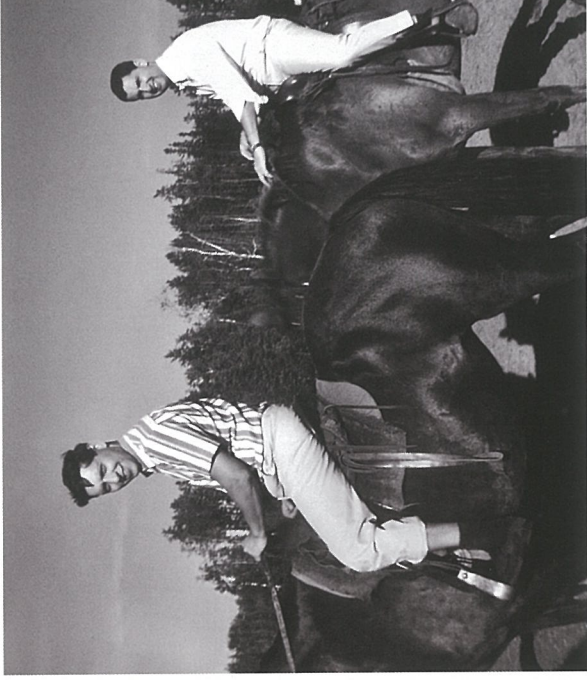
Anti-Semitism also found its way into the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Manitoba, which had a severe quota system from 1932 to 1944. Appearing before the 1944 provincial government committee hearing convened to investigate allegations about the quota system, the dean of medicine, Dr. Alvin Mathers, who had instituted the quota system, insisted that “certain nationalities” would never be accepted as doctors, so there was no point in training them, and he warned that the “University of Manitoba might become too Jewish.” Following the provincial government investigation that substantiated the charges that the quota system indeed existed—Mathers and university officials had initially denied that it did—the university was compelled by the government to halt the practice immediately and insert into its regulations that henceforth “the selection [of Faculty of Medicine candidates] shall be made without regard to the racial origin or religion of the applicant.”

When the Asper family moved to Winnipeg in 1946, Izzy became a Zionist and joined the labour Habonim organization, explaining that the left-wing girls enjoyed a much more bohemian approach to life than did those in the stern group of Young Judaea Zionists. He also went to B’nai Brith summer camp, where

he learned to swim, and even rescued the drowning Larry Zolf, future CBC gadfly, satirist, and well-informed commentator. Asper claimed not to remember the incident and vehemently denied that he considered throwing him back in. When not studying at the University of Manitoba, Izzy joined a teenage gang of a dozen muscle boys who would sneak into rich people’s garages, lift up their cars, and set them down sideways so they couldn’t be driven out.

It was in university that he met his future wife, Ruth Miriam “Babs” Bernstein. They courted, but Izzy was so busy with extracurricular activities they could only meet late at night. Babs’s parents started referring to him as “Mister Coffee” because at about eleven each evening their daughter would announce, “I’m going for coffee” and head out to meet her beau. “We then started going out together more,” Izzy recalled. “She owned the first long-playing record I’d ever seen, and it was Dave Brubeck doing ‘Take Five.’ That got to me. Here was a good-looking girl who understood this music and loved it, even owned the record. You can build on that!” On May 24, 1956, Brubeck was playing at the Black Hawk bar in San Francisco. In those days you couldn’t travel with a girl across the border unless you were married, so Izzy and Babs tied the knot and got to see Brubeck live in concert.

Young Asper had a tough grind in law school, not with his studies but in getting to class. In



the second year, his attendance record didn't even rank as sporadic. "Law School was death warmed over," he recalled. "You had to have 80 percent attendance. In my second year, I had 12 percent, quit once and then got 'chucked' out. I couldn't take it. I remember putting my hand up and giving my version of the law and the prof would say, 'What's your name? Asper. Oh right, we know about you.'" Izzy was told that he wasn't there to say what the law ought to be, but to learn what it was. He did eventually graduate in law and was fortunate enough to be offered a tiny office on top of the local Bank of Nova Scotia vault on a pay-when-you-can basis. He boasted to his friends that he was sitting on a million dollars, but went for eight months without a client. ("I had no air conditioning—I kept the window open.")

In Winnipeg, he set up a primarily Jewish law firm that did so well he eventually decided to branch out and build a small distillery to produce various liquors strictly for export, which

meant that he didn't have to carry inventory. "We were selling one-day-old raw whisky to the Americans," he boasted. "They paid us a dollar a gallon, when it might have cost them four times that. It was like selling futures." The operation was profitable from its first few months, but his partners sold out to a larger competitor, turning a handsome profit but losing their senior partner, who was enraged by their impatience. A similar experience followed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when with a new set of partners Izzy bought out Monarch Life, the country's last major independent insurance company; when it became wildly profitable, the partners overruled him and once again sold out in 1983 to cash in on their investment. This time Izzy was so upset, he suffered his first serious heart attack.

Over the years, Izzy became disillusioned with law and business. In 1970, he decided to enter provincial politics, and almost overnight he found himself leader of Manitoba's



minuscule Liberal Party. "If Louis Riel were alive today," he declared as an opening gambit, "I would be in the trenches with him." The Metis leader was put to death because he refused to hide behind an insanity plea that could have saved his life, so supporting him seemed to be the perfect qualification for the Liberal crown.

In the 1973 election, Izzy won his riding by only four votes, earning the title "Land-slide Asper." The definite low point of the campaign occurred when New Democratic Party (NDP) premier Ed Schreyer referred to Asper, and Progressive Conservative (PC) leader Sidney Spivak, who was also Jewish, as "the gold dust twins from River Heights." (Labour minister Russ Paulley actually came up with the line, as noted by a *Winnipeg Tribune* story on June 20, 1973.)

The premier had likely not intended it as an anti-Semitic jibe, yet the portrayal of Spivak and Asper as rich lawyers left a bad taste in the mouths of Winnipeg Jews. Sidney Green,



running for the NDP (who, along with Saul Cherniack and Saul Miller, was a Jewish NDP cabinet minister), recalls it as "one of the less palatable features" of the contest, adding that Cherniack "pleaded with Schreyer to desist in adding fuel to this fire." Asper also received vile letters with a strong anti-Semitic undercurrent and decided to leave politics behind, though this decision owed more to the limitations of his position as provincial leader than to his being Jewish. Around the same time, in 1975, Sidney Spivak was replaced as PC leader when it was not-so-subtly insinuated by some party members that Manitoba would never elect a Jewish premier. But even after he left politics, Asper could not escape anti-Semitism. Any guy whose first name is "Israel" presents a natural target. Sometimes it was the silent treatment, such as not being hired as a tax advisor by the WASP-dominated grain trade. At other times, it was simply deliberate exclusion.

far facing The Manitoba Club, the social headquarters of Winnipeg's business elite, c. 1905. The club did not admit its first Jewish member until 1972.

facing Izzy and Leonard Asper celebrate Canwest Global's purchase of a stable of newspapers from Hollinger in 2000.

The mark of having “arrived” in Canada in the 1960s and 1970s was membership in one of the favoured dining clubs, where the chosen few smugly convinced themselves they belonged to a select assemblage of men who *are*, instead of men who merely *do*. These clubs were sacrosanct, set apart by the holy hush of privilege that endured undisturbed. Membership signified that the right connections had been made and the future was clear of ordinary concerns. All of these clubs were restricted to non-Jewish members. One of the last to demolish that restriction was the Manitoba Club. The first attempt to dis-mantle the non-Jewish barrier was sponsored in 1968 by James Richardson, dean of the grain trade, who invited Sol Kane, an active director of the Bank of Canada, former chairman of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, and all-round good fellow, for lunch. Richardson was severely reprimanded. The club did not admit its first Jewish member, Gerald Libling, until 1972. Israel Asper was refused membership to the Manitoba Club until the mid-1970s when, under pressure from the enlightened Winnipeg lawyer Alan Sweetman, the club finally passed a non-discrimination bylaw.

There followed other investments in Izzy's business life: an incarnation as a merchant banker and the acquisition of a television syndicate, which Asper built up to become Canwest Global Communications Corporation, Canada's largest and richest media empire, with significant international holdings. And yet his

professional life never stopped being a struggle between the impossible and the desirable. His motto, reproduced on his family crest, was “Reach for the stars.” And he always did.

ALTHOUGH IZZY ASPER gradually eased himself out of active corporate command of his media empire, he continued to bubble enthusiastically, “Even when I'm ninety I'll still be buying green bananas and looking for a thirty-year closed-end mortgage.” In fact, he had officially turned over management of Canwest to his youngest son, Leonard, in 1999, naming him president and CEO, while he remained an active executive chairman. By 2003, he had stepped down from that office as well, prompting Leonard to muse at the Canwest Chairman's Dinner that winter: “What will this mean for me—Izzy stepping down as chairman? Nothing. I always get in the last words, ‘Yes, Dad; No, Dad; *Right Away, Dad!*’ ”

As he passed the direction of the family empire to the new generation of Aspers—Leonard, Gail, and David—Izzy took a much keener interest in his “fourth child,” the Asper Foundation, established in 1983. That was the year he gathered his children, then in their bursting twenties and not yet in the family business, for an important meeting. “We sat down in my boardroom at home,” he recalled, “and I told them I had just incorporated a new company. I said that they should understand that they were all going to inherit equally, but there would be four children instead of three. So instead of



one-third each, it would be one-quarter. 'You've got a new sibling,' I said, 'and it's called the Asper Foundation. We just incorporated it. And I want you to be on side with this, because it will be the glue in your relationship. You can fight all you like about the business, but what will keep you together as a family will be the foundation. It will give you the opportunity to do something useful with your lives and make a difference.'

Asper was generous to a fault, and that "fault"—if it was one—was that, unlike most other philanthropists, his original gift was only the first step in the process. Richard Leipsic, Canwest's senior in-house counsel who negotiated most of the donations, recalls that "people were always very surprised, because I was doing most of the legal aspect of the philanthropic deals, when I'd present them with a ten-page agreement... Donating to the universities, for example, they got very befuddled about the fact that we were willing to give money, yet expected to have some commitment on the

other side, some accountability, some penalties if they didn't perform. Izzy always said that it was really easy making money; the hard part was giving it away. He realized that you don't get it back, that the return it shows is not monetary, it's in terms of its results, and I think he always had this concern that people would view it as their own money. If somebody comes in and writes you a cheque for \$1 million, you don't necessarily feel the same accountability as if you had to earn it. So he tried to impose a measure of accountability on his charitable giving."

There was a tough, unsentimental side to Asper, expressed in his personal dictum: "You can't legislate propriety or morality or love or affection or loyalty. You can only legally cover what happens when they don't exist." Apart from his numerous and continuing donations to Israel, most of his charitable gifts were designed to improve Winnipeg's quality of life, focused on—but not limited to—its Jewish institutions. "Izzy infused the city with a tremendous vitality,



far facing In 1999, Izzy Asper officially turned over management of Canwest Global to his youngest son, Leonard, naming him president and CEO, while he remained an active executive chairman.

facing Izzy Asper receives the country's most prestigious award, the Order of Canada, from Governor General Roméo LeBlanc in 1995.

left David Asper, chairman of the Asper Foundation.

his own vitality," remarked Martin Freedman, a frequent law partner.

Between September 1999 and July 2000, Izzy Asper donated significant sums to his community and Israel. These included \$10 million to the Winnipeg Foundation and the Jewish Foundation of Manitoba, \$5 million to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, \$5 million to the St-Boniface Hospital Research Foundation, and \$10 million to the University of Manitoba's business school, which was renamed the I.H. Asper School of Business in his honour. He felt he had paid back most of the dues he owed his community. "My job now is to do something that nobody else is doing," he told Moe Levy, the Asper Foundation's executive director and Izzy's chosen instrument to mastermind his grandest project. "I don't want this foundation just to be writing cheques. Let's do something that's fantastic and extraordinary for the world," Asper said. That fantastic venture turned out to be the Canadian Museum for Human Rights.

The senior Asper's obsession with human rights bloomed on October 14, 1970, when he arrived in the Manitoba legislature as leader of the provincial Grits. Asper, not quite forty years old at the time, was concerned about one issue only: the need for a provincial bill of rights. He promptly introduced his version, parts of which became the template for similar bills in other jurisdictions. In 1960, Asper had actively supported Conservative prime minister John Diefenbaker's pioneering Canadian Bill of Rights. In 1982, he was one of the leading provincial activists who championed Pierre Trudeau's Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. "I went to Trudeau and put the proposition to him that this was such a monumental achievement, it ought to be celebrated in some tangible way just like the American Declaration of Independence," he recalled. "He loved the idea but his agenda was full and he just couldn't get at it." Izzy's own active political career cratered in the next election campaign

below Students at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on the Asper Foundation's Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program. From the program's inception in 1997 to 2014, over 12,600 students and chaperones in 204 cities spanning twelve provinces and territories across Canada will have participated in this initiative.



when he could not win more than the same five seats the Liberals had won in the election of 1969.

Decades later, beginning in 1997, Izzy, through the Asper Foundation, created an annual education and travel program for Canadian students to visit the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., so they could bear witness to how a people can lose their rights, their freedoms, and their lives. It was a highly successful venture and helped reverse much existing indifference. But to create change and make a lasting impact, the number of people participating in this program needed to increase. Yet, the program was also

dealing with other issues: at that time, the Canadian dollar was at an all-time low against the U.S. dollar, so trip costs were becoming prohibitively expensive. Also, the program focused mostly on American notions of freedom. In spring of 2000, Gail Asper suggested to her father that ways to make this a Canadian journey needed to be explored. What was required, she said, was not only to teach Jewish children, and familiarize them with the horrors of the Holocaust, but to teach all Canadians about genocides and their warning signs, from a Canadian perspective.

On July 18, 2000, with martinis in hand, Izzy Asper and Moe Levy, whom Asper had hired



nine months earlier, discussed the concept of building a “museum of tolerance” in Winnipeg. It was a visionary project that would portray the agonies of human rights violations that blot history, and celebrate its heroes. The notion of exposing Canadians—especially during their youth—to the very worst abuses of human rights built upon the Washington experience, but the Canadian museum Izzy envisioned would create a national education program and bring in twenty thousand students from across Canada each year.

Little did Izzy realize that this vision would take more than a storm-tossed decade of wrangling to complete. The ostensible reason, as

with most bureaucratic undertakings, was that nobody was willing take decisions that might set precedents. Not to worry. Not for a split second did a single individual involved with this mother of a project ever consider the idea that this would become a template. Not this side of sanity. It was strictly a one-off.

above Students explore the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The success of the Asper Foundation's Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program trip to Washington inspired the decision to build the CMHR.