



## **A Museum for Human Rights is NOT Enough**

**Alice Herscovitch**, Executive Director of the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre  
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On the occasion of the opening of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR), we are rightfully proud that private and government partners have made this commitment to human rights concretely and publicly. This is an exceptional moment to reflect on our collective understanding and history of human rights. At the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre, we are a testament to the fact that, where Canada once had a policy of “none is too many” for Jewish refugees, many Holocaust survivors speak glowingly of their adopted country, which allowed them and their families to flourish. As we take stock, we must acknowledge that Canada’s commitment to human rights is being questioned, as we face an alarming international refugee crisis and the closing of our borders to asylum seekers.

The Centre is most concerned by statistics recently released. According to the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees 2013 Report “More people were forced to flee their homes during 2013 than ever before in modern-day history. (...) The number of people displaced within their own country (IDPs) also rose, from 28.8 million at the end of 2012 to 33.3 million at the end of 2013.” In 2013, 51.2 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, violence, or human rights violations. This is the highest level recorded since WWII.

At the same time, the number of asylum seekers to Canada has decreased dramatically: In 2013, that number was 10,400 as opposed to 20,500 the year before. It is time to ask questions about the role and responsibility that Canada assumes in terms of the UN Convention on Refugees, and about our core Canadian values at a time when so many lives are at stake. The impact of Bill C-31, An Act to Amend the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, has seemingly been both swift and draconian. Can we afford to wait and see if this a trend?

Elements of the law, which establish a list of designated “safe” countries of origin, are of grave concern to the Centre, whose mission includes the prevention of antisemitism and discrimination by promoting respect for diversity and human life. One provision of this law regarding access to health care has already been struck down in a judgement by Federal Court because it endangered the health and lives of asylum seekers. The distinctions for these asylum seekers were found to be “cruel, inhumane and discriminatory”.

The list of designated countries does not take into account the countries’ human rights record, and those seeking refuge do not have the same rights as other claimants. Asylum-seekers from these countries have a shorter period of time for the preparation and judgment of their claims, and are not entitled to an appeal process. The last year has provided evidence of both the impact of this measure, and worsening conditions in regards to basic human rights for minority groups in some of these “safe” countries. One case in point is Hungary. The European Roma Rights Centre issued a statement in June 2014 about the expulsion of the Roma from Miskolc, a major city in eastern Hungary, in what they call “an egregious example of systemic discrimination and racism”. . In reaction to opposition to a World War II memorial which is said to whitewash Hungary’s role in the Holocaust (over 550,000 Hungarian Jews were murdered); the Memorial was completed overnight to prevent demonstrations.



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Centre commémoratif  
de l'Holocauste à Montréal

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Montreal Holocaust  
Memorial Centre

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Canada and the world have made tremendous progress since WWII and the Holocaust. The UN Refugee Convention was signed, as was the Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. The Quebec and Canadian Charters of Rights and Freedoms are foundational to our societies. But for these commitments to remain meaningful, the CMHR must serve to help Canadians question not only our past, but our present and to reinforce our collective responsibility. The world refugee crisis must increase our resolve to open our doors to those who need Canada now.