

Museum of grim reminders

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The bodies lay sprawled in the small classrooms, their arms still outstretched in the final moments of life. Nearby, skulls and bones sat in anonymous heaps.

At the stark hillside school at Murambi in southern Rwanda, viewing these bodies provided us with a grim reminder of the country's past of genocide and the lasting need to preserve human rights for all.

It was at this site in 1994 that an estimated 40,000 Tutsi civilians were brutally massacred during the bloodshed that overwhelmed the African nation. At the request of survivors and the victims' families, many of their bodies were preserved in lime and put on display.

The hope is that teaching the history of these catastrophic violations of human rights can honour those who perished, while preventing the depths of these horrors from being forgotten.

Human rights monuments exist all around the world. In Memphis, Tennessee, the motel where civil rights pioneer Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated now houses the National Civil Rights Museum.

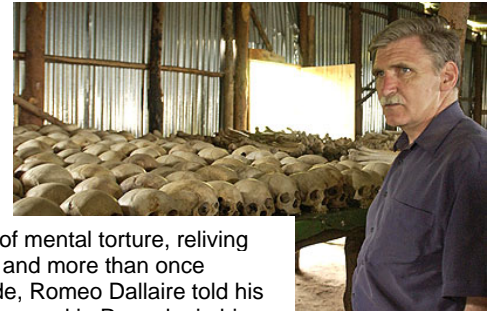
In Dachau, Germany, the former World War II concentration camp has been re-imagined as a memorial to the millions who perished in the Holocaust.

It's essential we in Canada also strive to recognize the struggle for human rights. That's why we were excited to hear about plans for the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, to be built in Winnipeg.

Conceptualized by the late media magnate Israel "Izzy" Asper and slated to open in 2010, the museum will be dedicated to enhancing and challenging our understanding of human rights.

The museum's unique design, described by architect Antoine Predock as composed in "light and shadow, ephemera and stone, gravity and weightlessness, reflection and opacity, earth and sky," will guide visitors on a difficult but enlightening journey through history, honouring those Canadian heroes who have fought for us all to preserve human rights.

Heroes like Josiah Henson, the escaped slave who helped thousands of others find freedom in Canada through the Underground Railroad.



After nine years of mental torture, reliving the horrors daily and more than once attempting suicide, Romeo Dallaire told his story of what happened in Rwanda, in his extraordinary book *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda*.

Or Jean Lumb, who fought on behalf of immigrant families and was the first Chinese Canadian woman to receive the Order of Canada.

Or Mary Two-Axe Earley, the founder of Equal Rights for Indian Women and a prominent force in the push for native women's rights.

Or Lieutenant-General Roméo Dallaire, who struggled in Rwanda to maintain order during the escalating chaos when the international community turned a blind eye.

On the global stage, Canada has participated in many human rights treaties, condemning genocide and land mines, as well as advocating for the rights of women, children and refugees.

Recently Canada pushed for the United Nations to adopt the "responsibility to protect." The central idea of this resolution is that all nations bear responsibility when governments fail to protect their citizens' rights.

It aims to establish ways in which the international community can collaborate to prevent future crimes against humanity.

Despite these efforts, we in Canada are not above criticism.

A 2005 survey conducted on behalf of the Human Rights Museum found 81 per cent of respondents believe abuses have occurred in this country, while 19 per cent claimed to have had their own rights violated.

And last year a UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights criticized Canada for not taking action on disproportionate poverty rates among minorities and marginalized individuals. The committee's report also took our government to task for ignoring discrimination toward aboriginal communities.

Meanwhile, devastating violations still occur worldwide. In the Darfur region of Western Sudan, a bloody ethnic conflict has been raging since 2003. The UN puts the death toll as high as 400,000. Millions have been displaced and had homes destroyed in the ongoing chaos.

We clearly still have a long way to go.

That's why this museum presents such an inspiring opportunity. Human rights are a fundamental part of humanity, and we must bring them to the fore of our society's consciousness.

Achieving this goal first requires education. The museum will also operate as a unique centre for teaching, training and rallying those who work to advance our rights – peacekeepers, educators and student activists. Its programs will bring discussion about rights to youth across the country, helping to foster the next generation of human rights heroes.

Construction is tentatively slated to begin this year, with doors to open in 2010. However, building can't begin until funding is secured. Governments at various levels have committed to the project, but have been slow in delivering on this promise.

The museum is also currently short of its goals in private funding. It's vital that we show our support for human rights education, as a nation and as individuals.

Hopefully, one day human rights abuses will exist only in museums.

Craig and Marc Kielburger are founders of *Free the Children* and co-authors of *Me to We*.