

# Confronting Antisemitism and Other Intolerance

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Thanks to all who helped us hold this event in the capital where the Swedish businessman/diplomat Raoul Wallenberg's heroic acts saved tens of thousands of lives. Thank you to Szabolcs Takacs, who headed the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) during last year's Hungarian heading of the Alliance.

The Canadian human rights lawyer David Matas notes in his autobiography (*Why Did you Do that?*) that Wallenberg saved the lives of about 50,000 Hungarian Jews with “protective Swedish passports and every means he could...(He) showed us that all that is necessary for evil to be defeated is for the good to be active”.



Matas has worked with members of Wallenberg's immediate family (four of whom are here with us) for years to learn what happened to Canada's first honorary citizen after he was arrested in Budapest by Soviet soldiers on Jan. 17, 1945. Matas argues that there is a moral duty upon Russia and the “whole global community” to establish the truth about what happened.

I once asked Vitaly Churkin, now Permanent Representative of Russia to the U.N. what befell Wallenberg. “Wallenberg died of a heart attack in 1947”, he said, but then added, “It is quite possible that Stalin had him shot.” Paul Ginsborg's book (Yale U Press) *Family Politics* indicates that Stalin's agents were in some periods executing an estimated 50,000 persons monthly.

Wallenberg's values were central to the first Award for Moral Courage in the Face of Antisemitism or other forms of intolerance presented this year in Canada's Parliament. Those eligible must promote multi-religious freedom, protect the vulnerable, and take personal risks to defend the religious freedom rights of all.

The first winner, Rev. Majed El Shafie of Toronto, has confronted antisemitism and the persecution of other faith minorities in various parts of the world. He has long advocated for religious freedom and opposed a number of governments violating this right.



Majed El Shafie accepting Wallenberg Award

## Confronting Antisemitism

Most Christians in Europe, Canada and around the world stood by during the Shoah, history's worst genocide. There were notable exceptions, but most of us Christians failed to honour the second great commandment - to love one's neighbour as oneself.

Remembering that as many as 1.5 million children were murdered during the Shoah, consider an anecdote related recently by a Canadian, who was a seven-year old child in a central European city in 1939. Until then, children of diverse cultures and languages had played happily together. One day on her way to a Jewish school, she was struck and injured by someone who had targeted her with a stone embedded in a snowball. Hitler's virulent antisemitism had ended the harmony of her childhood. While German and Russian soldiers fought for control of the city as the WW2 was ending, her family was fortunate to escape the death camp trains and survive.



Irving Abella



Harold Troper

Canada's own shame is set out in *None Is Too Many* by Irving Abella and Harold Troper. During all of WW2, fewer than 4000 Jewish refugees were permitted entry to Canada; today, there are an estimated 40,000 Holocaust survivors in Canada. Historian Paul Johnson describes our then national pathology, "Though a disease of the mind, (antisemitism) is by no means confined to the weak, feeble or commonplace intellects; as history sadly records, its carriers have included men and women of otherwise powerful and subtle thoughts."

Canadians have made remarkable progress since 1945 in celebrating religious and cultural diversity. National Holocaust Day on May 5<sup>th</sup> attracted many young people to the ceremony at Ottawa's War Museum in Ottawa. Two teachers from public secondary schools were presented awards for teaching about the Shoah. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau stressed that "discrimination, racism and antisemitism" are unacceptable anywhere in Canada.



Receiving an award from the prime minister, survivor Cantor Moshe Kraus revealed that his parents and more than a hundred family members perished in Nazi death camps. He would have been burned alive at Bergen-Belsen if his singing had not won the favour of the camp commander.



Today, we live in a world where, instead of harmony and legal, political and social equality, some pursue bigotry and violence. The responsible international community must find more effective ways to oppose aggression against minorities by intolerant regimes and terrorists.

*The Devil That Never Dies*



*The Devil That Never Dies, The Rise and Threat of Global Antisemitism* (2013), by Daniel Goldhagen, formerly of Harvard, is important. The thesis is that antisemitism has exploded in recent decades, largely due to misinformation and falsehoods, insinuating itself into the minds of millions of persons globally, frequently anonymously by way of the Internet.

Two of its key points:

- Christians were misinformed for centuries that Jews, rather than Romans, killed Jesus; the New Testament before its modernization was replete with inaccurate references to the faith community into which Jesus was born and died. (Fortunately, Christians now repudiate such falsities. Pope Francis, for example, said in 2013, “What I can say, with the apostle Paul, is that God has never stopped believing in the alliance made with Israel and that, through the terrible trials of these past centuries, the Jews have kept their faith in God.”)
- Muslims are wrongly told by some spiritual leaders that Jews are the enemies of Allah.

### **Faith Communities Uniting**

Iran and Iraq exemplify jurisdictions where Muslims are persecuted. In the first, some Shiites harass and persecute Sunnis; in Iraq, Sunni radicals-mostly ISIS currently-do the same to Shiites. In India, some Hindus abuse Muslims. Moderate voices calling for peace and reconciliation have fallen silent in many countries.

The oppressed minorities hardest hit by ISIS brutality are the Syriac Catholics and Orthodox. Chaldeans, Melkites, Maronites and Armenians have suffered terribly. How many know that an estimated 80 percent of those persecuted for their faith across the world today are Christians? The world badly needs a global public square where freedom of religion and belief for people of all faiths (and none) is built.

If all faith communities respond shoulder-to-shoulder when anyone in any religion is being persecuted anywhere, lives can be saved. Early intervention and solidarity are essential. For genuine reconciliation and harmony to grow, conflict and hatred must be gently erased and the threads of violence removed.

Miroslav Volf of Croatia in his excellent book, *Exclusion and Embrace*, says: “there can be no peace among nations without peace among religions. Since religious peace can be established only through religious dialogue... reconciliation between the peoples depends on the success of the inter-religious dialogue.”



### **Berlin Conference**



In March, 140 parliamentarians from around the world gathered in Berlin for the Inter-Parliamentary Conference for Combating Anti-Semitism, hosted by the German Foreign Office and its Bundestag. “The fight against anti-Semitism is our common duty as a state and as citizens,” said Chancellor Angela Merkel, emphasizing that there is no place in Germany for hatred directed against Jews or any other form of xenophobia and that this applies to everyone - old established residents and new arrivals.

### **BBC on Antisemitism**

A recent BBC television special, “Never Again: Fear and Faith in Paris”, focused on antisemitism in France and the UK. One point made was that by teaching positively about all faiths in British schools, spiritual diversity is respected generally. In France, *laïcité*, originating in the French Revolution of 1789, has meant ever-stricter separation of public life and religion despite increasing numbers of religious communities arriving, especially from Muslim countries. This has created friction, sometimes involving Jews as scapegoats.

There are hopeful signs. A Muslim in Bradford, UK, donated to the restoration of a synagogue and then joined its council. In France, in the kosher store where violence occurred, lives were saved by a Muslim employee who hid Jewish customers in the basement. Londoners have elected their first Muslim mayor, Sadiq Khan, a former human-rights lawyer who says, “whether it’s [ISIS] or these others who want to destroy our way of life and talk about the West, they’re talking about me. What better antidote to the hatred they spew than someone like me being in this position?”



### **Conclusion**

The desecration of Jewish synagogues and cemeteries has tragically increased in recent years around the world. Across Canada, approximately 1600 antisemitic incidents were reported in 2014 alone. Silence can easily be seen as endorsement of such acts.

Raoul Wallenberg’s courage and actions in Budapest over seven decades ago pointed the way to a better future for all. He stood up in a near hopeless situation to draw a line in the sand, saying, “One person can make a difference.” We need to remind ourselves of this constantly.

Thank you/merci/Koszonom