

Rosalie Silberman Abella
Polish Displaced Person
and Child of Holocaust
Survivors
General Heintzelman
May 1950



The Honourable Madam Justice Rosalie Silberman Abella's speech from a the pre-Pier 21 opening event luncheon June 31, 1999.

Of the 500,000 immigrants to land at this Pier after the war, 100,000 were Displaced Persons and Refugees. I was one of them. My parents married in Poland the day World War II started. They spent four years in a concentration camp. Their 2 year-old son and my father's entire family were killed at Treblinka. They ended up in Stuttgart, Germany after the war where my father, a lawyer, was the Legal Counsel for Displaced Persons in Southwest Germany. In 1946, shortly after they were liberated, my parents had a child, then two years later, another. It was their way of proving to the world - and themselves - that their spirit was not broken.

After years of trying to get into Canada, we finally got permission. In May of 1950, my parents, my grandmother, my younger sister and me found ourselves on an American troop ship, the General Heitzelman, headed for Halifax. We landed at Pier 21, immediately got on what my mother remembers as a soot-filled train headed for Toronto, and started our lives all over again.

Within days of arriving in Toronto, my father went to the law Society of Upper Canada to ask what tests he would need to take to become a lawyer. None, they said. Non-citizens could not be lawyers. Waiting the five years it took in those days to become a citizen was impossible. There was a family to feed. So he became an insurance agent for the next 20 years. Happily.

The moment I heard that story as a child about my father not being able to be a lawyer, was the moment I decided to become one. But growing up, people told me that girls were not lawyers. Not so, said my parents. This is Canada. With hard work, anything is possible.

Those of us who were permitted to come to Canada were given a precious gift: the possibility of endless possibilities, and the freedom to pursue them in safety and security. That is why every immigrant who started at Pier 21 cherishes this country and its people.

My father died a month before I finished law school, and never lived to see his inspiration take flight in the daughter raised to fear only injustice, indifference and cowardice, or in his two grandsons, one of whom has just finished law school and the other who is about to start. But he knew somehow it would turn out alright for his family because he was confident in Canada's generosity. And how generous it has been! The child my parents had to rebuild their hearts in Germany in 1946, became a judge in Canada in 1976. Remarkable.

July 1st, the day Pier 21 officially opens, is Canada Day. It is also my birthday. I cannot imagine a better birthday present than this chance to come back and say "Thank you" to the Pier I last saw as a four year-old Jewish refugee, and to the country that took it from there. This country is full of tenaciously grateful immigrants and their descendants who bloomed in Canada's field of opportunities, nourished by its generosity and strengthened by its idealism. This triumphal triumvirate of opportunity, generosity and idealism is what this Pier stands for Canada's best self. It is the Canada that let us in, the Canada that took one generation's European horror story and turned it into another generation's Canadian fairytale.

I will never forget how lucky we were to be able to come to Canada, but I will also never forget why we came. These are the two stories which complete me - one joyful and one painful - and which merge in the next generation into a mother's irrevocable gratitude to a country which has made it possible for her children to have only one story - the joyful story, the Canadian story, the story that started at Pier 21.