

JRAN: Standing Up For Human Dignity In Canada

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As a result of what many in the refugee advocacy community believe to be a time of social cruelty here in Canada, government policy in our country has turned its back on those from other lands who face mortal discrimination in trying to find a safe harbour in Canada.

Not since the days immediately prior to World War II when Canada became infamous for a refugee policy that purposely excluded Jews fleeing Eastern Europe have we seen such a state of affairs. Canadian historians, Irving Abella and Hesh Troper documented our government's dark refusal to admit Jews as an antisemitic policy. Indeed an unnamed bureaucrat when asked in 1938 how many Jews should Canada allow into the country replied "[None is too many](#)".

Sadly racism and discrimination have a tendency to be muscular. As Jews we are all too familiar with refugee discrimination, indeed the memory of suffering we have endured as a result of being powerless is long and deep. Tragically it appears that our government believes "None is (once again) too many" when it comes to refugees most especially the Roma.

Our friends in other faith traditions have urged us to speak out at this time on behalf of refugees. They have told us that we have a special moral authority to speak on behalf of those who desperately need refuge. In particular, our Roma brothers and sisters are asking us to act in solidarity with them because of [our particular memory of shared suffering in Nazi Europe](#).

Last year Nobel Peace Prize recipient, [Dr. Elie Wiesel, made a powerful statement](#) on behalf of refugees being denied sanctuary and even the basic health provisions here in Canada. Dr. Wiesel supported the Toronto Board of Rabbis in their work attempting to overturn proposed legislation that would make Hungary a so-called "designated safe country". At that time he wrote, "As a former refugee, together with the Toronto Board of Rabbis, I feel morally compelled to remain on the side of other uprooted men and women everywhere. As long as they don't find new homes, living in permanent exile, their human rights are violated. Socrates himself chose death over exile. Today, as yesterday, a nation is judged by its attitude towards refugees."

Sadly, their protest has failed and [that Bill, now law](#), makes it virtually impossible for a refugee claim to succeed from such designated safe countries like Hungary and mandates that even medical care be withheld. Nonetheless Elie Wiesel's words had impact with the Canadian public. People began to take notice.

As Jews of conscience we felt we could no longer remain quiet.

As a result a national organization ["Jewish Refugee Action Network" \(JRAN\)](#) has been created. Our goal is to embrace the Talmudic maxim "Tzedek, tzedek terdof-justice, justice shall you seek".

And yes there are members of our community who would prefer us to speak only on behalf of Jewish refugees. They are reluctant to criticize a government who seems very supportive of some of the interests of the Jewish community. However, we believe that we are commanded to speak for all those less fortunate to stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves even if it means that we have to be critical of our friends, political and otherwise, when they stray from the ethical path. In fact we believe that true friends will listen, that true friends will act in accordance with ethical values.

We were fortunate that so many members of our community were ready to stand with us, prepared to reignite their progressive passions now that an organization they could identify with has formed. Former Canadian UN Ambassador, humanitarian, AIDS activist and former Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF, [Stephen Lewis](#) was appointed Honourary Canadian co-Chair with his wife Journalist and renowned social justice advocate [Michele Landsberg](#) our other co-Chair.

Others on the Board include :

- Rabbi Arthur Bielfeld-past co-Chair of Coalition against Child Poverty and an Order of Canada recipient; Rabbi Emeritus Temple Emanuel
- Maureen Silcoff-immigration and refugee lawyer and former member of Immigration Review Board
- Mary Jo Leddy-founder of Romero House for refugees, Order of Canada and social activist
- Ken Rosenberg-lawyer, university lecturer, and former political staffer
- Rabbi Dow Marmur-Senior Fellow Massey College and St. Michael's College, journalist and Rabbi Emeritus Holy Blossom Temple
- Avrum Rosensweig-founding President of Jewish humanitarian organization Ve'ahavta, writer and former radio personality
- Audrey Macklin-Professor of law University of Toronto specializing in citizenship law and human rights and founding member Canadian Association of Refugee Lawyers
- Val Hyman-teacher, social worker and social justice advocate
- Anna Porter-co-founder of Key Porter Books, Author of numerous books, a member of both the Order of Canada and the Order of Ontario
- Dr. Miriam Schuman-health care journalist, physician and associate professor of medicine at University of Toronto
- Dr. Phil Berger-Chief of family and community medicine at St Michaels Hospital, Associate Professor of medicine University of Toronto, founding member of Canadian Doctors for Refugee Care and an Order of Ontario
- Noa Mendelsohn Aviv-Director of Equality programming at Canadian Civil Liberties

association. Lawyer specializing in civil and human rights

- Professor Michael R. Marrus- the Rose and Ray Wolfe Professor Emeritus of Holocaust Studies University of Toronto, member of the Order of Canada and Royal Society of Canada.
- Mitchell Goldberg-Quebec lawyer specializing in immigration and refugee law, member of the Canadian Bar Association, author and historian
- Jon Telch-former political aid assisting MPs seated on the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs where he dealt with numerous issues of human rights violations from foreign countries
- Gabriela Ramo-lawyer practicing for over 20 years in immigration and refugee law, writer and speaker

I am honoured to be part of this distinguished group. We understand the complexities and difficulties we face going forward but are determined to stand up as Jews, non-Jews and Canadians to demand a return to Canada as a bastion of decency where all people are treated with dignity and respect.