ADDRESS TO THE CANADIAN CLUB OF TORONTO

by

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Monday, May 28, 2001

I can't tell you how much this honour means to me, except to say I wish my parents were alive today. My father flew 55 missions in the war, my mother was liberated from a prisoner of war camp by Canadian forces, but I know this would have been their proudest day. And they would have been moved most of all by the sight of their granddaughters sitting here, Caitlin and Madeleine, and I know they would see the sight of them at the table as the culmination of a great fifty-year journey: That the Starowicz family would be rooted and accepted in their country of refuge.

I'm particularly happy to be in the company of two people who have been mentors to my life, Peter Herrndorf, from whom I learned the principles of national broadcasting, and Murray Frum, to whose wisdom, and that of my colleague of 20 years, Barbara Frum, I had recourse at many crossroads of life. And I'm grateful to Nancy Lockhart for her many kindnesses, the greatest of which is to let me share in their family.

I'm glad that there are young people here, my daughter Madeleine's classmates from Montcrest School, to represent continuity. And I'm honoured by the presence of my dear companions-in-arms from the CBC. Harold Redekopp and I started out in radio together 30 years ago. Slawko Klymkiw threw the weight of the Program Director's office behind the Canadian History project, and saved it from oblivion. Gene Allen has been the guiding intellect of the Project, and the keeper of its historical and journalistic integrity. Anne Emin, Eva Czigler and Ruth Ellen Soles, whatever their business cards say, have worked tirelessly to make sure I don't make a complete ass of myself.

I have many reasons to be grateful to the Canadian Club, who sent me across the country and to Europe fifteen years ago to warn about the erosion of national broadcasting, but also for a reason few of you know. The CBC was founded by the extraordinary efforts of two men who rallied the country to the cause of national broadcasting. Alan Plaunt, and Graham Spry. And the instrument they used to rally the country was the Canadian Club. Here is a letter Graham Spry wrote in the 1920's: "When I returned to Canada in the summer of 1926, after nearly a year in [Geneva], I was looking about for both experience and a path into active Canadian life. Past experience had planted two seeds—fascinated and excited interest in Canada, and an ambition to be involved in Canadian affairs...[I took the job as national secretary of the Association of Canadian Clubs, whose objective is] to study and promote Canadian unity and especially to find ways of easing the wartime bitterness between French and English Canadians. The Canadian Clubs job was something which would enable me to see all of Canada and all walks of life through travel, meeting and conferences I would be on my own and on my own in the centre of Canadian government in Ottawa. The whole of Canada, in effect, was laid before me. I could not have been happier."

Through his energy, Graham Spry was able to double the number of Canadian Clubs from 53 to 115. His favourite was the one in Govenlock, Saskatchewan. "It is a railway station," he wrote, "with a population of 8, and the Canadian Club has a membership of 125. It is mainly composed of ranchers and farmers of the district." Through the Canadian Club, he tirelessly criss-crossed the country and urged the creation of a national

broadcasting system, and the Clubs were among the first to use radio, transmitting the words of hundreds of speakers. The most historic moment came when he and the Canadian Club linked all the small radio networks, mostly owned by railway, telephone and telegraph companies, to form the first national link to Parliament Hill on July 1, 1927, and for the first time ever, all Canadians could hear the Prime Minister and the celebrations. It was the first glimmer of national broadcasting.

This fall, the CBC will complete the Canadian History Project. The wave of enthusiasm from Canadians for our national history stunned even us. As many people watched two-hour episodes as the Olympics or Hockey Night in Canada. The companion book has been a national bestseller. The videos and DVD's have broken all sales records, and the curriculum guides will be in 90 per cent of Canadian schools by next year. The myth that Canadians are not interested in their history has died forever. There is a hunger out there to understand who we are, and what shaped us, and there is a latent pride, which has the strength of a tidal wave.

Canadian history has been considered dull, or at best a tepid story by many because it has no Napoleonic-scale wars or French Revolutions, and we have persuaded ourselves sometimes that we have an absence of history. Nice place to raise your kids but you don't want to stay up nights reading about it. But that misses the very point. We have had, in our history, every toxic ingredient for conflict. Competing languages, contested land, two religions, rival ethnicities. How we didn't become Yugoslavia, or Northern Ireland, or Vichy France is a far more intriguing historical mystery than the European wars, and far more pertinent to the modern world. Something took those same ingredients and mixed them differently here, into a common civility. We are not morally superior to anyone. Why did peace endure here, while it failed almost everywhere else ? Here, for what it's worth, is what I learned, and humbly offer as a personal view.

It dawned on me first when I was watching the rushes of the Loyalist flight to Nova Scotia, as thousands of families were dropped onto the rocky beaches of Nova Scotia. I watched the scene, and was struck that it was an 18th century Kosovo in its scale. It looked identical to the scenes I was watching on the news at that time. Then came these quotes, over the scene of huge ships departing on the horizon:

Sarah Frost: "It is, I think, the roughest land I ever saw. But this is to be our city, they say."
Sarah Tilley: "I climbed to the top of Chipman's Hill and watched the sails disappear, although I had not shed a tear throughout all the war, I sat down on the damp moss, with my baby in my lap, and cried."

I have no connection to them, it would be two hundred years before the Starowicz family ever came here. But I found my eyes moistening in the small CBC theatre and tried to hide the fact that I was overcome with emotion (which is not my wont). I finally realized why. This was my story too. The experience of refuge, the experience of arrival in a strange and alien place, the fear of an uncertain destiny. I began to understand the nature

of what links us all in the Canadian experience. We are not linked by blood. But we are linked by the common experience of refuge and hope.

And if we cast our eyes back over Canadian history, at least the 500 years of European immigration, the thread runs right through it. New France was peopled by the landless peasants of Britanny and Normandy, the unemployed of Ile de France, the displaced and abandoned daughters of Paris. Each year, when the ice in the St. Lawrence broke, a new immigration of the hopeful and the desperate came up the river. New France was a colony founded on the principle of hope for new lives for the disenfranchised of the metropolitan country. It grew to 80,000 people, before the cataclysmic event that would shape the North American continent –the Seven Years' War and the American Revolution.

The American Revolution created two countries, not one. The Loyalist exodus which ensued is one of the great human migrations of the continent's history. The port of New York was the Casablanca of the time, as families boarded hundreds of transports to Nova Scotia, while thousands of families trekked to Quebec, to the Thousand Islands, to the Niagara Peninsula, to start life all over again.

English Canada was born in the blink of an eye historically speaking. It was not the result of a trickle of European migration, as most of us imagine today. It was the result of a titanic and catastrophic human crisis, which in the space of a quarter of a century, transformed this conquered French colony into a duality which would govern its destiny for centuries.

Canada was founded on two conquered peoples. A French Canadian colony, occupied by the British and abandoned by the French, who didn't even want it back at the end of the war and who, in the peace treaty, traded it for the minuscule sugar island of Guadeloupe. The second people, their ancestral English enemies in the American colonies, driven out of their homes, and their lands annexed by their republican neighbours. Two nations, one conquered and abandoned, the other conquered and expelled.

And it is here that the destiny of North America took two very different roads. The United States was founded on one language, English, one predominant religion, Protestant, .... Canada was founded on two languages, French and English, and two religions, Catholic and Protestant. The United States would be a very different country today if its constitution had included, at its birth, the people of Mexico, for example, who spoke a different language and professed a different religion. It would be a lot more like Canada today.

The experience of refuge is at the core of the Canadian identity. We are all children of a great displacement. The Loyalists were followed by the Scots displaced by the Highland Clearances, by the English of Susannah Moodie's generation, a marginalized class Britain no longer needed or wanted. They were followed by hundreds of thousands of starving Irish families, who came in fever ships, and who left the vast graveyards of Grosse Isle. They, in turn, were followed by the great migration of the landless from Eastern Europe, by the Ukrainians, the Galicians, the Mennonites, the Dukhobors, the Sandinavians – all of

whom were fleeing war, persecution or famine. Thousands of Chinese young men crossed the Pacific ocean to flee poverty, and spent generations sending their paltry earnings home to families they would never see again.

Thousands of British orphans were sent over in a systematic migration of the abandoned. They were the debris of history. They were the expelled, the persecuted, the landless, the economically marginalized –the victims of the imperial wars and economic upheavals of Europe and Asia. And in this century the tide of refuge grew – often unwanted—to embrace the Jews, the Sikhs, the displaced people of the Second World War, which is my parent's migration, the refugees from Communism, the refugees from the middle East, the boat people of Vietnam, the peoples of the great Caribbean migration, the refugees from the Sudan, and the Balkan wars. We are their children. We are all boat people, we just got here at different times.

The collective Canadian experience, however recent or buried in the ancestral past, is the memory of displacement and loss. And that memory of loss is parallelled by the collective Canadian experience of endurance and redemption. Every French Canadian family has the memory of the flight from poverty, from the streets of Paris,...and of the humble and improbable beginning of their ancestor. Every Scot, every Irishman or Irishwoman, every Ukrainian, every Jew, every Lebanese has the same story: The great Trauma, followed by the Great Passage, followed by the cold and hard New Beginning in the grey winter. It has shaped us. We are all disdainful of class or privilege. There is no greater social sin than trying to pull rank, or jump the cue, or claim privilege. It is unacceptable to be rude to a waiter or a waitress in this country, because your son or daughter is going to be one at some point in their lives. We are vigilant that no one claim more rights than we.

Canada – cranky, litigious, and, despite the common caricature, far from deferential to authority, and deeply suspicious of government. Everything's all right as long as everyone gets the same rights. But try to make an illegal left turn at midnight, without someone taking offense and leaning on his horn.

It is in our nature to be proud of our difficult and poor origins. Who in this room does not speak proudly of his ancestors' hard beginnings ? And why do we do it ? Because we know the other person listening, regardless of origin or race, will understand. It is the Canadian experience. It is in our nature to distrust political ideology or ethnic nationalism, because most of us are here because of ideology or ethnic nationalism.

Canada was born as a perpetual negotiation between its constituent parts –first the French, English and First nations. Then the constant accommodation of the new communities that took root here. The genius of Canadian history is that constant search for equilibrium, where no one wins the full upper hand, the perpetual negotiation of our linguistic, cultural and social rules. That constant negotiation shapes us and makes us who we are. To the frustrated question: "When are we finally going to settle this?" the answer, of course, is: Never. That's not the problem. That's the point.

I am ambivalent about the word "Multiculturalism", not because I don't value diversity, but because the term is inadequate to the phenomenon of Canada. Diversity is merely one of the results of the Canadian experience of refuge and redemption. My parents came here not because they wanted to preserve their Polish language and culture, but because they were looking for freedom from war, from political ostracism, and a chance their child find a better life that they had, and would not end up in a uniform.

Sometimes you need to see things though childlike eyes, to see how extraordinary it is. Let's look at the premise of Canada. It is this: Let us take the second largest land mass on the planet, a place of terrifying beauty, and let us bring there people who have been expelled by war or famine, hatred or persecution –let us make it a land of those abandoned by their empires, unwanted by their homelands, united only in the common human experience of refuge, and a dream no more complex than their children should have better lives. What an extraordinary premise for a nation of people! And let that be our identity. We are the debris of history, and our gates are open to the dispossessed of Africa, of Asia and the Balkan wars. And out of the experience of refuge, we, the victims of war and famine, will shape a New World.

My daughters have neither aboriginal, nor French nor Loyalist blood. But their heritage is the Filles du Roi—the street children of Paris, the Loyalist families, the Irish famine victims, the Jewish Holocaust, and the refugee rafts of the South China Sea. Because in the collective journey, we have created a community of memory, shared loss of the old world and shared endurance and redemption in the new, something which we now can call the Canadian experience.

United Nations Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar, when he was ending his term, came to Canada to donate the thousands of gifts he received from countries around the world to Canada. William Thorsell asked him: Why Canada, after all, your homeland is Peru ? The Secretary General answered: "Because of all the nations I travelled, Canada is the one country that I believe resembles closest what the world will one day become."

Some have called this vision of Canada a bleak one, a community of victims. I think it is a strikingly beautiful idea, namely that this community of the children of the unwanted, will shape a society that will give the world the defining example of tolerance and civility, and the debris of empire and ideology will shape history itself.