

REFUGE AND THE CANADIAN IDEA

*Keynote Address to the Conference
“Building Strong Communities”*

*By Mark Starowicz
Toronto, April 5, 2005*

I’ve inhabited several identities in my life. I was born in England at the end of the war of Polish parents. I spent my early childhood in Argentina, and spoke Polish and Spanish. Then I came to Canada at the age of eight, a complete stranger in an alien climate, speaking neither English nor French. It was unbelievably awful. From the warm and beautiful climate of South America, we arrived in Montreal in March –frigid winds, grey skies, black ice and sooty snow. In Argentina I knew all the neighbours, all the kids on the block, and we all played communally, everyone knew me as Marecito, everyone knew my personality and my interests. Within two days of arriving in Canada I was walking alone to school, with no friends, without knowing any neighbours, and was put in front of a Grade Two class to read aloud so they could assess if I could handle Grade Two –which I had been attending in Argentina.

The sentence that I had to read is still engraved in my mind. It was a religion book, for I was in a Catholic school. The sentence was: Mother and David pray to the Saviour.” Since Spanish was phonetic, I read it as: “ Mot Her and Dah Veed Pry Ed toh t-h-eh Sah Vee O Ur.” Within ten minutes I was put into Grade One with kids 18 months younger than me, and I would always be the oldest kind in my class all the way to university.

I learned English quickly, but I didn’t recover a sense of community and or neighbourhood for many years. The only community our family belonged to was a Polish immigrant one, which existed only on Saturday nights in my parents’ kitchen, because their friends lived all over the city, and there was no Polish neighbourhood. There were many other immigrant kids in school, but being immigrant is not an ethnicity. Poles and Czechs and German parents didn’t socialize together just because they are all immigrants, and neither did their kids. The only unifying thing about the immigrant experience then

was exclusion. It was a different English Canada then, dominated by descendants of the British Isles. We all lived in a largely Anglo-Irish and Scottish area, where people knew each other from birth, and we were the outsiders. We didn't know the rules of baseball because we came too late; we couldn't skate to get into the pee-wee league, and didn't get invited to birthday parties in the neighbourhood.

I always refuse to caramelize the Canadian immigrant experience. Your family usually drops down the social scale because your father's engineering degree or medical or accounting degree is not recognized here. My father was a highly decorated Air Force officer in the war, but now he had to work as a mechanic, surrounded by young trainees who barely heard of the war and had no interest in the older man with the thick accent in their midst. You have no standing in the society.

You can also be trapped in your ethnic community, which is sometimes nurturing, but sometimes stifling and orthodox, resentful of past wrongs in the homeland, often full of internal divisions and grudges and closed to fresh ideas and perspectives.

The immigrant experience was a melancholy one for me all through elementary school, and I only began to feel accepted once I went to college, where everyone came from different parts of the city and the country, and everyone was a stranger. And therefore you had a chance at a fresh start.

So, given that I wasn't born here, didn't speak either official language when I arrived, and was so unhappy with my experience in Canada for so many years, it was supremely ironic that I was asked to make the first History of Canada for television, some 40 years later, in both languages. And what I learned in the four years it took us to make it, surprisingly, had *everything* to do with the immigrant experience.

As you probably know, the series *Canada: A People's History*, surprised everyone—including myself—by taking the country by storm. More than two million people watched the first episode of *Canada: A People's History* on the French and English networks of the CBC. For the rest of the series' first year, as many Canadians watched their history unfurl as have ever watched major Olympic events or Stanley Cup playoffs. In fact, the first episode alone, ranked as the most viewed documentary in the entire fifty-year history of Canadian television going back to when we had only one channel. The series book became the best selling non-fiction book in Canada last year,

the video cassettes the highest selling Canadian video in Canadian history. This is fairly distant history we were dealing with. No Starowicz's, hardly any Asians, Jews or East Europeans; in other words, no direct roots to Tecumseh, Montcalm or Champlain, at least among the English audience. Yet, to quote the Ottawa Citizen the next day "*Who wants to be a Millionaire?*" plummeted by one million viewers under withering fire from Canadian History.

Clearly, a chord had been struck in the Canadian psyche; but what was the chord?

I got my first hint of it the preceding year, before the series aired, when a group of us were in a small CBC theatre watching what we call "rushes", which are rough drafts of scenes that just came out of the edit suite. That afternoon, we were watching an account of the American Loyalist fleeing the American Revolution to British soil, in Nova Scotia. Images of transport ships filled the screen, and the sight of thousands of families being unloaded, tired and cold, onto a rocky Atlantic beach. I could have been watching the news on refugees fleeing Kosovo, which was happening at the time. Then came these voices, over the achingly lonely 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."

It affected me emotionally, and when the lights came on, I saw that I wasn't the only one trying to hide my emotion. The history project staff in the theatre that afternoon were of French, Chinese, Jewish, and English descent. There wasn't a Starowicz or a Bernstein or a Gendron among those Loyalists, yet these grizzled journalists were reacting like schoolchildren. They were averting their faces, drying their eyes, of covering up streaks of tears. And I finally understood why the scene had moved me, had moved us all. *This was our story too*: the experience of refuge, of arriving in a strange place of terrifying beauty, the fear of an uncertain destiny – this is the common thread of the Canadian experience. We are not linked by blood, but we are inextricably linked by the experience of refuge.

If we cast our eyes over the hundreds of years of Canadian history, we can see this thread running through it, although the aboriginal story is different. New France was peopled by the landless of Brittany, Normandy, and the displaced and abandoned daughters of Paris. The American Revolution transformed this continent and created the foundations of two countries – the United States and modern Canada – by provoking one of the greatest human migrations of the continent’s history: the Loyalists who sailed to Nova Scotia, crossed rivers and swamps into Quebec, sailed on to the Thousand Islands and to the Niagara Peninsula. English Canada was born in a blink of an eye, historically speaking – just nineteen years – creating the French-English duality which has governed Canada’s destiny ever since.

Modern Canada was founded on two *abandoned* peoples. The first, the French of two separate colonies – Acadia and Quebec – both occupied by the British and abandoned by the French, who didn't even want Quebec back after the Seven Years’ War and traded it in 1763 for the tiny sugar island of Guadeloupe. The second, their ancestral English enemies from the American colonies, driven out of their homes in the years after 1776.

Thus, the experience of refuge is at the core of the Canadian identity. We are refugees or the descendants of refugees who came to our shores like the recurring tides: the Scots left landless by the Highland Clearances, the marginalized English gentry of Susannah Moodie’s generation, the hundreds of thousands of starving Irish families ousted by landlords and famine. Countless black people came here too, refugees from the American Revolution and the Civil War. In turn, they were followed by the landless from eastern and northern Europe: the Galicians, the Mennonites, the Poles and the Jews, the Russians, the Scandinavians, the Dutch – all fleeing war, persecution, economic devastation, or famine. Thousands of Chinese young men crossed the Pacific Ocean to escape poverty and sent their paltry earnings home to families they would never see again. Thousands of British orphans were sent here in a systematic relocation of the abandoned.

After the end of the Second World War, came the East European people the war had displaced (among them, my parents). Then came the Sikhs, the Italians, and the Portuguese in search of a better life; the boat people of Vietnam; people from the

Caribbean. Today, the refugees from war still arrive – from the Sudan, from Somalia, or the Balkans.

They were, for the most part, the displaced people of history: the expelled, the persecuted, the landless, the marginalized, the victims of imperial wars, of economic and ideological upheavals. At best, they were economic migrants, perhaps adventurers, but all seeking a better life for their children. In a sense we are all boat people. We just got here at different times. Every one of us has the same story in our past, whether we are descended from the Filles du Roy – the street children of Paris – or from Galician villagers.

A hundred different histories have shaped the Canadian identity. And there is a river that runs through those stories – we have all been shaped by the experience of exile or the experience of wrenching departure, perhaps through the memory of it by our grandparents or parents. And whatever the causes of our ancestral exile or departure, everyone in this room shares another common experience: the trauma of arrival, of endurance in a hostile landscape, followed, inevitably, by the story of redemption. That redemption can be the first harvest or the first child to graduate from an university. Everybody, almost without exception, has the same three-part story: the exodus, the endurance, and the redemption.

This is not true of most of the population of this planet. It is true of Australians, Americans, New Zealanders and some Latin American peoples, which is why we often feel a cultural affinity with these peoples. But it is not woven into the memory of most French, Germans, English or Italians in the Old World.

This makes us different from the peoples of the Old World. This breeds certain characteristics which are visible today. We are disdainful of class and privilege; there is no greater social sin here than trying to pull rank or jump the cue. It is unacceptable to be rude to a waiter or waitress, because our sons and daughters are likely to be one at some point in their lives. We are suspicious of government and ideology because we are refugees from governments, armies, and ideology. We are vigilant that no one claims more rights than we have. Try making an illegal left turn at a nearly empty downtown intersection at midnight, and someone will honk at you in protest. Canada – cranky, forever courting and rejecting a breakup – is a perpetual negotiation of its constituent

parts. To the frustrated question: “When are we finally going to settle all this?” the answer is, of course, “Never.” That’s not the problem, it’s the point. The genius of Canada is the constant search for equilibrium, where no one ever fully gains the upper hand. That, also, is not the norm of most countries of the world.

Climate is history too, and it shapes identity. Many sociologists –most recently Michael Adams in his surveys of Canadian versus American attitudes—observe that there is a communitarian streak which runs through our civil life, and it’s most readily explained by climate. It is impossible to survive the winter without your neighbour’s help in an agricultural society. The roads have to be cleared somehow to get goods to market or children to school. It is foreign to our nature to have a common water supply privately owned, for example, and second nature to erect a barn communally. I appreciate not many of us are erecting barns these days, but the need to maintain civil relations with your neighbours to assure survival is imprinted into the culture. It is not so large a leap to go from common road clearance, to non-denominational schools, to group care for the elderly, and finally, to medicare. There is demonstrable social similarity between maritime people of the Canadian and American Atlantic coasts, and a marked similarity of attitudes within the snowbelt from Quebec and Ontario to the New England states, as there is for peoples of the American border states and the Canadian prairie provinces.

Distance has also shaped us. It has allowed communities to retain their ethnic or religious particularity in a way that was not possible in smaller countries. Consequently, when we have had to come together in our political arenas, the tendency for accommodation and compromise is built in. I don’t want to sound Pollyanna here. Canadian history is marred by appalling racism, the systematic expulsion of entire peoples, a system which made our native peoples refugees in their own land, violent anti-immigrant attitudes, institutionalized anti-Semitism and religious prejudice. All of those, we made sure, were justly woven into the history we produced.

My dear friend, historian Gene Allen, says he always thought of Canada as the intergalactic Bar Scene in Star Wars. Nobody, he argues, can afford to win outright. And they know it. Everybody has a stake in the constant operation of a platform resting precariously on a hundred gyroscopes and stabilizers. It’s considered bad form to jump up and down on this platform.

Some people suggest that we have a tepid history, compared to France or Russia, for example, because there are no vast Napoleonic armies and because we don't have a civil war or a revolution in our past. Instead, the Canadian experience has bred a grumpy civility that has given rise to one of the great mysteries of history. We have all the ingredients, all the toxins, to create a Kosovo or a Northern Ireland: two major religions, two languages, contested land, racial and ethnic divisions. How we *didn't* become the Balkans, or Vichy France, is a far more intriguing story than any Napoleonic battle, and far more pertinent to the modern world. Six hundred thousand people died in the American Civil War. Seventeen thousand fell in ten minutes at Cold Harbour. Tens of thousands of Canadians have died on foreign battlefields. But more Canadians die on the highway on a single Labour Day weekend than all Canadians who fell on any battlefield on Canadian soil since the Riel Rebellion.

If the United States, at its independence, had consisted of a federation of two languages and cultures –say that the Continental Congress had included Mexico, a Hispanic, Catholic people—then it would have evolved into a far more complex, pluralistic and decentralized federal state. It would have been much more like Canada.

Instead the continent divided into two experiments: One, a unilingual, unitary centralized state, the other a bilingual, decentralized state. It is tempting to see one as more chaotic than the other. On the surface they are, and we can long for the political cohesion of the United States, which is also a republic woven from many national strands. But the people who died in the Civil War of 1860-1864 to make that political entity more unitary, had they been allowed by history to live, their children would now number forty million people - more than the population of Canada. We should pause before we endorse any political cause as being worth that many souls.

That was the observation. Here's the story I promised to end on. My dear colleague William Thorsell, who runs the Royal Ontario Museum, told me this story:

Xavier Perez de Cueillar, when his term as Secretary General of the United Nations ended, had to decide whom he would donate the hundreds of gifts he received from heads of state when he was in office. He chose to give them all to Canada.

At the dinner honouring this occasion, William asked him: "Why Canada, after all, you are a Peruvian?"

He replied: “Of all the countries I have come to know in my tenure, Canada, with its capacity to absorb and tolerate all nationalities and races, most resembles the way I think the world will be, and must be, in the years to come.”

It would seem that in this cranky, litigious and insufferably contentious collection of the Old World’s unwanted , we may have created the model of the post-national state. If that is the case, history has determined identity in a way that is peculiarly pertinent to the modern world.

This country has evolved from the one I arrived in. It is no longer a New Britain and a New France. It has evolved into an unprecedented historical experiment, and become a collective idea, and a project. We are no longer scattered, ethnic and religious communities on the prairies, separated by great distance, and can no longer behave like isolated enclaves. The country is a collective project which requires us to construct new forms of community.

We can cherish and protect our ethnic and religious heritages, but we cannot exclude ourselves from the great project by remaining locked up in them, and devoting our efforts only to the welfare of our particularity. We can’t just give money and our work and our talent only to our specific national group, or faith institution, or cultural group. We have to participate in the architecture of our cities, debate our use of public space, the nature of our schools, the state of our national culture, the democratic process, the law. We have to act as part of an integral whole. The Canadian immigrant experience must not be one of isolation, as it was for many in my generation when we were young, but an exercise in cross-cultural collaboration.

The very definition of this country is the eternal dialogue of its constituent parts. That was the reason to come here in the first place: the civility of public discourse, and the maintenance of public peace. There is no country on earth that makes it so easy for the newcomer to be involved in the project of its own construction. But this is more than an issue of opportunity. It’s an issue of civic duty. We are all in a project that has global consequence, the first post-national state on the planet. Its continued existence is a powerful affront to global racism, religious hatred, toxic nationalism and war. Our very existence is a front to that.

The country has been a 400 year-old dialogue and we have come to like what we have found. And in the past 20 years you have seen it happen in your own generations. We have collectively come to like the idea that we are the sanctuary and the refuge of the planet. We like what we see which is that we are not all of the same colour, language, identity or ideologies. Listen to our children. They like it. Their fourth grade and fifth grade essays say that we have in this generation arrived at an identity and that that identity is a plurality. And with that comes a set of principles and a set of ideas that we have collectively agreed upon. We define it with medicare, peacekeeping, and environmental issues.

When we have finally come to embrace who we really are, how we came to be who we are and how extraordinary our improbable project is, we will find our moral power. Thank you very much.

-30-

Mark Starowicz is Head of Documentaries for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation English Television Network, and Executive Producer of the Canadian History Project for CBC and Radio-Canada. He can be reached at: Starowicz@sympatico.ca.

The opinions in this paper are the author's, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the CBC/Radio-Canada.