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TAMARA SHEPHARD Feb 17, 2011 - 3:21 PM | Report a Typo or Correction

Etobicoke manufacturer tunes up memorial honouring rejected Jews

Libeskind memorial unveiled in Halifax last month

A memorial to nearly 1,000 Jews denied sanctuary by Canada on the eve of the Second World War returned to its Etobicoke-based custom architectural manufacturer this week for final testing. Last month, The Wheel of Conscience monument was unveiled at Pier 21, Canada's national immigration museum in Halifax, N.S.



Wheel of Conscience. The Wheel of Conscience, designed by renowned architect Daniel Libeskind, that represents the slowly grinding gears that wouldn't allow Jewish refugees into Canada in 1939 returned this week to its Rexdale-based manufacturer for final testing. *Courtesy/Philip Castleton*

It memorializes the M.S. St. Louis carrying 962 refugees, mostly German Jews, turned away from Cuba, the United States and Canada before returning to Europe in May 1939.

The rejection is reported to have condemned hundreds of passengers to their deaths in Nazi concentration camps.

It is one of the ugliest chapters in Canadian history.

Rexdale company Soheil Mosun was commissioned to manufacture the monument - stainless steel clad, laser-etched wheels turned by gears on the monument's face, each increasingly larger and turning the next, that read Hatred, Racism, Xenophobia and Antisemitism.

On its rim, a description of the tragedy. An etched map displays the ship's voyage. Artwork of the ship on the monument's face is a laser-etched reproduction of an original photograph of the M.S. St. Louis.

Passengers' names are etched on the back.

"There's this energy and this passion that the monument brought to me when it was turned on," said Darius Mosun, Soheil Mosun's chairman and CEO.

"I read those horrible words rotating on the gears. I thought about my parents, how those poor passengers were suffering. All they wanted is what we have for their families. Being carted down to Cuba then Miami then Canada. Can you imagine? Then saying, 'We don't want you. Go back to Germany to face your peril.' We have everything here and we take it for granted."

Darius's father Soheil Mosun left Iran as a teen, headed to Germany where he became an engineer. He immigrated to Canada where he met his future wife, Brigitte, a technical drafts person, who had also immigrated to the country. They set up a custom metalworking business with a tablesaw from Eaton's in their Toronto apartment.

In the early '70s, the couple founded Soheil Mosun, today one of the world's leading custom architectural fabricators.

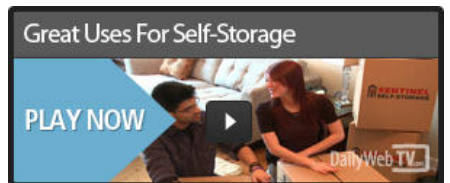
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Its portfolio includes the design, engineering, manufacturing and installation of 207 solid bronze windows for the Library of Parliament, the Peace Tower observation deck enclosure and window system, General Motors' global headquarters in Detroit, MI and gates to protect one of the holiest sites in Islam: the Shrine of Muhammad in the holy city of Medina.

Currently, Darius Mosun is advocating with leaders in Ottawa of the need to improve relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Canada's largest trading partner in the Middle East. Mosun's firm conducts business regularly in UAE.

Renowned architect Daniel Libeskind said he designed The Wheel of Conscience to represent the slow grinding of government bureaucracy.

Libeskind evoked that literally with the stainless steel gears marked Hatred, Racism, Xenophobia and Antisemitism.

Libeskind is the son of Holocaust survivors. Born in Poland in 1946, he later immigrated to the U.S. where he became a citizen in 1965.

The celebrated American architect was unavailable for comment this week.

But in a statement, Libeskind explained his intention behind the monument.

"The composition as a whole is inspired by the desperate plight of the Jewish refugees and their tragic destiny on the M.S. St. Louis," said Libeskind, who won a design competition to create the memorial. "This work of memory will express the importance of eradicating the evils of hatred, racism, xenophobia and antisemitism. It is this particular story that is embedded in a dynamically moving memorial."

The federal government through the Ministry of Immigration funded the project through a Community Historical Restoration Project grant.

Immigration Minister Jason Kenney called the St. Louis incident "Canada's eternal shame" in a statement.

Canadian Jewish Congress CEO Bernie Farber said it has been his goal since joining the congress in 1984 to educate the next generation about the Holocaust and its "inherent dangers."

He said he found that task difficult because of the inherent difficulty in comprehending the murder of six million people.

Also the son of Holocaust survivors, Farber's father was the only person in his family, and small Polish village, to escape murder by the Nazis. His mother left Ukraine before the Second World War and landed with her mother and brother at Pier 21.

Farber found in the compelling story of the M.S. St. Louis an opportunity to educate about the Holocaust through a memorial, a film and a high school curriculum.

"The story of the St. Louis is, in fact, a metaphor for the Holocaust," Farber said this week in an interview.

"Because trapped on this boat was the example of European Jewry - mothers and fathers, young teenagers and lovers, children, grandparents, academics, factory workers. Nine hundred and sixty-two lost souls were aboard this ship, all with one particular characteristic. They were Jews fleeing for their lives, looking for safe sanctuary."

Pier 21 was chosen as the site of the memorial, Farber said, because that is where the St. Louis would have docked had Canada allowed it.

At Pier 21, Farber revisited his own family history, reading the manifest of the ship which carried his family to Canada and learning of their travels upon their arrival.


"The message is 'hatred is poison,'" Farber said of The Wheel of Conscience. "We as a society, and we're well-placed as Canadians because we're so well-trusted as Canadians, need to teach about tolerance. To use this particular monument as a vehicle with which to have future generations understand the absolute depravity of where hatred can lead.

"Where hatred can lead is to the gas chambers of Auschwitz."

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