

OBITUARY

Elizabeth Comper was a fighter against racism on several fronts

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Elizabeth Comper had a comfortable life a decade ago as wife of the Bank of Montreal's chief executive when she saw something on television that shocked and upset her: the world's oldest hatred flaring up again in her own country.

In April, 2004, she watched the news about the firebombing of the library of Montreal's United Talmud Torah Jewish day school and saw the fear in the eyes of the children interviewed, children not unlike those she had taught at the city's Beth Rivkah Academy for Jewish girls in the 1970s.

"She said 'Tony, this is not right. This is Canada – we have to do something,'" recalled Tony Comper, her husband of 43 years and partner in all her endeavours until her death in Toronto of myelofibrosis on June 22.

A year after the firebombing, the Compers launched their bold educational initiative: **Fighting Antisemitism Together (FAST)**.

Most people are so encased in their tribal loyalties that they never fully engage with the issues of other peoples nor form profound relationships with those outside their religious or ethnic group, but Ms. Comper recognized no barriers. Her Anglo-Saxon Protestant upbringing did not get in the way of her sponsoring Holocaust Education Week or fundraising for a geriatric facility for the Chinese community, or providing scholarships for First Nations women.

"There wasn't a shred of prejudice or disdain for anyone in her character," recalled her friend, Randi Marrus, a retired secondary-school teacher. "She was very, very smart and could always focus on the important things. She certainly knew about education and how to set up educational programs and get them accepted."

To kick off FAST, Tony Comper contacted – after the spate of anti-Semitic incidents – about 30 community and business leaders. "They were all non-Jewish because we believed that anti-Semitism is not a problem for Jews to solve; it's for non-Jews to solve," he said in an interview. "I told them, 'I want you to

contribute \$10,000, but first I want you to put your name on ads we will run, saying that we will not stand for this any more.’ It took about three seconds for them to say, ‘Sign me up.’”

The Compers set up the FAST foundation and Ms. Comper worked with the Canadian Jewish Congress to develop educational materials for students in Grades 6, 7 and 8 to counter racism and anti-Semitism. She then presented the course to the Toronto District School Board to try out in the classroom. Nicole Miller, a marketing specialist hired as FAST’s executive director, had experts at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education develop materials in conformity with the curriculum requirements of each province and rolled out the program nationally. The Choose Your Voice curriculum teaches children to speak up when they witness bullying or hear prejudiced or racist comments of any kind. “We present them with a clear choice: You can be a bystander or you can be a hero,” Ms. Miller explained.

Available free online, Choose Your Voice has been a huge success in every province; so far 2.2 million Canadian children have been exposed to it, and a second phase of curriculum, for high schools, will launch in September with lesson plans for teaching about human rights, genocide in Rwanda, understanding prejudice and immigration. Information about the Holocaust is threaded throughout the wide-ranging material.

Ms. Comper audited a course with her husband on the history of the Holocaust at the University of Toronto, and the two made a major contribution to the Centre for Jewish Studies. It was primarily for their educational work that the couple were named to the Order of Canada in 2010, and received honorary degrees from Concordia University and the University of Haifa, in Israel, among many other awards.

She was born Elizabeth Webster on Nov. 29, 1945, the second daughter of Charles and Elizabeth Webster, in Etobicoke, Ont. After high school, she obtained her teaching certificate at Toronto Teachers’ College. Charles Webster was sales manager for a pharmaceutical company and, after taking early retirement, he bought a farm in Milton, outside the city, to raise Aberdeen Angus cattle.

Elizabeth commuted from the farm to teach elementary school in Etobicoke.

Tony Comper, who was a student of Marshall McLuhan at St. Michael’s College, University of Toronto, played in a rock band, and a mutual friend took Elizabeth (then 21) to a fraternity house on St. George Street to hear Tony’s group.

“In addition to being very beautiful, she was very vivacious and full of life – that’s what attracted me, her outgoing personality,” Mr. Comper said.

They married five years later, and the next day boarded the train for Montreal, where the groom began his meteoric career at the Bank of Montreal. The bride spotted a newspaper ad for a teaching job at Beth Rivkah Academy, was interviewed by a rabbi, and hired on the spot. Working days, she also pursued a BA at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia) in the evening, later taking a degree at McGill in library science, intending to become a children’s librarian.

In 1984, the bank transferred Mr. Comper to London, centre of the financial world, where the couple spent two happy years immersed in the city's cultural riches: "We lived near Shaftsbury Avenue, and went to the theatre three times a week. You could buy a ticket in the gods for £2 then," Mr. Comper recalls.



When they moved back to Toronto, Ms. Comper was introduced to Joseph Wong, a doctor who was trying to create a much-needed care home for the elderly of Asian heritage. She connected him to the business community and introduced him to important people at the Baycrest geriatric facility, whose brains Dr. Wong could pick. She also raised \$750,000 in the early 1990s to kick off what would become the first Yee Hong Centre for Geriatric Care (there are now four).

Passionate about theatre, she joined the board of the struggling Tarragon Theatre, which then had no corporate sponsors, and remained on it for a decade, starting in 1988. For two of those years she served as chair.

"She facilitated the complete computerization of the theatre, front of the house and back, which for an alternative theatre in Toronto was phenomenal," recalls her friend Leonard McHardy, co-owner of Theatre Books, who met her in 2001 through their shared work on the Siminovitch Prize for excellence in the theatre. "She was such an energy in the room."

Later, she would go to Theatre Books to look for a biography of Chekov or to ask for a book about the history of Dublin's famous Gate Theatre, because she was about to go to Ireland: "She would phone and tell me what plays she had seen in New York, or ask me about the latest theatre gossip." She helped other theatre groups as well, endowing a fund for new work by Necessary Angel Theatre Company.

When the Royal Conservatory of Music needed a major renovation, the Compers chaired its capital campaign and they were also generous to the Art Gallery of Ontario.

Ms. Comper, who loved beautiful things, intended to create something special when the couple purchased the penthouse at 1 St. Thomas St., an elegant building in Toronto's Yorkville area, six years ago. At \$15-million, it was reportedly the most expensive condo unit in the city. The building was designed by the celebrated U.S. architect Robert Stern, head of the Yale architecture school, and the couple turned to designers from Mr. Stern's New York firm to create the interiors. Those who saw the results called the penthouse a work of art, with its own elevator and hand-painted green and gold wallpaper. The Compers' museum-quality collection of work by Canadian female artists of the 1920s, 30s and 40s hung on the walls, and her collection of ceramic jugs added to the visual interest.

Ms. Comper did not have long to enjoy her dream home. Two years ago, about six months after they finally moved in, she was diagnosed with myelofibrosis during a physical. This incurable condition alters the bone marrow so that it cannot produce red blood cells. Ms. Comper was kept alive for the past year by regular blood transfusions while she and Mr. Comper, who had by then retired, withdrew from the world, having their meals sent up from the nearby York Club. Almost no one but her husband saw her ill.

Part of her legacy is a program at the Princess Margaret Cancer Centre to research and find treatments for myelofibrosis and related diseases of the blood.

Elizabeth Comper, who had no children, leaves her husband and a legion of friends.

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