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"The world is not unfolding as it should."

This is Supreme Court Justice Rosalie Silberman Abella's assessment of the decades that have passed since World War II, a conflict that claimed millions of lives and many of her own relatives. It is also the title of an eloquent and stirring address she gave Wednesday to the Empire Club of Canada, one that drew a standing ovation from a crowd of more than 150 people.

In an impassioned and often emotional speech, Abella declared that international justice was in a state of crisis — an observation given sharper poignancy by recent events in Tunisia and Egypt, she said.

"The events of the past few weeks have been like a Polaroid picture of international law, justice and human rights: with time, the picture comes into clearer focus. And with clarity, my deepest fears are increasingly confirmed," Abella said.

"What do I mean? I mean that increasingly I have come to see international human rights law as having a dysfunctional relationship with justice."

Abella is both an expert in law, being the first Jewish woman appointed to the Supreme Court of Canada, and the child of Holocaust survivors. Through these two prisms, she has filtered her views of the world today.

Her parents, Fanny and Jacob Silberman, married in Poland just as World War II was breaking out. They lost several relatives to the conflict, including a 2½-year-old son who died in a concentration camp.

After the war ended, Abella was born in a displaced persons camp in Germany and over her lifetime, she has seen the emergence of human rights as something to be protected and defended.

"Our generation has had the most sophisticated development of international laws, treaties and conventions the international community has ever known, all stating that human rights abuses will not be tolerated," she said.

Yet at the same time, this same generation has permitted atrocities to unfold across the world, everywhere from Rwanda and Bosnia to Iran, Abella said.

"Silence in the face of intolerance means that intolerance wins," she said.

"The human rights revolution that started after — and because of — WWII, seems to have too few disciples in the countries that need it most."

Abella said ignoring human rights abuses elsewhere can have devastating consequences for the western world, pointing to the 9/11 attacks as a prime example.

The judge was also frank in her criticism of the United Nations, the body created from the postwar ashes to prevent future warfare and protect human rights. She questioned whether the UN was still relevant today and criticized it for maintaining a "magisterial silence" even as Iran, Tunisia and Egypt heaved with protest.

"I know (the UN) is all we have, but does that mean it's the best we can do?" she asked.

For Abella, three lessons have emerged from the concentration camps of Europe.

The first is that "indifference is injustice's incubator." The second, that "it's not just what you stand for, it's what you stand up for."

And finally, the third lesson, with which Abella concluded her speech:

"We must never forget how the world looks to those who are vulnerable."

For the full text of Abella's speech, go to www.thestar.com