

Legendary Canadian Abortion Campaigner Morgentaler Dies at 90

Henry Morgentaler, a Holocaust survivor who became one of Canada's leading abortion campaigners and spent time in jail for terminating pregnancies, died on Wednesday at the age of 90, activists said.

Morgentaler set up Canada's first independent **abortion clinic** in Montreal in 1969 at a time when the procedure could only be performed in hospitals and was limited to cases when doctors deemed that continuation of a pregnancy could harm a woman.

His campaign for women's rights eventually made its way to the Canadian Supreme Court, which backed him in a January 1988 judgment that said existing abortion laws were unconstitutional.

The then Progressive Conservative government tried in 1990 to recriminalize abortion in cases where women's health was not at risk. That effort ended in failure, leaving Canada with effectively no restrictions on abortion.

"Canadian women owe Dr. Morgentaler a tremendous debt of gratitude for standing up for their lives and health at great personal sacrifice and risk. He survived numerous threats on his life, a clinic bombing, and aggressive protests," said National Abortion Federation president Vicki Saporta.

Morgentaler died at a time when some legislators in Canada's right-leaning ruling Conservative Party are openly expressing their opposition to abortion.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper, wary of stirring up passions on a contentious social issue, says as long as he is in power the

government will not move to restrict abortions.

“Unfortunately, even today, access to abortion remains unequal and we must remain vigilant against repeated attempts to roll back this right,” said Niki Ashton, a legislator for the center-left official opposition New Democrats.

Morgentaler was born in the Polish city of Lodz in 1923 and survived several months in the Dachau concentration camp before emigrating to Canada in 1950 and becoming a family doctor.

He was tried three times in the province of Quebec in the early 1970s for breaking abortion laws and was acquitted each time. An appeal court overthrew one of the acquittals and he spent 10 months in jail in 1975 and early 1976.

Undaunted, he continued his campaign and opened up clinics in other provinces, where he faced more prosecutions. After Ontario’s appeal court overturned an acquittal he took his case to the Supreme Court and won a decisive victory in 1988.

Morgentaler received countless death threats and in 1992 a fire-bomb destroyed one of his clinics in Toronto. Another clinic had been slightly damaged in a similar attack in 1983.

“If I have to die tomorrow by an assassin’s bullet, well at least I’ve achieved something in my life,” he told an interviewer in 2008.

The same year he was awarded the Order of Canada, the second highest civilian honor, for helping improve women’s health.

More than 92,000 abortions were performed in Canada in 2011, the last year for which data is available.