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'A crime unique in human history': Obama, Canadian children visit Holocaust museum

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CORRECTION: A story slugged HOLOCAUST-SURVIVOR, which moved Monday at 1754 ET on the Postmedia News wire, incorrectly stated the age of Isaac Pেকেles of Vancouver. He is 15.

WASHINGTON - After touring the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum early on Monday morning, President Barack Obama described the "searing experience" of bearing witness to the artifacts of genocide. It was, for him, a teachable moment.

"We must tell our children about a crime unique in human history," he said. "We must tell our children. But more than that, we must teach them. Because remembrance without resolve is a hollow gesture."

A few hours later, and with much less fanfare, 14-year-old Isaac Pেকেles of Vancouver emerged from the museum similarly moved.

"History has its blemishes like the Holocaust," said Pেকেles. "I think there is a big importance in teaching our youth about what has happened in the past so it doesn't happen in the future. We need to teach good values like tolerance and to be fair and not discriminatory."

The ninth grader was among hundreds of Canadian students who arrived at the storied museum - making their first visit on the day Obama was making his second - to complete a months-long study program on human rights and the Holocaust.

The teenagers came to the U.S. capital as

part of the Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program, a 15-year-old initiative aimed at raising awareness among Canadian kids about historical and current examples of genocide and discrimination.

The students walked through a cattle car that had, some 70 years earlier, been used to transport Jews to a concentration camp. They witnessed an exhibit on the medical experiments the Nazis performed on Jews - like subjecting prisoners to extreme cold to determine the limits of human resistance. And they listened quietly as a Holocaust survivor, Louisa Lawrence-Israels, described a childhood spent hiding from the Nazis in a tiny row house apartment in Amsterdam.

None left unaffected.

"Seeing this, it makes you realize what you have," said 14-year-old Mia Kaye, who like Pেকেles attends King David High School in Vancouver. "It was scary for me, looking at it, and it was sad to see what happened to our people." ***please note correction****

The Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program has brought almost 10,500 high school students from 118 Canadian cities to the U.S. capital since 1997.

About 1,100 students from 40 schools and community groups from 17 cities and eight provinces across Canada are taking part this year in the Asper Foundation program, which was launched in 1997 by the late Israel Asper.

The message of tolerance is particularly important for Lawrence-Israels, who speaks each year to the Canadian group about her own experience in Holland during the Nazi occupation.

"I have a feeling that I am possessed - I need to get this message across," she said.

Lawrence-Israels was six months old at the time her family went into hiding. She has reconstructed her childhood experience through personal memories and stories passed on by her father and a family friend who hid with her in Amsterdam.

During her time in hiding, Lawrence-Israels said she was never allowed to look outside the small apartment window.

After her family was liberated by Canadian soldiers, Lawrence-Israels remembers growing up learning from her parents to hate Germans.

She delivers two messages to the students who visit the museum - resist hate, and speak up when you see it around you.

"People let the Holocaust happen. A million and a half innocent children were murdered, and people stood by and did nothing," Lawrence-Israels said.

Her own hatred toward Germans only stopped after she realized, to her own

horror, that she was passing the same feelings on to her own daughter.

"I'm not very proud of it. I changed in my mid-30s. That's how long it took me. I give that as an example, because from hate comes hate."

The message hit home for Victoria Luongo and Conor Thibeault, both 14, of Toronto.

"It was actually really life-changing," Luongo, a student at Marshall McLuhan Catholic Secondary School, said of her experience at the museum.

"They are trying to show that children can make a difference in the world."

Said Thibeault: "Everyone is equal and no one should ever be treated different than anyone else."

The Canadian students weren't present for Obama's remarks at the museum. But Lawrence-Israels, as a survivor, was invited. This time, instead of speaking, she listened. What she heard sounded familiar.

"We must tell our children about how this evil was allowed to happen - because so many people succumbed to their darkest instincts, and because so many others stood silent," Obama said.

"And we have seen it again - madness that can sweep through peoples, sweep through nations, embed itself. The killings in Cambodia, the killings in Rwanda, the killings in Bosnia, the killings in Darfur - they shock our conscience, but they are the awful extreme of a spectrum of ignorance and intolerance that we see every day, the bigotry that says another person is less than me, less than human. These are the

seeds of hate that we cannot let take root in our heart."

The Asper Foundation human rights program formed the starting point for the \$310-million Canadian Museum of Human Rights. The museum, which is under construction in Winnipeg, is now projected to open in 2014.

June Creelman, the director of learning and programming at the Canadian museum, said the institution is still at the "exploring stage" of developing its own educational program for students.

"Ours will be on the broader theme of human rights with more emphasis on Canada," she said.