

Museum provides a powerful lesson

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WASHINGTON — Growing up in Calgary, 14-year-old Aviva Fialkow was only vaguely aware of her grandparents' history as Holocaust survivors.

From time to time, she noticed her grandmother Faye would sometimes stuff food in her pocket and always seemed to rush to complete her to-do list. They were quirky, but unexplained, mannerisms.

It was only as Fialkow got older that she learned her grandmother's behaviour stemmed from a life lived in fear of not knowing when her next meal would come, or not knowing if she'd be alive to do the things she wanted.

Fialkow's grandmother, who survived a Nazi concentration camp in Poland, lost five of eight family members in the Holocaust.

"My grandma was a survivor and she wouldn't even talk about it because she was so scared," Fialkow, a Grade 9 student at Calgary's John Ware Junior High School, said Monday as she toured the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. "She lost her entire family."

Fialkow recalled her grandmother as she and about 200 visiting Canadian teens completed several hours viewing the exhibits at the Holocaust museum.

The group's trip to the U.S. capital marked the capstone of 18 hours of study in The Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program, which is designed to raise awareness of the Holocaust and why it's vital for individuals to take personal action to combat religious and racial intolerance today.

Inside the museum, the students saw a tragic abundance of personal effects from Holocaust victims — from family photographs to stacks of shoes the Nazis confiscated from victims before sending them into the gas chambers.

Keegan Yang, a 14-year-old student from Marshall McLuhan Catholic Secondary School in Toronto, said he became "really angry" walking through the museum as he wondered "how could someone do these things to other human beings."

The students heard a story of inspiration from Holocaust survivor Louise Lawrence-Israels, who spent two years with her family hidden in an attic apartment in Amsterdam during the Nazi occupation of Holland.

Lawrence-Israels was six months old at the time her family took refuge — and has reconstructed her childhood experience through a handful of personal memories and stories told to her 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 and was under strict orders not to argue or shout for fear of being discovered.

She answered to an alias name, Maria, and recalls being fed a diet of homemade cookies her father made on a camp stove.

After Lawrence-Israels and her family were liberated — by Canadian soldiers, she says — her mother and father never spoke of the war.

"No questions, no answers," Lawrence-Israels said.

Over time, Lawrence-Israels said she came to believe it was wrong for her parents to remain silent about their experience.

"You have to stand up and say something when you know that a wrong has been done," she said.

The message resonated with Fialkow and her fellow students.

"If you don't talk about it, nobody knows about it — and people need to know what happened during the Holocaust," Fialkow said.

The Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program has brought more than 8,200 students from 110 Canadian cities to the U.S. capital in recent years.

The program is aimed both at teaching the history of the Holocaust, and using it to urge students to do their part to guard against history repeating itself — as has happened in modern-day genocides that have occurred in places as far flung as Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur.

This year alone, about 1,200 students from 19 schools across Canada are taking part in the Asper Foundation program, which was launched in 1997 by the late Israel Asper as a way to use history to teach Canadian students about tolerance.

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