

Students learn Holocaust horror first-hand

BY ALLEN ABEL

CANWEST NEWS SERVICE

WASHINGTON — Louise Lawrence-Israels pinned on the bright yellow star that Jews were forced to wear in occupied Europe during the Second World War.

In the audience as she spoke yesterday at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum were 300 Canadian high-school students, enthralled by the saga of a baby girl from Holland who escaped the extermination camps of the Holocaust.

"My mother called me Maria to hide the fact that I was a Jew, and I never knew my name until the war was over," Lawrence-Israels told visiting participants of the Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program, recalling a childhood of privation and seclusion in an Amsterdam apartment that endured years of fear of betrayal to the Nazis and near-starvation warded off by tulip-bulb stew.

Students in the audience wore a silver star, emblematic of participation in a program

that has brought more than 6,000 young Canadians to Washington over the past decade, while educating thousands more in every province and territory about the horrors of the Holocaust and the spectre of racial and ethnic genocide that still haunts the modern world.

"We had lived across the street from a park for three years," said Lawrence-Israels, one of 80 "survivor volunteers" at the museum, "but we had never been outside, we had never even gone down the stairs. The day after Amsterdam was liberated by the Canadians in 1945, my mother took me and my brother to play in that grassy field."

Her parents had vowed never to speak of the war, or to speak the names of the 70 family members murdered by the Nazis. But, as the Canadian students learned on their visit, silence is a course destined to lead only to more hatred and tragedy.

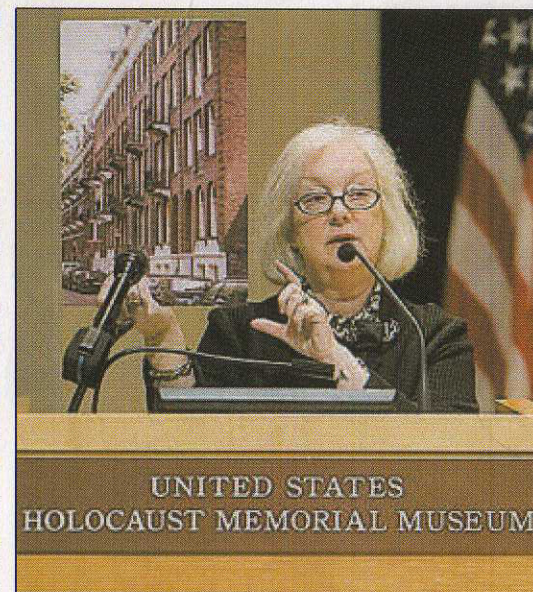
"The next generation is not going to have the opportunity to hear the survivors first-hand," said Elishua Ben-Choreen of Yitzhak Rabin High School in Nepean, Ont. "It's our

responsibility to continue to learn about the Holocaust so that we can teach others."

As part of their preparation for the trip to Washington, students helped to raise money for the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, now nearing the beginning of construction in Winnipeg. The building, Canada's first national museum outside the Ottawa region, is a natural outgrowth of the Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program, and the fruit of the late Israel Asper's desire to fight intolerance and hatred wherever it arises, said Moe Levy, executive director of the foundation.

"His desire was to bring these lessons to Canadians in Canada," Levy said. "In typical Izzy fashion, he believed that if something doesn't exist, then it is necessary to create it."

The Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program was created a decade ago by the late Israel Asper, founder of Canwest Global Communications, whose media holdings include Global Television and Canwest newspapers.



Louise Lawrence-Israels speaks to Canadian high-school kids in Washington yesterday. — CNS