

Canadian students in Washington to learn about the Holocaust

BY WILLIAM MARSDEN, POSTMEDIA NEWS

MAY 6, 2013

OTTAWA CITIZEN - WEB SITE

WASHINGTON – For Halina Peabody, 80, the Holocaust began when she was nine years old and German SS troops came to her Polish village, marched about 800 young Jews into the woods and shot them.

They had been told they were going to the forest to cover the trunks of young trees with burlap to protect them from the winter cold. Instead, the forest became their grave.

One victim was only wounded and managed to dig himself out. He escaped back to the village to warn the remaining Jews. That's when Halina Peabody's harrowing story of survival began.

She told her story Monday at United States Holocaust Museum in Washington where more than 100 Canadian high school students from across Canada came to learn about one of the greatest human tragedies in the history of mankind.

They are taking part in the Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program, which since 1997 has brought about 11,000 high school students from 118 schools across Canada to the Holocaust museum. The visit is part of a program to teach Canadian high school students about human rights and the consequences of racism and intolerance.

This year the program has 1,100 participants from 36 schools in 16 cities and six provinces.

After touring the museum, they listened for an hour as Halina Peabody described her life as a little girl hiding from Nazi killers.

After Russia invaded Poland in 1939, her father, a dentist, was arrested as a suspected spy and sent to Siberia. Halina, her baby sister and her mother were left to fend for themselves.

Two years later after the German Nazis murdered the young Jews in her village, Halina's mother secured papers from a local Catholic priest identifying her and her daughters as Catholics. They tried to escape by train to another Polish town, but during the journey a Polish man pressured her mother to admit that they were Jews. He told them he intended to hand them over to the Germans.

"My mother asked him as a favour that when he takes us to the Gestapo to have use shot altogether," she recounted.

Halina said she cried out that she didn't want to die, so her mother pleaded with the man not to turn them in. The man finally relented, but before leaving them he said, "You don't have a chance. You don't have a chance."

Halina's mother secured rooms in a boarding house. She decided the best place to hide would be among the enemy. So she found work in a German military kitchen where she was able to obtain a German identity card, which would offer greater safety for her and her daughters.

As the war drew to a close, a bomb blew up the boarding house, killing the owner and seriously injuring Halina's hand. Her mother took her to a local hospital where nuns spent weeks trying to save the hand from amputation.

After the war they reunited with their father and settled in London, England. Halina later immigrated to the United States.

Regan Greer, 15, a student at the Calgary French and International School, said she found the museum "very powerful and overwhelming."

"There were just so many things that happened that you can't even process it."

The program, she said, has taught her "in our lives we really can't be bystanders to anything, because we're just as bad as the people doing bad things."

The museum tries to recreate the lives of Holocaust victims and Lucas Harrison, 15, of Calgary's Bishop Pinkham Junior High School, said what really hit home for him was seeing a train car that had taken victims to their deaths.

"It was moving, deep and eye-opening," he said of the experience. "We were exposed to so many new things and just realizing the things that happened in the past seemed a little more real."

Hannah Luden, 14, of the Ottawa Jewish Community School, said she was first taught about the Holocaust in fifth grade, but the museum "brings it to life."

"I think I cried once or twice, probably more," she said.

wmarsden@postmedia.com

© Copyright (c) Postmedia News

Reprinted with permission from Postmedia