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Louise Lawrence Israels tells her story to 200 Canadian students taking part in the Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies program at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Tuesday in Washington, D.C. — GETTY IMAGES

Holocaust discussion teaches kids not to be silent in face of hatred

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POSTMEDIA NEWS

WASHINGTON — Louise Lawrence Israels clearly remembers May 5, 1945. It was the day Canadian Forces liberated Amsterdam, and the day her family came out of hiding.

Israels, then almost three years old, had spent most of her young life with her parents and brother living in a small attic hiding from the Nazi forces that had occupied the Netherlands since 1940.

Before that day, it was really the only life she knew.

"All I remember is light, and no walls," she recalled. "Our parents took us to the park and said 'You're free, play outside.'"

Her older brother began to cry, overwhelmed by the experience after more than two years without ever going outdoors, but was soon cheered when Canadian soldiers gave them both Hershey chocolate bars.

Israels told her family's story — they were Jews from the Netherlands — and their wartime experience on Monday to some 200 Canadian students gathered at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in D.C.

The Grade 9 students were among a group of 1,000 Canadian youth taking part this year in the Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies program — a human rights education initiative for youth that includes a visit to the Holocaust museum in the U.S. capital. Edmonton's Daniel Brick, 13, said he was inspired by her talk and impressed with how her parents kept so much of the hardship of their living situation from their two young children.

But Israels also spoke of how — after the war — her parents instilled in her an anger toward Germans. She's now careful to make a distinction between the Nazis and the German people.

Brick said: "I learned that parents are important but they can also be wrong. So you should trust your parents, but you have to think with your own mind."

Israels said she hopes the students left her talk remembering not to be silent in the face of hatred.

Alison Edwards has been the St. John's, Nfld., program director for the initiative since 2005 for students from Prince of Wales Collegiate and Leary's Brook Junior High. She said she has seen first hand how youth who go through the program refuse to be bystanders when they see kids being picked on.

"They've learned those skills about speaking up and being comfortable with it," she said. "They're comfortable helping people who might be bullied."

The human rights program, launched in 1997, is getting something of a reboot next year.

Students from across Canada will continue to participate in the program's education and volunteer aspects, but the annual trip to Washington will be moved to the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg. The program is also one of the reasons the museum itself was created.

Since its inception, more than 13,600 high school students from 204 Canadian cities and 12 provinces and territories have taken part in the Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies program.