

May 11, 2016

Holocaust survivor considers himself the luckiest man he knows to share stories with Canadian students

By David Larkins, Postmedia Network

Isaac Gotfried details years in slave labour and concentration camps in Germany, from which he finally escaped in 1945

Trapped in a concentration camp, Isaac Gotfried never let his mind wander to the possibility that one day he'd escape hell and be free again.

"We were hoping our camp would be bombed and it would kill some of us. So what? That was no way to live.

"We were wishing to die."

Now 90, Gotfried shares his stories of vivid horror as a survivor of the Holocaust, calling himself the luckiest man he knows.

Gotfried shared his tales with a group of young students in Winnipeg as part of the Asper Foundation's Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program, which annually helps send high school students from around Canada on a trip to learn about the atrocities of the Second World War.

In the past, the group has visited the U.S. Holocaust museum in Washington, but this year the students are touring the Canadian Museum of Human Rights, the building that was the dream of late Winnipeg businessman Israel Asper.

Gotfried detailed his years in slave labour and concentration camps in Germany, from which he finally escaped in 1945.

"When you're reading about something, it's a name ... but when you hear someone telling (their) own personal story and you see how it's affected them it's so much more special," said Laya Shatil, a 16-year-old from London, Ont.

Christina Enright is a 13-year-old from Calgary with aspirations of working in international law with an eye on impacting the world on matters of human rights.

"The most prominent thing for me was the crime that is being a bystander, because you're essentially choosing somebody else's fate," she said. "Victims, they can't speak up for themselves ... and if you stand by and let that happen, you are part of that. You're sentencing them to whatever fate the persecutors have for them."

Jacob Kimel, 15, has read accounts of Holocaust horrors, but said hearing the tales firsthand provides a unique perspective.

"It's always really inspiring to hear a new perspective and a new story," he said. "It's always very moving to hear a survivor speak and whenever you hear a story there's always unique things."

The students are getting lessons in more than just the Holocaust, taking tours of the CMHR and having their minds opened well beyond their own personal experiences. Calgarian Ethan Kao, 14, emphasized meeting with refugees from Sierra Leone, who told of the persecution they escaped in their homeland.

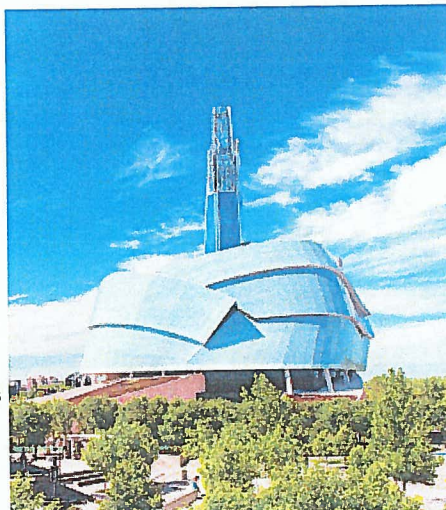
"It shocked me because I didn't think humans could be this cruel," Kao said.

"... This trip has taught me lots about human rights and human-rights infringements. I've learned about these human rights that are supposed to be universal, they've been withheld."

Gotfried has lived in Winnipeg for 68 years and estimates he's told his story to more than 20,000 people over the past 24 years.

He hopes the most important message the students can take home is to remain "vigilant."

"Not to overlook and not to keep quiet, to speak up, to tell the world what they know," he said.



TOURISM WINNIPEG PHOTO The exterior of Winnipeg's Canadian Museum for Human Rights is a stand-out in a city with more than a few architectural treasures.