

(ON-LINE VERSION) - THE STAR PHOENIX (SASKATOON, SASKATCHEWAN)
- THE WINDSOR STAR (WINDSOR, ONTARIO)
THE MONTREAL GAZETTE (MONTREAL, QUEBEC)

Canadian students learn from survivor born during Holocaust

BY WILLIAM MARSDEN, POSTMEDIA NEWS APRIL 28, 2014



A woman walks by a photo of the Auschwitz concentration camp at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. A group of Canadian students participating in the Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program visited the museum Monday as part of a trip to the U.S. capital.

Photograph by: Brendan Smialowski/Getty Images/File, Postmedia News

WASHINGTON — High school students from across Canada participating in the Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program came to Washington this week where they listened to a Holocaust survivor describe how she spent the first three years of her life hiding from the Nazis, not even knowing her own name.

Louise Lawrence-Israels, born in Haarlem, the Netherlands, in 1942, told about 160 students Monday that in January 1943 she and her family went into hiding to escape deportation to extermination camps set up by the Nazis in Auschwitz and Sobibor, Poland.

Louise said her father obtained false papers and rented an apartment in the attic of an Amsterdam row house where the family hid until Canadian troops liberated the city on May 5, 1945.

"When you go into hiding you don't exist anymore," she said, speaking at a local hotel where the students are staying.

The family took on Christian names. "I didn't know my name until I was three years old," she said. "I thought my name was Maria."

She said before the liberation she had no conception of life outside the confines of the tiny apartment. The idea of playing in the sun was unknown to her.

Several days after Amsterdam's liberation, her father took her and her brother outside for the first time and told them to play in a grassy field. But they didn't know what to do.

"My brother said, 'If this is what it means to be free I don't want to be free; I want to go back up stairs,' " she recalled.

She said after the war her parents taught her to hate Germans and it was only at the age of 30 that she realized this was wrong. "I am not very proud of this," she told the students. "Hatred begets hatred and the Holocaust began with hatred."

Louise married an American medical student and moved to the United States in 1967.

The Nazi exterminated about six million European Jews, an estimated 220,000 Roma (Gypsies) and hundreds of thousands of Slavs, homosexuals and the mentally handicapped during the Second World War.

Ella Sabourin, 14, of the Ottawa Jewish Community School, said her visit to the United States Holocaust Museum and the Martin Luther King National Memorial impressed upon her the fragility of humanity and of human rights. "We need to make people aware of that and keep learning from the mistakes of the past," she said. "You have to keep strong, stand up for your ideals, because one person's voice makes a big difference."

"It's unfathomable to think about the atrocities that occurred," Evelyn Pocock, 16, of Marshall McLuhan Catholic Secondary School in Toronto, said of her visit to the Holocaust museum. "It was definitely life changing."

For Shmuel Benzaquen, 14, also of the Ottawa Jewish Community School, the Holocaust is a reminder that humans are capable of any atrocity. "People can do any horrible thing even though it may seem beyond imagination," he said.

Lucas Bertoia, 14, also of Marshall McLuhan secondary, said he still finds it difficult to understand why humans can be so cruel to each other. "I'm not sure why this happens," he said. "It's a difficult question."

This year about 1,100 students are participating in the Asper Foundation human rights program. They represent 58 schools and community organizations in 30 cities and six provinces.

The program inspired the creation of the \$351-million Canadian Museum for Human Rights, for which Canadian taxpayers paid \$200 million. The museum opens in Winnipeg on Sept. 20. It is hoped the museum will become an integral part of high school programs designed to promote understanding and respect among religions, races and ethnic groups as well as encourage reflection, dialogue and action on human rights.

Since its inception in 1997, more than 12,600 students of different faiths and backgrounds and their chaperones from 120 cities across Canada have participated in the program. The program includes a trip to Washington, D.C., to visit the Holocaust Museum. There are six separate trips planned this year from April to June.

Monday was Yom HaShoah, the memorial day for those who died in the Holocaust. "Let us recommit ourselves to the task of remembrance, and to always oppose anti-Semitism wherever it takes root," U.S. President Barack Obama said in a statement. "Together, we must give enduring meaning to the words 'Never Again.' "

wmarsden@postmedia.com

© Copyright (c) Postmedia Network Inc.