Human-rights program teaches Canadian students details of Holocaust

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BY SHELDON ALBERTS, WASHINGTON CORRESPONDENT, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE MAY 11, 2009

ON-LINE ARTICLE

A tour of the "State of Deception: The Power of Nazi Propaganda" exhibition at the National Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, in a file photo.

Photograph by: Jim Young, Reuters

WASHINGTON — After months spent studying the genocide of Jews during the Second World War, 14-year-old Eliza Kraus had grown familiar with all the painful details of the Holocaust. She learned about the brutality of the Nazis, the squalor of the Jewish ghettos, and Adolf Hitler's "final solution."

But when she finally visited the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on Monday, and stepped inside a cattle car used to transport European Jews to Nazi concentration camps, the Calgary teenager was left speechless with emotion.

"Walking through the boxcar, I didn't even know what to say because I knew hundreds of people were crammed into that little space with no food, no water and they were in there for days," says Kraus, a Grade 9 student at the Calgary French and International School.

"It helps you understand more what they felt, and it means more to me because of that."

Kraus is among 250 teenagers in Washington this week completing a human-rights program that helps educate Canadian students about the history of the Holocaust and the dangers of racial intolerance and hatred.

The Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program has brought more than 7,000 students from 110 Canadian cities to the U.S. capital in recent years, and it's a visit that can leave its participants both drained and motivated to speak out against modern-day human-rights abuses.

This year alone, more than 1,100 students have taken part in the program and, on several of the stops at the Holocaust museum, Louise Lawrence-Israels has been there to tell them her harrowing tale of survival.

For an hour Monday in the museum's Meyerhoff Theater, Lawrence-Israels held the students riveted with details of more than two years spent hiding in Holland from the Nazis with her parents and older brother.

Only six months old when her family was confined to a tiny Amsterdam row house apartment, some of Lawrence-Israels' memories come in the form of stories passed on from her father and verified by a family friend who also shared the confined space. Others are the hazy first-hand recollections of childhood. Of answering to a fake name, Maria. Of never being allowed to yell, or argue, or look out the tiny dormer window of the apartment for fear of being seen and identified as a Jew. Of surviving on cookies her father cooked over a camp stove.

"We learned to play inside. You play simple games," said Lawrence-Israels, 66.

"We had never been outdoors. For me, I learned to walk and talk inside that apartment."

So deprived were Lawrence-Israels' formative years that when Amsterdam was finally liberated by Canadians in 1945, she and her brother did not know how to play in the park across the street from her family's apartment.

"My parents told us to play — we didn't know what that was. We just stood there," Lawrence-Israels said.

After the war, Lawrence-Israels told the students she grew up with a visceral hatred and fear of Germans. She only realized how damaging that feeling was when it became manifest in her own children.

"I realized it then — hatred begets hatred. That's how the Holocaust started."

Lawrence-Israels' message to the Canadian students is that genocides can only happen if people fail to stop hatred and racial prejudice when they see it start to take hold in individuals and societies.

Of the six million Jews killed during the Holocaust, 1.5 million were children, Lawrence-Israels said.

"They were murdered not because they had done something wrong but because they were Jewish. And no one stood up to do anything about it," she said. "I do not understand. It took one courageous person to stand up. They could have prevented a million and a half children from being murdered."

It was a message the Canadian students took to heart.

"The entire point of coming here is to remember, this did happen, and to make sure it doesn't happen again," said Alex Lee, 14, a fellow Calgary French and International School student.

"What's happening in places like Darfur, with civilians being murdered and raped — it's a lot like what happened during the Holocaust."

Erin Wadsworth, a 14-year-old ninth grader from Marshall McLuhan Catholic Secondary School in Toronto, said she has learned to "become less judgmental" because of her study of human-rights issues and abuses.

Her own visit to the Holocaust museum's cattle car exhibit left her in tears.

"It was devastating," she said. "It's very heartbreaking to learn about genocide, but worth it."

David Lopez, another 14-year-old Marshall McLuhan student, has translated his education about the Holocaust and human-rights issues into action — volunteering with a project that raises money for clean water in the African nation of Tanzania.

"I think these learning about genocide is important. But people aren't reacting enough," said Lopez. "I hate to say we don't care, but we aren't giving them the attention they need."

The Holocaust Studies program was launched in 1997 by the late Israel Asper as a way to use history to teach Canadian students about tolerance. Asper founded Canwest Global Communications Inc., whose media holdings include Global Television and Canwest newspapers across Canada.

The program formed the starting point for the $100-million Canadian Museum of Human Rights, which began construction last month in Winnipeg and is slated for opening in 2012.

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Previous Next