

Students see Holocaust horrors through eyes of survivor

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Canwest News Service

WASHINGTON — Louise Lawrence-Israels pinned on a bright yellow star, the wartime badge of racial subjugation, transmuted now into a symbol of remembrance and hope.

In the audience as she spoke yesterday at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum were 300 Canadian high school and junior high school students, enthralled by the

saga of a baby girl from Holland who was forbidden to laugh or cry out loud, or even to know her real name.

"My mother called me Maria to hide the fact that I was a Jew, and I never knew my name until the war was over," Lawrence-Israels told visiting participants of The Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program, recalling a childhood of privation and seclusion in an Amsterdam apartment that endured years of air-raid sirens, fear of betrayal to

the Nazi occupiers, and near-starvation warded off by tulip bulb stew.

Students in the audience wore a silver star, emblematic of participation in a program that has brought more than 6,000 young Canadians to Washington over the past decade, while educating thousands more in every Canadian province and territory about the horrors of the Holocaust and the spectre of racial and ethnic genocide that haunts the modern world.

"We had lived across the street from a park for three years," said Lawrence-Israels, one of eighty "survivor volunteers" at the museum, "but we had never been outside, we had never even gone down the stairs. The day after Amsterdam was liberated by the Canadians in 1945, my mother took me and my brother to play in that grassy field. But we had no idea what it meant to play outside, without walls or fences; we just stood there crying. And my mother, finally seeing her children standing free in a park, I think she cried the rest of the day."

Her parents vowed never to speak of the war, or to speak the names of the 70 family members exterminated by the Nazis. But, as the Canadian students learned on their visit, silence in the face of genocide is a course destined to lead only to more hatred, more separation, and more tragedy.

"The next generation is not going to have the opportunity to hear the survivors first-hand," said Elishua Ben-Choreen of Yitzhak Rabin High School in Nepean, Ont. "It's our responsibility to continue to learn about the Holocaust so that we can teach others about the Holocaust."

The tale of the sequestered childhood of Lawrence-Israels struck a chord with Sammy Diamantstein, also from Yitzhak Rabin. Both of his grandmothers survived the Holocaust, one by being hidden at a Catholic convent in Poland, the other by being selected for a labour brigade at the Auschwitz concentration camp, moments before she was to have been sent to the gas chamber.

"The Jewish Holocaust was unique in some aspects of its propaganda and political demonization of the Jews," Diamantstein said. "But even though there might not be another Jewish Holocaust, there is still the threat of genocide in Darfur and in other places."

As part of their preparation for the trip to Washington, students helped to raise money for the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, now nearing the beginning of construction in Winnipeg. The building is a natural outgrowth of The Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program, and the fruit of the late Israel Asper's desire to fight intolerance and hatred wherever it arises, said Moe Levy, executive director of The Asper Foundation.

"His desire was to bring these lessons to Canadians in Canada," Levy said. "In typical Izzy fashion, he believed that if something doesn't exist, then it is necessary to create it."

The Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program was created a decade ago by the late Israel Asper, founder of Canwest Global Communications Corp., whose media holdings include Global Television and Canwest newspapers.



Word of the Day

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