

Students learn Holocaust horrors

Asper Foundation brings Canadians to Washington museum

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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 Tuesday 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



NEVER TO FORGET: Holocaust survivor Louise Lawrence-Israels speaks to high school students at the Holocaust Museum in Washington on Tuesday.

Canwest photo

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 still haunts the modern world.

"We had lived across the street from a park for three years," said Lawrence-Israels, one of 80 "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 had 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.

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 Canwest newspapers, including The Windsor Star.