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Never again: Canadian students learn the darker lessons of history at Holocaust Memorial

BY SHELDON ALBERTS, POSTMEDIA NEWS MAY 9, 2011



A visitor to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington walks past a mural of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. File photo.

Photograph by: Jim Young, Reuters, Citizen Special

WASHINGTON — There are things that can't be learned from textbooks alone, things that need to be seen to be understood.

After visiting the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on Monday, Vancouver high school student Marina Favaro knows this more than ever.

The painstakingly recreated exhibits housed in this formidable institution include the physical evidence of a genocide that claimed six million lives — cattle cars that carried Jews to the death camps, bunk beds on which prisoners slept in Auschwitz, piles of shoes collected from victims before they were killed.

"They stripped everything from the Jewish people. Everything was valuable to the Germans except for their lives," says 16-year-old Favaro, a Grade 11 student at Vancouver Technical School. "It's appalling."

Favaro was among several hundred Canadian students who bore personal witness Monday to the horrors of the Holocaust — and learned the vital importance of human rights — at a memorial that frequently reduces visitors to tears.

The teenagers were participating in an annual trip to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, sponsored by the Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program.

It was the emotional capstone to an 18-hour educational program that teaches the history of the Holocaust as part of a larger message to students about tolerance and the need to take action to stop modern-day genocides.

"It was eye-opening. We knew what the facts were but we didn't see the background. It has a big impact on me, seeing what these people went through," said Laura Brager, 14, a Grade 9 student from Calgary. Brager was taken aback by the sight of a pile of Holocaust victims' shoes.

"That really hit me hard, knowing those prisoners were wearing those shoes before they died. It was really powerful."

Eric Chan, a 17-year-old Vancouver Technical School student, said the Holocaust museum visit helped him better understand "the intensity of the experience" for victims and the responsibility "to do our part" to prevent human rights abuses today.

For Favaro, whose passion for social justice began when she read *The Diary of Anne Frank* as a young girl, the museum visit reinforced her own conviction that today's youth must speak out against injustice.

"It visualizes what we have been learning. It is indispensable. The horrors that the people have through — we need to look at people as one race, the human race," she said.

It was the same message delivered to the Canadian students by Louise Lawrence-Israels, a Holocaust survivor whose Dutch family hid in the attic of an Amsterdam walk-up apartment building for almost three years during the war.

Lawrence-Israels spent her infant and toddler years totally isolated from the outside world. All food was cooked on a tiny camp stove. Her family's apartment had a small sink with cold running water. They were so desperate for food that the family once ate tulip stew, a toxic brew that left her writhing in pain.

But Lawrence-Israels considers herself lucky — more than 1.5 million children were killed by the Nazis during the Holocaust.

"What I cannot forget or forgive is that people let it happen. They didn't say anything," Lawrence-Israels said.

With cultural genocide still going on — whether in Darfur, Bosnia, Rwanda or the Congo — "isn't it time we say something to stop it?" she asked the students.

"It may be going on in a country far away, but we have to say something."

Lawrence-Israels's message had personal meaning for 14-year-old Josh Michnowski, a Grade 9 student from Calgary.

Michnowski's own grandmother, Susan Gold, was a "hidden child" during the Second World War, who spent years in an underground bunker in Poland as the Nazis hunted for Jews.

Michnowski carried with him to Washington a copy of his grandmother's memoir, *The Eyes Are the Same: A Holocaust Memoir*.

"We just need to remember what happened, for the future, and make sure nothing like this ever happens again."

As evidence of how even a few people can save lives, Michnowski said he was deeply affected by an exhibit that details the heroism of members of the Polish resistance during the Second World War.

"You learn that six million people were killed but so many people risked their lives to protect not just Jews, but Gypsies and homosexuals, and so many others," he said.

"It is empowering to learn about them."

The Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program has brought almost 9,400 high school students from 116 Canadian cities to the U.S. capital since 1997.

The program is aimed both at teaching the history of the Holocaust and using it to impress upon students the need to do their part to guard against history repeating itself.

"We like to think of this program as planting a seed," says Jeff Morry, senior program manager at the Asper Foundation.

"It's not reasonable to believe you can eliminate all hate and intolerance, but when you see hate and intolerance when it is small, you can stomp it out then" before it grows into something worse.

About 1,200 students from 57 schools and community groups from 38 cities across Canada are taking part this year in the Asper Foundation program, which was launched in 1997 by the late Israel Asper as a way to use history to teach Canadian students about tolerance.

The program formed the starting point for the \$310-million Canadian Museum of Human Rights. The museum, which is under construction in Winnipeg, is projected to open in 2013.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper designated the museum as a federal institution, the first national museum to be built outside the national capital region. So far \$160 million has been allocated to the project by the federal government, the Manitoba government and the City of Winnipeg.