

Temple Israel students participate in Asper Foundation program studying the Holocaust and human rights

BY ANGUS SMITH
FOR TEMPLE ISRAEL

A dedicated group of Ottawa high school students has spent many evenings and weekends over a six-month period learning about the darkest moments of human history and doing volunteer work.

The 13 Grade 9 and 10 students of the Temple Israel Religious School participated in the Winnipeg-based Asper Foundation's Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program. They immersed themselves in an 18-hour curriculum that covers everything from Native residential schools to the Holocaust, and volunteered 16 hours of their time to community projects, working in soup kitchens, food banks and schools.

In May, they travelled to Washington, D.C., to join more than 300 other Asper participants from across Canada for the conclusion of this year's program.

Built around a day at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and meetings with Holocaust survivors, the trip also afforded the Temple Israel contingent the opportunity to visit the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. Sitting around the conference table in the boardroom where the U.S. Civil Rights Act was drafted, they learned about concrete ways to live our imperative for *tikkun olam* (repair of the world).

On June 1, Temple Israel's Asper participants took part in a special ceremony to mark the end of their journey in the program and to sign individualized "Memoranda of Personal Responsibility."

Keynote speaker, Ottawa Holocaust educator Max Sternthal, riveted their attention with the story of Yitzkhok Rudashevski, a teenaged diarist who chronicled life in the Vilna ghetto.

Sternthal urged the students to see themselves in Yitzkhok, especially in his quiet resolve to study and to learn, to use his mind as an instrument of resistance.

"Welcome Yitzkhok into your circle, be the voice of the millions of Jewish kids who were robbed of the chance to grow up," said Sternthal.

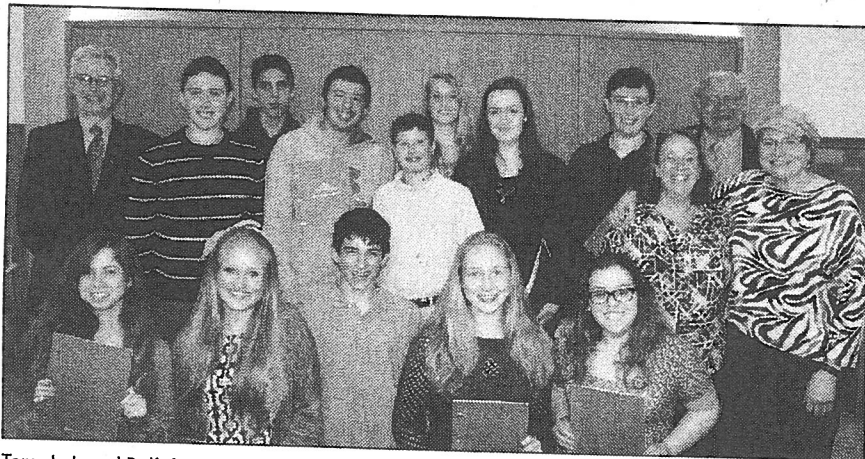
The evening's centrepiece was a series of multi-media presentations by the

participants themselves, reflecting on their experience.

Jacob McKean talked about the Newseum in Washington, where he learned that people cannot be free when there is no freedom of the press.

Maya Ruckenstein, Sarah McKeague and Sonia Jason-Byerley remembered their encounter with Holocaust survivor Walter Saltzberg in a single line of poetry, "While we dream about the future, Walter dreamed only of water."

Isy Burke said the trip to Washington "took Holocaust studies out of the classroom and into the real world."



Temple Israel Religious School participants in the Asper Foundation's Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program gather with their instructors at a ceremony, June 1, to mark the completion of the program.

(Front row, from left) Isy Burke, Charlotte Hood, David Khazzam, Sonia Jason Byerley, Maya Ruckenstein, (back row) Angus Smith, Nathan Jason Byerley, Elijah Rodriguez-Garcia, Jacob McKean, Steven Angel, Sarah McKeague, Miranda Rhamey-Smith, Jordan Jason Byerley, Sue Potechin, Rabbi Norman Klein and principal Sheli Braun.

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