In May of this year, 52 Calgary high school students and their chaperones, most of them non-Jewish, traveled to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. as part of The Asper Foundation Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program, which is operated locally by Calgary Jewish Federation.

Another 10 Calgary youth returned recently from the March of the Living, where they spent a week in Poland followed by a week in Israel. And at the same time, 11 Holocaust survivors shared their stories of fortitude and loss with 3,000 predominantly non-Jewish students from high schools across the city, at the Annual Holocaust Education Symposium co-sponsored by Federation and Mount Royal University.

Holocaust education – teaching people of all faiths that racism can lead and what happens when human rights are not protected – is one of the most important mandates of Federation. All of the initiatives of our Holocaust education programs are supported by funds raised through the UJA campaign.

Our intent is to provide a lesson about acceptance and diversity that will reverberate with the participants for a lifetime. To make them think. And to not sit by idly by when faced with injustice.

Depth of Learning

It’s difficult to imagine a human rights initiative that is more comprehensive and ethnically far-reaching than the Asper program, conceived by Winnipeg entrepreneur and philanthropist Dr. Israel Asper in 1997.

Participants are required to commit to a curriculum of at least 18 hours that is focused on the Holocaust and an array of other human rights issues, including our Charter of Rights and Freedoms; discrimination against French Canadians, aboriginals and other minority groups; the treatment of homosexuals; and women’s rights.

Then the students travel to Washington, where they visit the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and monuments related to freedom. The students are also required to volunteer for 16 hours in their communities. We can proudly say that Calgary is second only to Winnipeg in the number of participants sent annually to the Asper program.

Thank you to Holocaust Education Director Ilana Kryger Lapides, and to chaperones Chantalle Bourque, Rich Eichler, Trisha Hodgson, Cynthia Prasow and Josh Stav for making this program a success.

Calgary’s March of the Living contingent was among the more than 6,000 people from around the world who marched in silence from Auschwitz to Birkenau on Yom HaShoah, in living defiance of the Nazi death marches.

The March of the Living’s goal is three-fold: to give students an overview of the once bountiful and rich Jewish culture and communities of Poland; to visit the sites where millions of Jews and others were slaughtered; and to spend a week touring the ancient and modern Jewish homeland.

Will our Calgary youth ever forget the images of Treblinka or Majdanek, the Tykocin Synagogue or the old Kazimierz district of Krakow where Jewish life flourished for decades? Gratefully, these memories will be equaled by their experiences in Israel — commemorating Yom Hazikaron or celebrating Yom HaAtzmaut with thousands of youth from around the world.

Special thanks to Max Lipsman, who this year served as madrich for his sixth March of the Living and was co-chair of the Coast-to-Coast delegation.

Another program in which Calgarians should feel immense pride is our Annual Holocaust Education Symposium, which has educated upwards of 60,000 local high school students during its 30-year tenure.

Each year, students hear from guest historians from Mount Royal University or University of Calgary, and then watch the film Genocide.

The highlight of the morning is always a presentation by one of the survivors who shares intimate details of family loss, personal terrors and post-war life in Canada.

“Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and think about it and I cry,” one Survivor shared with the students at the recent symposium, advising that they have a role to play in building a better world. “No bullying, no racism, no prejudice, no discrimination. It’s up to you.”

This is not just history. These survivors have to be a living memory.”

Our thanks to all the survivors, historians and volunteers who made the symposium possible. And our appreciation to MRU for its enormous contribution of space and staff to the program.

In addition to the above programs, over the course of the year, Federation arranged numerous visits of Holocaust survivors and educators to local schools, loaned materials to teachers, and presented at “Understanding Atrocities,” a conference focusing on genocide.

Federation also sponsored a lecture by Sara Pechanec, a convert from Islam to Judaism, whose family sheltered Jews during WWII and then were protected by the same family during the war in Bosnia.

Most recently, the Federation supported the Fanny and Hy Edro Holocaust Education Fund of the Calgary Jewish Foundation in the visit of Father Patrick Desbois, who has made it his life’s work to identify and examine the mass graves where Jews and others were exterminated by the Nazis in the Ukraine and elsewhere.

Earlier this year, we began to develop Through Their Eyes, a multi-media project that will facilitate second and third-generation family members and others to help tell the survivors’ stories for generations to come.

It is our responsibility to ensure that the lessons of the Shoah and the memory of its victims never fade.

Through their joint efforts, the students, the teachers and our Federation are ensuring that the memory of the Holocaust and its lessons are not lost.

The dramatic contrast between the anguish of our past and the hope for our future is the central theme of this journey.

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Bruce Libin, President
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