

Winnipeg's Gray Academy marks Wallenberg Day with Africa program

By MYRON LOVE
Prairies Correspondent

WINNIPEG — On Jan. 17, students grades 9 to 12 at the Gray Academy of Jewish Education in Winnipeg joined communities around the world in commemorating Raoul Wallenberg Day with a day-long program focusing on human rights abuses in sub-Saharan Africa.

Joining the Jewish students at the school for the day were students from nearby Balmoral Hall, a non-Jewish private school, and Southeast Collegiate, an aboriginal boarding school in Winnipeg with which Gray Academy has had previous joint programs.

In total, about 200 students took part in the event.

"This program was inspired by [MP] Irwin Cotler when he spoke to our students a few years ago," says Shelley Faintuch, director of community relations for the Jewish Federation of Winnipeg, who, along with assistant Nora Sobel, did much of the organizational work.

"The goals of this conference were to bring awareness to students about human rights issues, and to empower students to undertake initiatives and action plans."

In 2001, Canada proclaimed Jan. 17 to be Raoul Wallenberg Day to remember the Swedish diplomat who is credited with saving more than 100,000 Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust.

The Russians arrested him in Budapest on Jan. 17, 1945. He disappeared into the Soviet gulag and his fate is unknown.

The Gray Academy program began with an overview of the situation in sub-Saharan Africa by Hamdesa Tusso, a visiting professor of conflict resolution at the University of Winnipeg. Tusso, who is originally from Ethiopia, focused on the legacy in Africa of colonialism and on the effects of the Cold War and the rise of Islamism.

Following Tusso's introduction, students separated into different groups to hear about real-life experiences of human rights abuses from individuals living in Winnipeg who are originally from current and former African hot spots such as Sudan, Somalia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Congo.

After lunch, students gathered in the Berney Theatre at the Asper Jewish Community Campus, where they viewed *A Good Man in Hell*, a documentary about Canadian general Romeo Dallaire and the Rwandan genocide in 1994. In the documentary, Dallaire issues a damning indictment of the United Nations and the world as a whole for doing nothing to stop the killing.

Judy Dueck of Human Rights Information and Documentation Systems then spoke to students about different interpretations of human rights and challenged them to take action on issues such as child labour in developing coun-

tries and the problems of aboriginal Canadians.

The students then divided themselves into four groups, each one charged with developing a plan of action. At the end of the day, each group presented its plan to the overall body.

Two groups proposed to tackle the situation in the Darfur region of in western Sudan, with one focusing on education, networking and getting information out through the media, and the other proposing fundraising projects and that petitions be sent to MPs.

Continued on page 27

honours Wallenberg

Continued from page 21

The third group of students suggested adopting an African school or village and raising money to buy a sewing machine or medical supplies, or to build a classroom.

The fourth group talked about keeping the public aware of the three Israeli soldiers who are being held captive by Hamas and Hezbollah. The students suggested writing letters to the new United Nations secretary general, as well as to Canadian political leaders and newspapers.

Raoul Wallenberg Day continued in the evening, when Hillel/JSA (Jewish Students Association) and the University of Manitoba Student Union, among other sponsors, presented Stephen Lewis, former Canadian ambassador to the United Nations and UN special envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, as a guest speaker at the University of Manitoba.

Other tributes to Wallenberg were also held in Montreal, Vancouver, New York, Stockholm, Paris, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Berlin, Caracas, Montevideo and Santiago.

In Buenos Aires, some 100 people — including Holocaust survivors, foreign dignitaries, local politicians, Jewish leaders and members of the local Islamic centre — gathered Jan. 17 near a sculpture of Wallenberg to honour the Swedish diplomat.

"The Shoah is not just the tragedy of the Jewish people," Rabbi Sergio Bergman said. "It's the tragedy of humanity, and until every human being understands this, Wallenberg's efforts won't be complete."

gram