



Holocaust Memorial Day 2005 - Theme Paper

Survivors, Liberation and Rebuilding Lives

Why survivors matter now

The 60th anniversary of the liberation of the concentration camps presents one of the greatest opportunities to show our respect for the survivors of Nazi persecution and mass murder, and to listen to what they can tell us about the best and the worst of human behaviour.

At a time when individuals acquire instant celebrity for the most trivial of reasons, in a culture of complaint and compensation, the survivors offer a radically different set of values.

Despite what they went through, after the war the survivors never clamoured to be heard and did not demand attention. Few sought revenge against those who had tormented them and most only reluctantly claimed compensation, even for what was theirs by right. Instead, they quietly went about the business of rebuilding lives and reconstructing the societies in which they lived. They set an unrivalled example of dignity and fortitude.

Even today they step forward unwillingly to tell of their extraordinary experiences. They do not insist on any reward: to them it is a civic duty. Their recompense is the knowledge that society is learning from what they had to suffer, the knowledge that younger generations are listening to what they have to say and carrying their message forward.

Who are the survivors?

Survivors are a diverse group. Nazi racial persecution and genocide was directed against the Jews with a special, distinctive malevolence. Roma were also subjected to systematic persecution and mass murder. In Germany and in many of the countries it occupied, disabled people were murdered by the Nazis on racial grounds. Gay people in the Third Reich were victimised because of Nazi racial doctrine and they too were imprisoned in concentration camps.

The Jewish survivors of Nazi persecution and genocide are themselves a varied group. Because of the passage of time, most of those alive today were young when the Nazis struck at them. They include those ranging from infants to

teenagers who were packed on trains and sent out of Germany on the eve of the war; young people who endured German occupation, ghettos, deportations, camps, slave labour, and death marches. The older survivors had lives before they became refugees or prisoners; the youngest were mere babies and cannot 'remember' life before or even during those times.

They came from all over Europe and North Africa. They witnessed 'ethnic cleansing', massacres, and death factories. Some were hidden with sympathetic non-Jews; others survived underground, either alone or with their families, in hiding or with false identities. In certain parts of Europe numbers of Jews escaped to the forests and hills where they lived and fought with partisans. Yet all are scarred.

What the survivors can tell us about racism and genocide

Survivors are not special just because they are survivors. Most will say that they did not escape from Germany or live through the ghettos or the camps because of something intrinsic to them. Most will readily admit that they survived thanks to sheer luck: better people perished, worse ones got away.

Survivors of Nazi persecution and mass murder are special because of *what* they survived and what they have to tell us about that horrific experience.

Those who escaped from persecution in Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia as young people or children before September 1939 witnessed the triumph of political intolerance, dictatorship, the massive abuse of human rights, and systematic state-sponsored robbery. They lived under a system founded on warped racial-biological principles in which the severely disabled were considered 'unworthy of life' and anyone who did not conform to a straight, heterosexual stereotype was considered 'asocial' and an enemy of the people.

They testify to families shattered by racial persecution, of parents giving up their children to the kindness of strangers in order to save them. They recall what it was like to arrive as refugees in 1930s Britain: a country divided between those whose humanitarian impulse led them to form refugee committees to help the persecuted and those who followed the xenophobic mass-circulation press and racist agitators like Sir Oswald Mosley who fomented hostility to the refugees. Most of the children who arrived on special trains in 1938-39 never saw their parents again because adults were denied admission by the British government for fear of causing a backlash against refugees seeking work as well as asylum.

These former refugees can inform us what it means to rebuild lives in a new country, to live through a war and then discover that you will never go home – that your family has been murdered. That you are orphans many times over: finally, irrevocably deprived of parents, culture, homeland.

Those who came to this country after 1945 bear witness to the very depths of inhumanity. In Poland, Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, the Baltic states, they saw people brutally evicted from their homes and their livelihoods destroyed in the name of a racist ideal; families ripped apart; men, women, children, babies slaughtered. They lived in squalid, walled ghettos and concentration camps where they endured starvation and disease in extremes of heat and cold. Despite illness and malnutrition, they were forced into slave labour.

Along with the Jews, tens of thousands of Roma were murdered, while millions of Russian prisoners of war and Poles were allowed to die of deliberate neglect or enslaved and worked to death.

In Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the Balkans and Nazi-occupied western Europe Jews experienced the increase of persecution from discrimination and marking with the yellow star to round ups, deportations, and mass murder on an industrial scale in purpose built gas chambers on the other side of the continent.

The survivors of the deportations are able to tell us how groups of people can be targeted by racism, segregated, isolated and uprooted. They discovered that few people are brave enough to resist and to help. Yet they experienced acts of kindness and courage, rescue and resistance. Some were actually saved by 'Righteous Gentiles' – non-Jews who risked their lives to help.

Survivors can recall the struggle to maintain human dignity in the overcrowded ghettos and in the camps. They witnessed the break down of civilization, but also solidarity in the face of the most awful brutality. Survivors in different places encountered the spectrum of responses to genocide, from desperate collaboration with the perpetrators to defiance and armed rebellion.

Above all they bear witness to the moment of liberation, the moment at which a totalitarian, genocidal regime was brought down by Allied troops: Red Army at Auschwitz, the British at Belsen, the Americans at Dachau as well as Allied personnel from many other nations who opened the gates of hundreds of murderous, ghastly camps.

What survivors can tell us about the aftermath of genocide

Few comforting stories emerged from the Nazi dark ages. One of the most important things we can learn from the survivors of Nazi persecution and mass murder is that for people who emerge from war and genocide, suffering and grief do not end instantly with the declaration of peace. The survivors of the Nazi racial persecution and genocide faced a particularly difficult time.

For those in the camps, liberation was a muted experience. They were alive, but they had lost everything. Thousands died of malnutrition and disease even after Allied troops arrived.

The sights that greeted Allied servicemen and women marked them for ever. They brought immediate aid to the survivors in terrible conditions and at great risk to themselves. The troops and relief workers should be honoured for that bravery and skill.

But after the initial rescue, survivors often faced incomprehension and even hostility. Those who limped back to their own countries frequently discovered that their homes were occupied by other people and that their belongings were gone. They were treated with fear and resentment.

The post-war experience of Jews was rooted in the ambiguous wartime attitude towards the Nazi policies that singled out the Jewish people and the reluctance to accept that they were special targets of Nazi race hate. Unlike the citizens of occupied countries, the Jewish survivors had no government to represent them or homeland to take them back. Since only a few had been able to take up arms against the Nazis they were not treated as heroes, like resistance fighters or soldiers who came home.

About 50,000 Jewish camp survivors gathered in the British and American zones of occupation in Germany, refusing to return to places that were no more than a graveyard. Outbreaks of violent anti-semitism in Poland led to over a hundred thousand Polish Jewish survivors joining them. But no country in the world was willing to take substantial numbers of Jewish 'Displaced Persons', 'DPs', as the survivors became known.

The British government refused to allow an influx of Jewish refugees and only a few thousand came to Britain under a scheme for the 'distressed relatives' of Jews already in the UK. The government permitted 10,000 Jewish and non-Jewish children to enter the country but ruled out any old enough to work, even though tens of thousands of non-Jewish DPs, including Poles, Balts, Ukrainians, and ethnic Germans, were recruited for labour in Britain.

Today we live in a 'therapeutic culture', but few survivors received anything more than essential medical treatment. About 750 boys and girls who were brought to Britain by the British Jewish community were given excellent care and sustained attention – but they were the exception. Neither the survivors nor the liberating troops, many of whom were traumatised by what they had seen, received the kind of support that we would deem essential to their psychological well-being.

In the post-war trials of war criminals the testimony of survivors was almost totally ignored and they were at the bottom of the list of those to get restitution. It took decades before they obtained justice. In Germany Roma and gays had no chance of obtaining redress: the laws under which they had been persecuted remained in force for many years. Their experiences, like the Nazi treatment of Germans of African descent, were hardly mentioned.

And yet most of the former Jewish refugees and the camp survivors who reached Britain between 1938 and 1945 came through and avoided the canker of bitterness. Some completed interrupted educations while others began their schooling in a new tongue. They mastered trades and professions, and embarked on productive working lives. They married and raised families. They maintained their religious affiliations and cherished memories of a culture that was now in ruins. Above all, they avoided the temptation to hate or to teach their children to hate.

Over time they formed associations and set up memorials to murdered loved ones and lost communities. They fostered commemorations, teaching and research into the origins of the Nazi nightmare and the fate of those it engulfed. As well as being productive, law abiding citizens, they tried to turn their experiences to the general good by warning against what happens when democracy, toleration, and decency collapse.

They did all this not because of what society expected of them, but despite a pervasive lack of compassion and curiosity. From the 1940s to the 1970s, there was little interest in what they had endured: the Nazi genocide was not taught about in our schools and stories connected with it rarely cropped up in the media. It is only in the last few years that we have recognised the importance of the survivors and given them the acknowledgement they deserve.

What can we achieve on Holocaust Memorial Day 2005?

Survivors still bear the scars of their experiences – and nothing can heal their loss. But we can to some extent make up for the years in which they were ignored by showing our respect for their strength and resilience.

Holocaust Memorial Day 2005 should not be an empty celebration of ‘the human spirit’ or the ‘triumph over adversity’. Rather, Holocaust Memorial Day should be a time to hear the survivors recall their experiences, reflect on how our society treated them, and listen to what they can tell us that applies equally well to the world today. It should be a spur to action against all manifestations of racism, intolerance, dehumanisation of ‘the Other’, and incipient genocide.

Survivors should not just be used for a convenient ‘sound bite’ or serve as the peg on which to hang clichés about crimes committed by other people, long ago and far away.

Our task is to make sure that as many people as possible, especially the young, listen to these survivors from a terrible past that finds echoes in our society - and pledge to them that we will do our utmost to prevent anything like that which they endured ever happening again in Britain or elsewhere in the world.

If we had heeded them earlier, perhaps the catastrophes in Bosnia, Rwanda and Kosovo would not have occurred. Perhaps we would have acted sooner to get relief to the survivors of those atrocities, provided asylum for the victims with greater speed and generosity, and done more to help them recover. Sadly, the stories told by the survivors of Nazi terror have resonated in the horrific stories that emerged from Srebrenica and Kigali.

Now, thanks to the huge media coverage of the anniversaries marking the last year of the war the spotlight will be on the wartime generation, the former refugees from Nazi persecution and the survivors of genocide. We must seize this opportunity to pay our respect to them, to hear their voices and learn from what they have to say.

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