



Communities Together: Build a Bridge

Holocaust Memorial Day 2013

No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. **John Donne, English poet**

This is the duty of our generation as we enter the twenty-first century - solidarity with the weak, the persecuted, the lonely, the sick, and those in despair. It is expressed by the desire to give a noble and humanizing meaning to a community in which all members will define themselves not by their own identity but by that of others. **Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor**

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Imagine waking up to find that the neighbours you have known all your life and even sat next to at school, now walk past you without stopping, now forbid their children from playing with yours, now spit at you and even attack you.

Imagine having nowhere to turn, that the walls are closing in and that there is no escape. Imagine that you have done nothing wrong, yet you are to be punished nonetheless and no-one will stand by you.

On Holocaust Memorial Day – 27 January 2013 – we're asking you to remember and stand by those who were forced to live through these experiences. We want you to honour those communities which were destroyed in the Holocaust, under Nazi Persecution and in subsequent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur, as well as the atrocities in Armenia.

History tells us that communities which have lived side by side peacefully for generations and even centuries can be persuaded to turn on each other with murderous intent. People were betrayed by their neighbours and removed from the safety of their former communities and subjected to extremes of violence and injustice. It is the courage and determination of those who survived and rebuilt their lives that we can draw on today.

HMD 2012 asked you to **Speak Up, Speak Out**. You gave a voice to the voiceless and challenged the language of hatred. On HMD 2013 we are asking you to respect different communities.

In cities, towns and villages – wherever we live, there are others around us. Our communities are made up of individuals with different backgrounds, occupations and lives. Communities may be defined by geography, by interest, by cultural activities or by faith. On HMD 2013, whether individually or as groups we can make links, forge connections and reach out to different communities.

When the Nazis took over Germany in 1933, Jewish families were no longer welcome in German society and Jews were sacked from their jobs, including those who had been decorated for their courage in military service in World War One. Families with generations of German citizenship were stripped of their rights and excluded from schools, shops and parks.

The exclusion was legislated by Nazi officials, but communities supported it by boycotting Jewish people and their businesses. As neighbourhoods fractured, Nazi policies became more radical in their means of excluding Jews.

Martha Blend, who came to the UK as part of the *Kindertransport* remembered how her community became unsafe when she was removed from her school class: 'I knew I hadn't changed, so this blanket condemnation was all the harder to bear. Suddenly I was cut off from the place which had been a safe haven, the teacher I loved and the children I had known'. Martha was lucky to escape Germany before the Nazis began the Final Solution – but six million other Jews were murdered across Europe as communities abandoned their former neighbours, colleagues and even friends.

During the Rwandan and Bosnian Genocides in the 1990s, many communities were divided by ethnicity. Tutsis in Rwanda and Bosniak Muslims in Bosnia were attacked by neighbours and colleagues within their communities. Kemal Pervanic was imprisoned in a concentration camp during the Bosnian War. Many of the Bosnian Serb guards who held Kemal captive in appalling conditions were former neighbours, schoolmates and even a friend he had shared a desk with. In the genocides in Cambodia and Darfur, many communities were attacked because others wanted to gain from their destruction.

There are also those who protected their communities. In Albania during the Holocaust, many Muslim communities chose to save Jews. People saved Jews by providing hiding places and misdirecting the Nazis. At the end of the Holocaust, Albania was the only country in Europe where the Jewish population had increased during the years 1939-45.

We can also be inspired by individuals who took action to protect communities. Vali Rácz was a Catholic Hungarian and a well known and successful singer who saved Jewish lives during the Holocaust. Vali had made a number of Jewish friends in show business and when the Nazis began deporting Jews from Hungary, many of her friends were in danger. She hid Jews in her own house despite the great personal risk this involved. Vali's experiences in knowing and befriending many Jews motivated her desire to help them during the Holocaust and all those hidden in Vali's house survived the war.

Many people who fled from persecution during the Holocaust and subsequent genocides have rebuilt their lives and supported new communities in Britain. Today, we each have responsibilities as individuals and as members of our own communities. We can start by getting to know and support the diverse communities in the UK and the individuals who make up the whole. We can respect each other's differences and places in communities. Ultimately, some of the ways in which you can prevent hatred and discrimination are by making connections with, and between, communities.

On Holocaust Memorial Day 2013 local authorities and community groups can work towards a more inclusive experience for all, students can create a safe environment regardless of their age and we can all act to know, respect and support our communities. On 27 January 2013 we can connect to come together, and stay together.

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