



## Torn from home

*'I didn't feel like I had a home after the genocide because everything was destroyed. I had no home at all. I had nothing.'*

Chantal Uwamahoro, survivor of the Genocide in Rwanda

### Background

Holocaust Memorial Day Trust (HMDT) chooses the annual theme to provide those preparing Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) events with fresh ideas for interesting and inspiring commemorations. Each theme relates to the Holocaust, Nazi Persecution and the subsequent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur.

### Introduction

Holocaust Memorial Day Trust offers the theme **Torn from home** to encourage audiences to reflect on how the enforced loss of a safe place to call 'home' is part of the trauma faced by anyone experiencing persecution and genocide. 'Home' usually means a place of safety, comfort and security. On HMD 2019 we will reflect on what happens when individuals, families and communities are driven out of, or wrenched from their homes, because of persecution or the threat of genocide, alongside the continuing difficulties survivors face as they try to find and build new homes when the genocide is over.

HMD 2019 will include marking the 25th anniversary of the Genocide in Rwanda, which began in April 1994. HMD activity organisers may particularly want to acknowledge this milestone anniversary, and reflect on how this theme impacts on members of the Rwandan community.

### Scope of the theme

**Torn from home** has resonance, in part, because all HMD participants, children or adults, will have some personal associations with the word 'home'. It relates to the experiences of communities before, during and after their persecution. As a means of escaping certain death, some of those persecuted found alternative places to call home in less than ideal conditions, whilst others have had to make the place they were confined to into a home. After the genocide ended, many survivors did not have a recognisable home to return to.

This theme also allows for reflections on how we can support those escaping persecution today and who may be looking to make a new home in our own communities. It leads to discussions of how the lessons of the past can inform our lives today and ensure that everyone works together to create a safer, better future.

## 1 - The meaning of home before genocide

### a) What makes a home?

*'My mother always seemed to be in the kitchen. I remember coming home from school and being greeted by delicious cooking smells.'*

**Blanche Benedick, survivor of the Holocaust**

The word 'home' is familiar to us all. It relates to a place in time and space but it also relates to the people and possessions we find within. Although not always the case, home usually has associations with safety, security, privacy, dignity and peace. In the lead up to the Holocaust, Nazis undermined the notion of 'secure home' by imposing curfews on Jews, and seizing certain possessions such as radios and cameras, before then forcing them to leave their homes.

When reflecting on their lives before their persecution, survivors of the Holocaust and subsequent genocides remembered the familiar sights, and smells, as well as the voices of the friends and family which turn a house into a home. Their homes might have been very different from each other, but the survivors whose testimony we share hold many common reflections about what home meant to them before the genocide.

### b) Fleeing from home before genocide

*'There was a lake, Lake Kivu, which separates Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, very huge. So we decided to swim.'*

**Jean Louis Mazimpaka, survivor of the Genocide in Rwanda**

During the first years of Nazi rule some Jewish families, as well as others who were experiencing increasing persecution, left their homes and fled Germany. Some fled to neighbouring countries in Europe, whilst others left for countries further away like the USA, Canada and China. Not only did this mean leaving all that was familiar, but it meant trying to make a new home, often somewhere with a different culture and language, and, in some cases, an unwelcoming new society.

In subsequent genocides, communities experiencing persecution have fled their homes, becoming refugees in nearby countries, and in the UK. Sometimes leaving home is physically dangerous, like it was for Jean Louis and those who swam with him across Lake Kivu, to find a place of safety. Leaving home is never an easy decision.

## 2 - Torn from home during genocide

### a) Forced from home

*'The Khmer Rouge ordered us to leave the city "for three hours only" and to carry nothing with us... I left my house with my mother, my two daughters, three sisters and two brothers... Five hours passed, one day, two days, three days... We realised by now that this was a trip without return.'*

**Var Ashe Houston, survivor of the Genocide in Cambodia**

A few months before World War Two broke out, Jewish people in Nazi Germany were told that it was now legal for their homes to be taken from them at any time. As the war developed, and Nazi control spread across Europe, Jewish people were forced from their homes into ghettos in cities across Europe. Families had to live in overcrowded, dirty and unsanitary conditions; disease and starvation were rife. Many still attempted to make their cramped accommodation in the ghetto into a semblance of home, by continuing to celebrate Jewish festivals and the sabbath.

Subsequent acts of genocide also saw communities forced from their homes. During the Genocide in Cambodia, millions of people like Var were forced from their home towns and cities to live and work on the land in the countryside. Some lost hope that they would ever see their homes again.

### b) Finding an alternative home

*'Even when I was hiding in someone else's home, there was no security, because at any moment someone could come and knock on the door and find you. At least in the bush there was hope that, if someone came, you would be able to move and keep hiding.'*

**Chantal Uwamahoro, survivor of the Genocide in Rwanda**

Some survivors were only able to survive by hiding under floorboards or in attics, or in forests and bushes, such as Chantal had to do in Rwanda. These hiding places were not home but, in some cases, people remained in their hiding place for several years. In other cases, people moved from place to place, finding a refuge for a few weeks or months at a time.

### c) Making a home a refuge

*'Mona's mother said, "Don't worry, Blanche, you're going to stay here with us for a few days. We're going to hide you because we've heard that all the Jews are going to be rounded up."'*

**Blanche Benedick, survivor of the Holocaust**

Those who tried to save others by taking them into their homes can be remembered for their acts of rescue during the Holocaust and the genocides which followed. These include those who looked after children who came to the United Kingdom on the *Kindertransport*, and others, like Mona's family in Denmark, who hid Jewish people in their homes during World War Two. Louisa Gould paid the ultimate price for hiding a Russian prisoner of war in her home on the Channel Islands; she was murdered in Ravensbrück concentration camp.

### 3 - A home after genocide

#### a) Returning home

*'I stayed in Rwanda after the genocide, we tried to go back to work, to find others and make other friends, to find out if you have some family members left. Then we tried to build the country again, to build a family again, to build ourselves again.'*

**Appolinaire Kageruka, survivor of the Genocide in Rwanda**

When the Holocaust ended with the end of World War Two, millions of people across Europe were displaced, often hundreds of miles from home. Some tried to return home – often a difficult and complex journey. Those who were able to return to their neighbourhoods often faced continuing prejudice, and sometimes violence from the communities to which they now returned.

After the Genocide in Rwanda, survivors like Appolinaire who moved back to their homes found themselves living alongside neighbours who had been perpetrators during the genocide. The challenge of rebuilding a life was made more difficult by having to encounter those responsible for their loss of family on a regular basis.

#### b) No home to return to

*'I was numb when I saw there was nothing left... Someone had even planted corn on my land and they were harvesting it.'*

**Besima, survivor of the Genocide in Bosnia**

Many of those who tried to return from concentration camps across Europe after the Holocaust found their houses had been looted, sold, given away or physically destroyed, and the local communities unwilling or unable to help them reclaim their homes.

Similarly, when survivors of the Genocide in Bosnia, like Besima, returned to their homes, many found that they had been taken over by members of the communities involved in killing their loved ones. The continuing trauma of genocide leaves people trying to adapt to a new life alongside some of those responsible for destroying their old one. Finding or building a new home can take a long time in communities still recovering from genocide. Having no permanent home creates further trauma for those who survive.

### c) An empty home

*'I missed my brothers and sisters, always, to this very day. When the holidays came and people celebrated, or the families sat together, that was when this inner thing, this nervous strain came. That was very hard.'*

**Otto Rosenberg, Sinti survivor of Nazi Persecution**

For many people, family and loved ones are essential to feeling 'at home.' Having lost friends and family during genocide, those who survived the Holocaust, Nazi Persecution or other genocides had to face the trauma of making a home without those who had been murdered. Otto describes his continuing sense of loss, particularly at times when Sinti families traditionally gather in the home and spend time together.

### d) Making others feel at home

*'Britain is now my second home. It is good to have a new life, but it was really tough to have no contact with my family for so long.'*

**Abdul Aziz Mustafa, survivor of the Genocide in Darfur**

After persecution, 'home' can become a country offering a place of safety and belonging. The continuing refugee crisis highlights that there are millions of people across the world who are still seeking a safe place to call home. The ongoing Genocide in Darfur highlights that acts of persecution, violence and genocide continue to force millions of people from their homes today.

## Further reading

The survivors whose words appear above have all shared their testimonies with HMDT. Their stories, along with others of victims and survivors of the Holocaust, Nazi Persecution and subsequent genocides, can be found at [hmd.org.uk/lifestories](http://hmd.org.uk/lifestories).

Find out more...

Learn about Holocaust Memorial Day and explore our free resources: [hmd.org.uk](http://hmd.org.uk)