HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL DAY – BRIDGING GENERATIONS

Each year we come together on this day, as do people across the world, to remember those who died in the Holocaust and in all other genocides. 81 years on, you would hope that the message brought to the occasion would have been heeded. The lessons learnt. Sadly, that is still not the case. Indeed, the need for understanding and remedial action seems to be as great now as it's ever been.

Bridging the generations, the theme for this year, may, however, provide a breakthrough. For surely there is no more important concept as this? Recognition of 'transgenerational trauma' – the transmission of the impact and consequences of severe trauma from one generation to the next – has become a fundamental aspect of Holocaust legacy and understanding. The transference of guilt and responsibility is part of this. That there are implications for those born after 1945 and indeed potentially for those still to come is a culpability and a phenomenon that we need to heed and to address.

Wilm Hosenfeld, a German army officer who has become posthumously famous for the help he gave to Władysław Szpilman, the Polish pianist who survived the Nazi occupation of his city and country by hiding within the ruins of Warsaw, stated as such in the entry in his war diary for 13th August 1942. In reflecting on acts of savagery carried out by his compatriots, which included the murder of babies removed from a maternity hospital, Hosenfeld said: *"What cowards we are, thinking ourselves above all this, but letting it happen. We shall be punished for it too. And so will our innocent children, for we are colluding when we allow these crimes to be committed."*[1] On a personal front, German friends still apologise to me for the Holocaust. Friends born in the 1960s or even later. Not therefore for their actions and attitudes, but for those of their parents and grandparents.

In November of last year, I once again visited Warsaw. I like Warsaw. It is today a vibrant city, much as it was in the inter-war years before the German invasion and the advent of Nazi rule. With one notable exception. The absence of Jews. There is a community, but very small. Only one active synagogue survives. All around you are signs of a Jewish past. A rich life. Prosperous in all manifestations of the term. Socially. Artistically. Historically. Culturally. And with respect to commerce and industry. But now largely gone. Gone with the trains that took fully 400,000 people in 1942 and 1943 some 57 miles north-east to Treblinka.

One of those who experienced that fate was Janusz Korczak. Korczak was a remarkable man. A Jew. A pediatrician, children's author and educator. A campaigner for children's rights, he founded and managed a Jewish orphanage, initially outside, but then moved to within the confines of the Warsaw Ghetto (established by the Nazis in November 1940). His stature as a humanitarian is such that today there are multiple

[1] Szpilman, Władysław, 'The Pianist', p.200

commemorations in the city in which he earned that lasting legacy. Korczak knew and valued the meaning of life. He also respected the need to educate, to guide, to assist and to foster an appreciation for collective responsibility in those from younger generations who had known considerable challenge during the course of their short lives. As a consequence, he would have thought long and hard about the issue of 'bridging generations'. His commitment to the children in his orphanage was absolute and total. Though he himself could have avoided the fate of his charges, he chose to accompany them on their final journey. On 6th August 1942, he led them through the streets of the Warsaw Ghetto to the Umschlagplatz, the collection point at the ghetto's northern boundary, where they – alongside thousands of other Jews – were herded into cattle trucks and the trains that would take them to their deaths in Treblinka.

Memorials to Janusz Korczak in Warsaw. On the left, at the Jewish Cemetery on Okopowa. On the right, detail from the Pomnik Janusza Korczaka (Świętokrzyska 32). Photographs © Julian Harrison

In Betty Lifton's biography of Korczak, she recorded their walk to the train: *"The Germans had taken a roll call: one hundred and ninety-two children and ten adults. Korczak was at the head of this little army, the tattered remnants of the generations of moral soldiers he had raised in his children's republic. He held five-year-old Romcia in one arm, and perhaps Szymonek Jakubowicz…Stefa followed a little way back with the nine- to twelve year-olds. There were Giena, with sad, dark eyes like her mother's; Eva Mandelblatt, whose brother had been in the orphanage before her. Halinka Pinchonson, who chose to go with Korczak rather than stay behind with her mother. There were Jakub, who wrote the poem about Moses; Leon with his polished box; Mietek with his dead brother's prayer book; and Abus, who had stayed too long on the toilet. There were Zygmus, Sami, Hanka, and Aronek, who had signed the petition to play in the church garden; Hella, who was always restless; big Hanna, who had*

asthma; and little Hanna with her pale, tubercular smile; Mendelek, who had the bad dream; and the agitated boy who had not wanted to leave his dying mother. There were Abrasha, who had played Amal, with his violin; Jerzyk, the fakir. Chaimek, the doctor; Adek, the lord mayor… and the rest of the cast of The Post Office, all following their own Pan Doctor on their way to meet the Messiah King. One of the older boys carried the green flag of King Matt, the blue Star of David set against a field of white on one side. The older children took turns carrying the flag during the course of their two-mile walk…"[2]

The Holocaust comprises many stories. Stories such as these. They continue to need to be told. Perhaps this will always be a task for us, the succeeding generations, one after another? One of their essential elements is of lives cut short, interrupted and unfulfilled. Stolen without conscience. Often before they had a chance to begin properly. Nowhere is the Holocaust more horrific and tragic than in the fate of children, and nowhere is this more heartrendingly apparent and recorded than here.

Equally important within the legacy of the Holocaust was the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising that took place across 29 momentous days in April and May 1943. The response of Jewish young people to the fate they knew was coming was as inspirational as it was brave and daring. Dissatisfied with the more passive approach of their community elders and leadership, they organised themselves into distinct operational units, determined to fight. Refusing the call to surrender to the Germans, they hit back with smuggled and homemade weapons – pistols, rifles, grenades, explosives, Molotov cocktails and more. Their intent was not necessarily to win, or even to survive. They knew the odds. They understand the consequences. It was the act of resistance and its inherent dignity that mattered. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising directly contradicts the often-made reflection – indeed accusation – that Jews in the Holocaust remained largely acquiescent, docile and resigned to their fate. However, a closer, more detailed examination, will discover that resistance actually took many forms, including at its most basic, the simple determination to remain alive and to remain committed to one's faith and culture. The simple living of a Jewish life provided an example to successive generations. As did its recording, the collection of art and artifacts, diaries and documents. Education. The playing of music. The performance of plays. The organisation of literary evenings. The production of underground newspapers. The building of bunkers and hiding places. The smuggling of food, medicine, weapons, money and other useful commodities. With that broader understanding comes, perhaps, a renewed reflection that more Jews resisted than was previously understood.

Walking the streets of the former Warsaw Ghetto today, it is difficult to conceive, to imagine what once was some eighty plus years ago. A new city has been built on the foundations and rubble, the aftermath of the Uprising. However, once you focus on the clues, the remnants, the vestiges that remain, visualising, reimagining, recreating

[2] See 1942: Janusz Korczak and his orphans | Executed Today

suddenly becomes entirely feasible. Street names, plaques, memorials, tramlines, pavement markers, preserved remnants of the Ghetto wall, museums new and old. They're all there. Features to be explored. Stories to be told. Lessons to be learned.

The Young Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto resisted when faced with the reality and consequences of hate, the ultimate human expression of indifference and prejudice. We also have that opportunity today in our battle to withstand things that serve to isolate, subjugate and discriminate. But to use different weapons. Those of tolerance. Of respect. Of love. Of strength and peace. The use of words. Of statements. Of conciliation. Of our outstretched arms. Of our dignity. Of our opposition to anything and anyone that tries to divide us. Of our commitment to create and maintain safety, reassurance and togetherness.

Images of Treblinka. Photographs © Julian Harrison

Whilst I spent the bulk of my time in Poland in Warsaw, I went to Treblinka too. I find that an altered mindset is required to fully absorb and appreciate what a place such as Treblinka – a Nazi death camp – actually signifies. It is not easy. This is not visitor enjoyment. It is not even educational advancement that is primarily at stake here. Yes, you want to learn. But you also need to feel. You need a level of detachment to reflect on what happened. The detail, however hurtful and mind-numbing. But emotional reflection is as valid. It has to be. Conscious that your every step is taking you into a graveyard of vast proportions, you walk carefully and deliberately, determined almost not to leave a mark that would indicate your presence. Your voice falls to a whisper, for you don't want to disturb the pervading silence. Your desire to be invisible grows as your use of senses heightens. Invisibility, I felt, was the surest way of leaving the spiritual ambience undisturbed, to sustain the intensity of memory. I found it important not just to be inconspicuous but to be as free as possible. To let your senses, your feelings, your raw emotions, take you on a journey that is both challenging and, in an important way, rewarding. Feelings are what make us human. And humanity is always at stake in a place like this.

What you see today at Treblinka is what has been deliberately constructed after the fact and following the atrocities committed during the Holocaust. In the immediate

aftermath, the Nazi authorities attempted to obliterate and hide what they had done. They exhumed and cremated bodies. They dismantled and destroyed the buildings, including the gas chambers. They ploughed over what was left. They planted trees over the evidence of genocide. They even posted someone at the site to maintain the deception that it was a farm rather than the site of a death camp.

In the post-war period, right up to the present day and the new visitors centre currently being built, a process of construction has taken place. During this time, the Polish authorities have built a lasting memorial. It is simple and unobtrusive. Respectful and dignified. Rows of concrete blocks delineate the rail route into the camp. At the centre, a large stone structure was designed, built and unveiled in 1964. At its top is the depiction of a menorah. The site of the cremation pit is marked by crushed and cemented black basalt to symbolise the charcoal remains of bodies. Surrounding all of this are stones of varying sizes, each one carrying a name. In all but one case, that name is of a country from which Jews were deported or a locality in Poland. A place where Jews lived before the calamity of the Holocaust. The one exception is the name of a person and his community. Janusz Korczak and the children in his care.

Images of Treblinka. Photographs © Julian Harrison

All of this must have a purpose.

Fascism, in its multitude of forms and contexts, is on the rise again. It thrives on fear, ignorance and indifference. It plays out on streets and in neighbourhoods, often concealed behind protestations of, and references to, patriotic pride. A veritable wolf in sheep's clothing. But it is also there in governments and in regimes, in democracies and in systems based on theocracy and autocracy. All across the globe.

Antisemitism, too, has never gone way. Indeed, it has become more widespread and more virulent. As a result, there is a need to educate. To inform people as to what it really is. That it is not the same as opposition to a government. That it is far more brutal. Far more pervasive. And sadly, far more prevalent and longstanding. Recent figures released by the Campaign Against Antisemitism are nothing but disturbing. 51% of British Jews feel that they do not have a long-term future in the UK. 59% try

not to show visible signs of their Jewishness due to concerns relating to antisemitism. And 88% believe that the authorities are not doing enough to address and punish antisemitism.[3]

But do not ignore other discriminatory practices either. Islamophobia, Homophobia, Transphobia and Antiziganism – discrimination against Romany gypsies – for instance, as just four examples. Anti-Muslim hatred surged to unprecedented levels in 2024. Tell Mama, an organisation that specifically tracks Islamophobic hate crime, recorded some 6,313 cases, a 43% increase on the previous year.[4] Furthermore, 45% of all religious hate crimes recorded by the Government in the year ending March 2025, specifically targeted Muslims.[5] There is also evidence pointing towards similar trends when it comes to hate crimes against Trans people. Indeed, in London, the figures have doubled over the course of five years, as reported by the Metropolitan Police.[6] And globally, according to data from the Transgender Europe and Central Asia's Trans Murder Monitoring Unit, some 5,322 trans and gender diverse people were murdered between 2009 and the Autumn of 2025.[7] Alarming. And disgraceful. In equal measure.

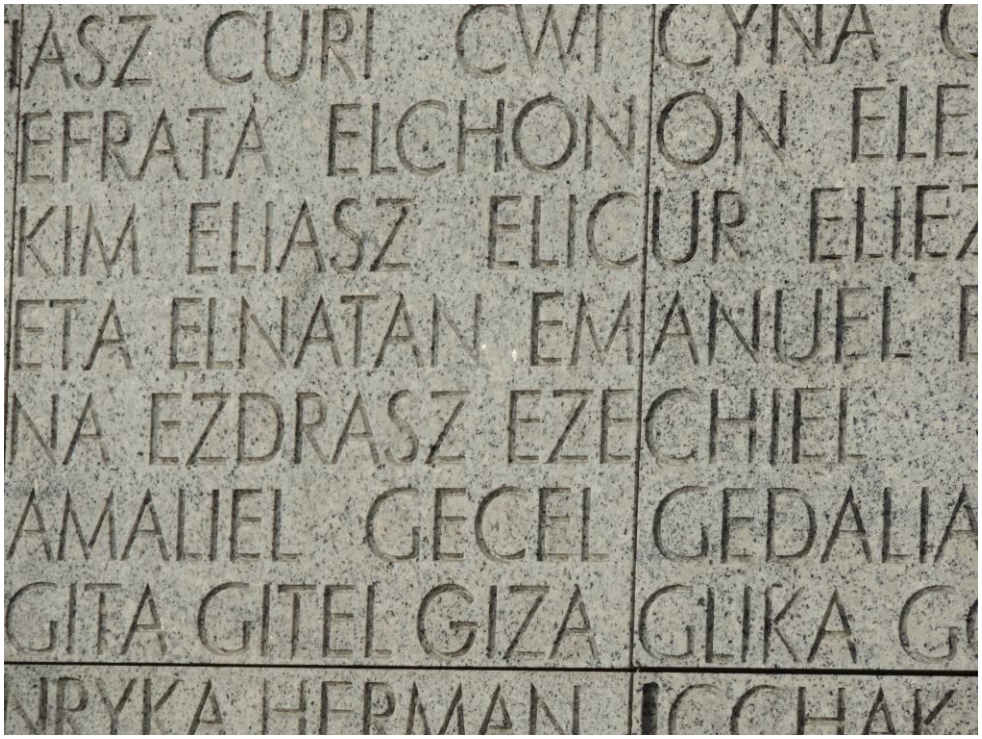
Thinking specifically of the theme of 'bridging generations', we need to reflect upon the society in which we live and the world we have created. By taking a personal interest. By being individually responsible. By questioning how we have become what we are.

For we are accountable to the younger generations for the persistence and prevalence of genocide and atrocities committed against fellow human beings. We are also obligated to listen to them and to take their views seriously and with a view to action. To hear what matters to them, however uncomfortable that may be. And that means what they say about genocide. About human rights violations and ongoing conflict. About targeted atrocities and acts of terrorism. About physical and other forms of violence and hatred. These things continue to blight the reality of the human world.[8] In Darfur. In Sudan. In Myanmar. In Ethiopia. In Syria. In Ukraine. In the Democratic Republic of Congo. In China. In Azerbaijan. In Israel. In Gaza. Indeed, is there anywhere currently 'immune' from human rights violations? Against Jews. Against Muslims. Against Christians. Against people of any faith. Against Gypsies and Travellers. Against trans people. Against other minority populations. Against protesters and campaigners. Against advocates for peace and the rights of all people. Against Palestinians. Against anyone whose difference is perceived negatively and who are more susceptible to discrimination and prejudice. Only by doing this, and

[3] Campaign Against Antisemitism (21st December 2025), New polling: Majority of British Jews see no future in UK - Campaign Against Antisemitism
[4] See Anti-Muslim hate at record level in UK, charity says - BBC News
[5] See Muslims suffer 45% of all religious hate crimes in England and Wales – 5Pillars
[6] See Transphobic hate crimes in London have more than doubled in 5 years, says Met - My London
[7] See TDOR 2025: New data reveals 281 trans people were murdered in the past year
[8] See Google and Genocide Watch Genocide Watch- Countries at Risk

doing it comprehensively and broadly, we will then be able to look with some degree of confidence to the future. To look younger people in the face without shame, guilt and culpability.

The Holocaust was not simply the accumulation of thousands upon thousands of individual acts of savagery and murder – appalling as these were – it was also the systematic workings of numerous bodies, machinations of the Nazi state and its allies, with one express purpose, the eradication of European Jewry. If we expand the context to include all targets of Nazi violence and murder, and genocides both before and afterwards, that reality is what helps us to understand the term 'genocide' itself. It defines it, but, perhaps more importantly, it points to how it must be addressed, tackled and ultimately overcome.



First names of Warsaw Holocaust victims at the Umschlagplatz Memorial, Warsaw. Photo © Julian Harrison

It is therefore at the systemic as well as the individual level that we must focus our attention on challenging discrimination and intolerance. Both everyday, individual actions and longer-term structural change and consolidation. Angela Merkel, the former Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany critically said: *"We must remember that the multilateral world order was created in response to the lessons of the Second World War. There will be fewer and fewer witnesses of this era. In history there is a recurring pattern that people start treating structures with neglect when the generations that created those structures are no longer alive."*[9]

By this reasoning, we need to recreate. To modify. To adapt. To change for the better. To create structures that are solid. That have personal and collective resonance and

[9] Buck, Tobias: 'Final Verdict: A Holocaust Trial in the Twenty-First Century', p.110

commitment imbued within them. That have a chance of becoming the new status quo. So therefore, let the new generation have their chance as well as the responsibility. Educate them on all discriminatory practices and on the need to heed the lessons of history. But give them the opportunity, the power, the authority to create something in their image, in their imagination, in their conviction, in their name. Something that can actually make a difference. In a positive and cohesive, as well as enduring sense. I think Janusz Korczak would have welcomed that.

I referred at the start of my address to the theme of this year as a concept. We have to make it a reality. And for the right reasons. The memorial in Treblinka says 'never again'. These words are not unique to Treblinka, however. Its original testament was a warning to the world. What is it now though? Unless people actively take it as a rallying call for humanity. Unless they recreate the power and intensity of its initial voicing. Unless it becomes once and for all our mantel for all time. Then it is lost. That is the task of all of us from now on. Not to delegate entirely to the young. That would be a dereliction of duty. But to empower young people, to incorporate their ideas, their passion, their conviction, their desire for a better future. For a world of peace. Of harmony. Of cohesion. Of tolerance. Of respect. Of value. A world that can finally rid itself of the tragedies of the past. A world that can create a lasting future for generations to come.

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[10] All photos are © Julian Harrison