Holocaust Memorial Day 2015
Holocaust Survivors’ Friendship Association

70th Anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz

Keeping the Memory Alive
This report outlines the contribution of HSFA members to the commemoration of the 70th Anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.

I am grateful to all our survivor members and their families for their work during this busy period. We have honoured the memory of our lost families in a most fitting way and our continuing work ensures we keep the memory alive for future generations. We are grateful to our many partners and the wider community in Yorkshire and the Humber for their contributions to the many events, for wonderful messages of support and for caring. The Holocaust left a lasting scar on the whole of humanity and raised questions which remain unanswered even to this day. The lessons from the Holocaust must be learned if genocide is to be prevented today and tomorrow. The HSFA is committed to continuing to work with all its partners from home and abroad to sustain the legacy of the Holocaust for a more peaceful future where we can all live together in harmony.

*Lilian Black, Chair, Holocaust Survivors’ Friendship Association,*
*Leeds, February 2015*

**Leeds HMD 25 January 2015**

The event was led by the Lord Mayor Councillor David Congreve. Trude Silman, Life President of the HSFA and Lilian Black, Chair, worked with Leeds City Council and partners to plan the overall programme content and secure inputs from the survivor community. Holocaust survivors of Auschwitz, Iby Knill, Arek Hersh and Lilian Black (on behalf of Eugene Black) lit the 70th anniversary candle created by Sir Anish Kapoor as one of the seventy centres identified nationally. Trude Silman lit one of the seven memorial candles and read out one of the commitments. Two third generation young people, Arielle Rivlin and Imbal Port also lit a candle and read out one of the commitments. Rudi Leavor, HSFA member and President of Bradford Synagogue, sang El Male Rachamin followed by a minute’s silence. A very thoughtful key note address was made by Dr Adam Strickson, Trustee of 6 Million +, writer and Teaching Fellow, University of Leeds and a good friend of the HSFA. His speech and poem is at the end of this report.
University of Leeds

The University of Leeds’ German Department staged an international exhibition and conference to explore “Germany’s Confrontation with the Holocaust in a Global Context”. The HSFA was delighted to work closely with Professor Stuart Taberner, Matt Boswell and Helen Finch from the University of Leeds to review the exhibition content and use local survivor input in particular to highlight slave labour within the concentration camp system. The story of Eugene Black and his experience within Dora-Mittelbau concentration camp where he worked in the underground V2 rocket factory was included in the exhibition.

As part of Leeds HMD and for the conference young people from Escape Contemporary Youth Theatre responded to the exhibition “Germany’s Confrontation with the Holocaust in a Global Context” with a fifteen minute performance in Leeds Town Hall at the Holocaust Memorial Service and at an academic conference on Transnational Holocaust Memory at the University of Leeds. ‘Falling to Our Knees’ (based on the spontaneous kneeling of Willy Brandt at the monument to the Warsaw Ghetto), explored the protection which we enjoy as citizens of
the UK and how it is enshrined in our passports, in comparison to the Jewish community in 1930s Germany, who had their citizenship and protection stripped away from them. Written by Anthony Haddon and directed by Simon Brewis, there was an exploration of how we remember and what it is like for people in Germany to remember the Holocaust as their past before thinking about how we can remember it as our past and whether and how we should be the guardians of those memories.

University of Leeds and Leeds College of Music Singers

V’shamru was performed using a very damaged manuscript by composer David Nowakowsky (1848 – 1921), found in Cape Town by Senior Lecturer of Music, Dr Stephen Muir and reconstructed. It is possibly the first time this particular piece has been performed in approximately 100 years.

Pyramid of Arts

This group representing people with learning disabilities produced a display of textile arts portraying impersonal belongings that might have been left behind and moved to more affirmative depictions of life. Leslie Swithinbank lit the memorial candle on behalf of those who perished through the T4 Euthanasia Programme.
LGBT Equality Hub

Representing those people who wore the pink triangle and were persecuted for their sexuality Raymond Warwick lit the commemoration candle on behalf of those who perished for no other reason.

We paid special tribute on the 20th anniversary of those who were murdered at Srebenica, Bosnia.

Whirlwind

Swept away,
Forgotten,
Lost.

Townfolk gather in the streets,
Seeking asylum from the burning exterior,
In a matter of moments, they disappear.

The peaceful aether has been ruptured by eternal screams
Forsaken by hope,
They call out endlessly for their brethren,
Children who once were can never be again.

Hatred swirls out from the crevice whence darkness erupted,
A single action, a single command,
He hates them all.
He hates us.

They become wisps in the wind
Their lives become forever fractured
Verbrechen gegen die Menschheit.*

Shattered dreams,
Broken memories,
Crippled psyches,
Gone.

Always remember,
Six years, six million.

Written by Adam Jackson
Leeds school pupil, inspired by Leeds HMD event
in commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz
* Crimes Against Humanity
Kirklees HMD 28 January 2015

Led by Kim Strickson of Kirklees Community Heritage and Education team, Kirklees local authority once again produced an outstanding commemoration event, in ‘Someone’ Else’s Shoes’. Survivors, community groups and schools were invited to step into the shoes of a person who had survived persecution and genocide. Each survivor had prepared their own shoebox, with a pair of their shoes, their story and questions for people to consider. A response was then prepared to be performed at the HMD event. The shoeboxes were prepared by groups representing the Jewish, Kurdish, Hungarian Roma, Bosnian, Ukrainian and Burundi communities.

The event was opened by the Mayor of Kirklees Councillor Ken Smith. The Pakistani Youth Forum introduced the event. The keynote speaker was Lilian Black, Chair of the Holocaust Survivors’ Friendship Association and daughter of Eugene Black, Holocaust survivor. Responses to the different stories were then performed by the different groups and each group lit a commemoration candle together with the person who had prepared the shoebox.

Separation is an illusion – Burundi response to the Jewish story
No-one dreams to scream – Hungarian Roma response to the Burundi story
Homage to a brave woman – Bosnian response to the Ukrainian story
Flowers of remembrance – Ukrainian response to the Bosnian story
The forgotten genocide – Kurdish response to the Ukrainian story
L’Chaim, a letter to Sleman and Fatima – Jewish response to the Kurdish stories

There were contributions from Mirfield Free Grammar, Honley High, Royds Hall Community and Westborough schools.
The 70th year commemoration candle was lit by Holocaust survivor Iby Knill and Maja Voros who is the great granddaughter of Ilona Nagy who survived Auschwitz along with her grandmother. Everyone else in their family perished. Ilona’s grandmother died very soon after liberation so Ilona was left completely alone at the age of eight. Ilona died in September 2013. Her daughter and granddaughter added this to the end of her story:

*The believer can see the invisible
Believes the incredible
And reaches for the impossible*

The Fettle Animation *Children of the Holocaust* production of Arek Hersh’s story, undertaken in collaboration with the HSFA, was shown.

**The United Hebrew Congregation of Leeds** performed “Lo Teida” (No More War) led by Phil Cammerman. “El Male Rachamin” was sung by Rudi Leavor, Chairman of Bradford Synagogue and HSFA member.
In addition there was an art exhibition of David Black’s holocaust art ‘Lost Faces’, representing the family never known who perished in the Holocaust. David is the son of Holocaust survivor Eugene Black. His work also formed part of the on-line exhibition organised by the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust.
Dear Kim! and everyone in the HMD project!

In the name of Hungarian Roma Group I would like to thank you for your kind invitation to be equal part of the HMD in this year again.
Me, all Ilona Nagy relatives (children, grand and great grandchildren) and my colleagues were proud, amazed and honoured to be involved in the remarkable and emotional Event. To get opportunity to meet with lots of very kind of people to learn and teach each other.

Because of this project, I get contact and shared not only Ilona’s but even my own life moments with people; I learned a lot of about other people persecutions and horrible situations. This help me to understand why we need to remember, not forget the past mistakes.

This makes me to rethink again why is better to live in England, where Roma Holocaust is accepted - bad history action and subject, not like in Hungary in January of 2015 where people still say in Hungary there was not Roma Holocaust even if the evidence is on the websites and everywhere.

I am so happy to meet with Lilian, Dieudonne, Senad, Halwest, Mick, Adam … My favourite part of the event was moment to hear Andy Burton and Noah B. play music. Lilian’s speech make me (my self esteem to be Roma) very strong, because she spoke on behalf of the Roma people.
Thank you so much Lilian!!!! Senad and his group responded to Roma story - that was very emotional for Ilona’s family - they mentioned to me,” in their eyes were tear drops” during the performance.

The High School students work was very important on the event, it was good to see how they connect with every group. The Jewish and Hebrew performances was very very strong characteristic. Roma children and adults listened with wild opened eyes. Ilona Nagy’s Family in Hungary (Anett said) will get every information about her part in the Event. They are SSSSoooooo Proud (news article, video and photos).

Thank you so…. much.

Anna (Lajosne Gyarmati)
from Old Bank School
Hull HMD

Hull HMD was organised by Dr Nick Evans from the University of Hull, HSFA member and historical adviser, working closely with the local authority in Hull. The keynote speech was made by Julia Kinch, granddaughter of Holocaust survivor Iby Knill. She trained as a new volunteer Legacy speaker with the HSFA. Her keynote speech is at the end of this report.

As part of the HMD event photographic portraits were taken by Dr Lee Stow. These portraits are of HSFA members and Holocaust survivors of Auschwitz. They also reflect the passing on of their legacy to the third generation.
Arek Hersh (survivor of the Lodz Ghetto, Auschwitz and liberated at Terezin by the Russians, courtesy Dr Lee Stow)

Eugene Black (survivor of Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Dora-Mittelbau and Harzungen, liberated at Bergen Belsen by the British, courtesy Dr Lee Stow)

Iby Knill (survivor of Auschwitz and Lippstadt, a sub camp of Buchenwald, liberated on a death march by the Americans, courtesy Dr Lee Stow)

Iby Knill with granddaughter Julia Kinch (courtesy Dr Lee Stow)
Other events and activities

The HSFA and its members responded to many requests from a wide range of organisations for speakers, TV interviews and for press articles.

• Arek Hersh spoke at Sunderland HMD, a number of synagogues and also spent the 70th anniversary at Auschwitz with his granddaughter. He was filmed by the BBC as part of the anniversary events.

• Trude Silman spoke to students at the University of Leeds Jewish Society.

• Iby Knill spoke at Ellesmere Port, two events at Redditch, the University of Huddersfield and the Leeds Church Institute. She participated in the BBC TV programme “The Big Question” and also went out on air through BBC Leeds and ITV news. She lit a candle at Armley Prison.

• Lilian Black and Iby Knill were on air with Radio Aire.

• Trude Silman and Heinz Skyte, HSFA Life Presidents, along with Kath Shackleton of Fettle Animation were interviewed for ‘Made in Leeds’ TV about the Children of the Holocaust Animations.

• Lilian Black appeared on CBBC news round on the anniversary of liberation to talk about Eugene Black’s Holocaust experience of slave labour in the context of the Children of the Holocaust Animations.

• Eugene Black was interviewed by the Yorkshire Post with the article published as part of the HMD events.

Keynote speech: Dr Adam Strickson

A gust of absence, a blast of presence: keeping the memory alive.

How do we keep a memory alive? In Auschwitz, people used their fingernails and slivers of glass to draw pictures of themselves on the walls and to scratch out key facts about their lives. Despite the incomprehensible death toll, I can still read hundreds of memories of being there, but it's not my memory. I'm not a Jew, I'm not a gypsy, I'm not a homosexual, I'm not a political prisoner, I'm not a Jehovah's Witness, I'm not disabled and I'm not destitute. I am a conscientious objector but my belief has never been tested. I am a trade unionist but have never been in danger of being imprisoned for my activities. So how do I connect with Auschwitz, that terrible 'place of birch trees', that was liberated before I was born, 70 years ago? And why am I deeply involved in remembering and re-interpreting the experience for our times?

The Holocaust was briefly referred to at secondary school when we looked at the Nazis and I remember the shock I felt as a teenager looking through a book of photographs of emaciated dead bodies in Belsen. As an adult, I read novels, and saw films and plays set in the Holocaust. I knew about Auschwitz but didn't connect with it emotionally until, fourteen years ago, in my professional capacity, as an artist and writer, I was invited to work with a small group of young people aged between 12 and 17 who were either individually, or as part of a family, seeking sanctuary in the UK, and being supported by a local voluntary organisation, KRAFT (Kirklees Refugees and Friends Together). My job was to find ways for them to express their life stories in paint or words. Their stories were so traumatic that I've been trying to make sense of them ever since. The real surprise for me was that the young people whose lives were contained in these stories could be so literally close to me in my West Yorkshire town. How could I be only a few hours' travel away from a village where a thirteen year old Albanian boy's parents are both shot, his teacher gives him a couple of sandwiches, puts him on a lorry that ends up in the middle of Huddersfield, and he doesn't even know which country he has arrived in. I'd seen the coast of Albania when I was on holiday in Corfu! And how could I be living in the same town as an ex-child soldier from Southern Sudan who saw his mother raped and murdered in front of him? In the same year I was involved in this work, my wife Kim was given the responsibility of putting together the Holocaust Memorial Day commemoration for Kirklees, and she was meeting Holocaust Survivors for the first time. As husbands and wives sometimes do, we talked to...
each other and realised that our work was connecting both of us to a set of people who had been through persecution and suffering that we were having great trouble imagining – the Holocaust Survivors in the 1930s and 40s, and the young people seeking sanctuary in the 1990s. I certainly knew I was out of my depth, and that to approach and make good use of the fragments of traumatic experiences communicated to me from the Congo, Albania, Zimbabwe, Burundi, the Sudan, Kurdistan and Bosnia, I needed something else, some other insight or approach to empathise enough. And then we went to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

My wife had been working on organising and interpreting an exhibition of Krakowian ‘szopki’, highly ornate Christmas cribs, with Huddersfield’s Polish community and needed to make a short visit to Krakow to take photographs and talk to museum curators. So, in 2002, we went to the annual festival of cribs in Krakow’s main square on December 5th and, since she was now also involved with arranging the programme for Holocaust Memorial Day, the following day we took a day off between crib business and caught the bus to Auschwitz. We passed the sheep’s cheese sellers and got on a local, somewhat rickety bus that passes slowly through all the villages on a bitter, icy day. The windows misted up and we could only see outside by constantly wiping a clear space. Among the glimpsed allotment sheds, endless wood piles and beehives, I remember wiping my hand to clear the window at a bus stop (in a town I later realised was Wadowice) and just a few feet away from me was a blue plaque commemorating the birthplace of that famous Roman Catholic goalkeeper, who often played on the Jewish side, and whose first and only girlfriend, Ginka Beer, was Jewish, slender and beautiful. This minor playwright is also known as Karol Wojtyła, or Pope John Paul II, whose last book was fittingly titled ‘Memory and Identity’. After this apparently random incident of maybe 30 seconds, we continued to Auschwitz, or rather we didn’t because we have the honour of being the bus passengers who missed Auschwitz. Eventually, the loud heating in the bus had begun to work so in a dozy state and bored with wiping the window we missed the stop for the camp and ended up in the town. There was now only one other passenger and fortunately she was quite happy to let the bus driver go back to the entrance to the camp and drop us off. Because we were on a special educational visit, we’d booked a guide, Kashya, and – unbelievably – we were two of only half a dozen visitors to Auschwitz that day and, in minus 14 degrees and with the light fading fast, the only visitors to a very frozen Birkenau.

I’m still processing the memories of our visit, and the writing of a poem became my medium for understanding, using the language of story and metaphor to dig down into a deeper meaning below the conscious analytical mind. Poetry can be a kind of slow thinking in a fast time, and it can invite the reader to deal with trauma or mourning, or even to imagine the possibilities of preventing loss and suffering.
Through writing, I wanted to discover how Auschwitz-Birkenau and my visit on December 5th 2002 had become one of the key memories of my life and how it has allowed me both to remember and to connect with other lives and my own times. The poem, like a play, has a cast: me, my wife, our daughters, my brother-in-law; the bus driver; the prisoners and guards in Auschwitz-Birkenau during World War II; a Holocaust Survivor living in Elland, near Halifax; Kashya, our Polish guide to the camp, her daughter and her mother-in-law; guests and a cleaner in our Krakow hotel; Queen Sofia of Belgium, Steven Spielberg and St Mikołaj (St Nicholas). This is the poem, Kashya’s tour:

St. Nicholas’s Eve, when presents are given and birdsong struggles in the trees behind the unchanged gunpowder factory.
We pay for our private guide at a window.

Kashya tells us her aerial came off in the car wash and this is her first day driving on ice.
How she waits too long at junctions and works seven days a week in summer.
How her best gift ever was a green play tent and she spent all day in it with her sister.
How, despite the storks, she thinks Oswieçim ugly and her home is far away in the south-west.

She tells us how the lights failed yesterday and another guide got locked in one of the huts.
How he was fortunate to own a mobile phone; that the car seat is her seven year old daughter’s.

How Queen Sofia of Belgium paid for the toilets in which the hand dryer does not work.
How, in the year Spielberg built huts in the fields, there was no harvest and many new televisions.

She tells us there are families of foxes and one cat; that Gypsy children had holes in their cheeks.
How some patent shoes are still in good condition.
How faces were covered with something like moss.

How this place was chosen because of railways, that they are moving towards an exact number.
How she stayed up with her sister to see St. Mikołaj and how the green tent flew away in summer.
She tells us they washed with sand and stone, that the word ‘revenge’ has been found many times, that all the English use the word ‘bleak’ and her mother-in-law looks after her daughter.

I tell her the windows on the bus were misted up so we missed the camp but the driver went back; that tomorrow we are going to the salt mines and we live with our two daughters near Leeds.

I do not tell her that we hear a lot of sex in the hotel, that I know a woman who enjoyed her shower here and was glad to wash off the dirt after the train; how she grows geraniums around her trimmed lawn.

Later we will find chocolates on our pillows and slowly sip glasses of honey liqueur. Kashya will boil pierogi from a packet and read her daughter a story about a saint.

I did not tell her about my brother-in-law who still believes that most of this is fiction. How he binds books and had to kill his pigeons. How easily he picked up the wrong ideas.

At the same time as I was writing this poem, I talked with my wife about our different experiences working with Holocaust Survivors, Asylum Seekers and refugees. We both had an intuitive sense that people who are displaced casualties of contemporary conflict (and in some cases contemporary genocide) had much in common with the Holocaust Survivors – most of whom had only begun to frame and share the narratives of their own traumatic experiences forty years after the original events – and might be helped simply through a sharing of experiences. So while my wife was supervising the collection of six million buttons for the installation that became 6 million+, we initiated an accompanying piece of work called Double Portraits: filmed interviews and a series of responsive poems that compared the experience of Holocaust Survivors with those of Asylum Seekers and refugees. We didn’t do the interviews; they interviewed each other, whether they were nine or ninety.

During the work on Double Portraits, two people featured in the large cast of my poem became key to the development of the kind of remembrance we were hoping to achieve, the remembering that brings past experience (‘a gust of absence’) into a challenging and healing encounter with contemporary suffering (‘a blast of
presence’), allowing us to move forward in mutual understanding. The first is the woman who told me she enjoyed her shower at Auschwitz: Iby Ginsburg, Hungarian Holocaust Survivor and much valued member of HSFA, sadly no longer with us. For the filmed conversations, I paired her with an Ethiopian woman refugee, a librarian who ended up in Huddersfield, and who was tortured because of her opposition to the Ethiopian government during the early 1990s, including being hung upside down and beaten in jail. I know that both were grateful for this unexpected opportunity to find something in common, to share their memories, and to help bring them alive for school children and others. The second person in the cast of the poem who made this kind of act of remembrance seem both urgent and worthwhile was my brother-in-law, featured in the last verse:

I did not tell her about my brother-in law
who still believes that most of this is fiction.
How he binds books and had to kill his pigeons.
How easily he picked up the wrong ideas.

In his late teens, after a difficult childhood, he became an apprentice gardener and, forty years ago, came under the influence of an older couple who took him under their wing, introduced him to Revisionism and persuaded him to join the National Front. It took many years of his own experiences and conversations to persuade him that he had picked up the wrong ideas, and—when you scratch below the surface—the vestige of these ideas is still with him. For me, because he is close to me, he is a living representation of the person who may live on my street, who may be blaming a group of people for their own difficulties, and whose possibility of change has to be the touchstone of the success or otherwise of remembering the Holocaust. We live, once again, in a time when many people are looking for scapegoats for their own problems. According to the anthropologist Alexander Hinton, at the heart of all genocides rests the premeditated notion of deeply harmful social polarisations. Hinton specifies that genocides begin through “a process of ‘othering’”, where a previously included group is recast as a threatening or dangerous ‘other’ that must be excluded.¹

Holocaust commemoration therefore needs to be not only something that brings us a remembrance of the past, ‘a gust of absence’, but ‘a blast of presence’—it has never been more urgent that the memory be made present and that it should lead everyone in this hall to taking, or continuing to take, some useful action. Only connect Auschwitz-Birkenau and Srebrenica, Hungary and Ethiopia, Leeds and Juba, Harare and Huddersfield, me and you, you and me and, please, never refer to a group of people as ‘them’. We’re all ‘us’ and if we empathise enough with people’s suffering, if we connect strongly enough, then we will surely take action to make the world a better and more peaceful place— that action is the real test of our strength of empathy. To empathise, we must know and defend our own rights and make sure that since we can all only be ‘us’, we live in the constant possibility of peace and the impossibility of revenge. The Holocaust, like Srebrenica, was made possible because a large number of people, collectively, did not empathise enough with the suffering of others, and in so doing, they became complicit in their annihilation. They didn’t make the connection between their own rights and universal human rights, and in so doing they betrayed their humanity. The challenge to be loving humans before we are anything else remains pressing and horribly current.

Julia Kinch

Keynote speech Hull Holocaust Memorial Day 2015

The theme of this year’s Holocaust Memorial day is keeping the memory alive. I’m very lucky, because for me the memory of the Holocaust is still very much alive, in the form of my grandmother Iby Knill, an Auschwitz survivor.

I didn’t know this when I was growing up though. Whilst growing up I just knew her as my Oma – my gran, and I thought of her probably in much the same ways as many people think of their grandmothers. We went on family trips to see her in Leeds, I played with her dog and got to eat some of her delicious cooking—Cornish pasties and apple strudels are two of my favourite dishes!

But as I got older I started to learn more about my Oma, and I learnt more about my family. I went on a family holiday to Bratislava and Prague, and met family members who I’d never even heard of before, and who spoke in a language that I didn’t understand.

I had always known there was something important about my Oma being Jewish, but hadn’t ever really thought too much about it. My family aren’t religious, and my gran doesn’t adhere to the Jewish faith either, it was just this word that was used to describe something about my gran, but I didn’t know what.
Over the years the picture grew, and as I learnt more about World War Two as part of my History GCSE I began to ask questions and become curious. I began to wonder whether the fact my gran was Jewish had anything to do with the Holocaust.

At around this time my gran also started to investigate our family tree, though at the time I just assumed that this was one of those things people did — there were lots of adverts on the TV for family tree investigations, and TV programs like ‘Who do you think you are’ began springing up. Looking back on it now, this was probably part of her search to understand her own family’s story.

I remember my gran working on her book, ‘The Woman Without a Number’, and taking part in the BBC My Story competition. This is when the penny really started to drop, about how close to the Holocaust she had been. When she published her book she gave me a copy. It sat on my bookshelf for quite a while, I think I was a bit scared to read it, because I had no idea what I would find. Eventually I took the plunge and started reading.

It took a while though, for it to sink in that I was reading about someone I knew. More than that, I was reading about my gran. My gran who wrapped my advent calendar presents in fabric, who taught me and my best friend how to make summer pudding, and who encouraged me to play the clarinet.

It was weird. There was a disconnect in my mind, I couldn’t understand how this person, who worked as part of the resistance, who spent weeks in Auschwitz and who saw unimaginable horrors could possibly be the same person as my gran, my Oma.

Over the next few years I began to learn more about her life, about how she met my grandfather who was in the British Army, how she helped run a shop with him, and how she came to graduate with an MA in Theology at the age of 79. I began to join the dots between my gran, who raised my mum, and my gran the Auschwitz survivor.

My gran began to encourage me to learn more about her past, and suggested that I look at becoming a legacy speaker with the Holocaust Survivors Friendship Association, as they had just been given a grant by the Big Lottery to run a volunteer program.

In 2013 I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to attend some training run by the Holocaust Survivors Friendship Association. I also got the chance to go to Poland with a group of Legacy speakers. We spent three days visiting many of the important historical sites, including Auschwitz. At first I was a little apprehensive about going. Part of me didn’t want to go. I didn’t want to be reminded of the things that happened during the Holocaust. It seemed too close to home, to imagine that had things turned out differently, as they did for many families, I would not be here talking to you today.
In the end I decided that it was an important thing for me to do. Sometimes things are hard, and make us feel uncomfortable, but sometimes these things are necessary, and for me going to Poland was one of these things.

It taught me a lot about the sequence of events that lead to the Holocaust, and helped me understand how different the life my gran had as a young woman was in comparison to mine. It amazes me still, to think that my gran spent time in Auschwitz, that she lost many members of her family, met my grandfather and immigrated to the UK all by the time she was the same age as I am now.

But more than this, my trip to Poland reminded me why it is so important that we accept that humans are different. That we accept that we won’t always agree with each other, but that this is ok, because the differences between us are what make us so special.

For me, this is why keeping the memory alive is so important, because if we forget that difference is ok, and that we are allowed to disagree with one another, then we forget what it is to be human.

There are many examples of prejudice and discrimination in today’s society, we’re not perfect. But it’s so important that we remember this, and that we actively challenge our own prejudices in order to make our mark on this world, and to help it become a better place. No matter how large or small the impact we have, it means something, and everyone means something. So let’s keep the memory alive, because as my gran would say ‘Under the skin we are all the same’.

Lilian Black

Keynote Speech Kirklees Holocaust Memorial Day 2015

Keeping the memory alive

Lord Mayor, honoured guests, tonight we are keeping the memory alive in this special family we have created here in Kirklees. And it is a very special family here in Kirklees. We have been working with Kim Strickson and the team over many years and this is a relationship which we hope to continue over many more years. Why do I say it is special? Because Holocaust Memorial Day has never been just an event in Kirklees. It has been always a genuine joining together of people from different backgrounds and it is the project work which leads up to the event which makes this keeping the memory alive event so different and with such impact. We have truly created a family together. Thank you Kim, and everybody here tonight, for caring enough about our futures together. I would especially like to commend the Muslim Youth Forum for their major contribution
to the event. Many people do not know that thousands of Muslims lie buried in Bergen Belsen, Soviet Prisoners of War who suffered terribly in the early days of the camp.

They came late for the Hungarian Jews but when they came, it was fast and it was furious. Between May 15 and July 8, 437,351 Hungarian Jewish men, women and children were sent from six operational zones and 55 ghettos and concentration centres on 147 trains straight into the death camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Barely 10% survived selection. Amongst those Jews was an unknown number of Hungarian Roma who suffered the same fate. There were only 200 SS in Hungary at the time. This took organisation and it took the actions of ordinary men and women who acted as police and bystanders in the deportations. At the border in Kosice, the Germans took over the roles of guards as the trains rolled forward to their final destination. This had all been preceded over many years across the whole of occupied Europe by the build up to concentration and death by stigmatising, persecuting, punishing and targeting people for genocide because they were Jews, the Roma because of their ways, the disabled because their lives were not worth living. Other people were also swept up, people going to work without the right papers, resistance fighters, trade unionists, Jehovah's Witnesses, communists, homosexuals, arrested and sent off to concentration camps where they too had to endure slave labour and those terrible conditions in the camps. You see it could have been you or I as victim, bystander or perpetrator.

Amongst those sent were my father Eugene Black and his parents Leni and Bela Schwarz and his two sisters Paul and Jolan. Long journeys, starvation, thirst, beatings, slave labour in inhumane conditions, fear and the smell of the bodies burning. This was Auschwitz-Birkenau from which there was no escape except up the chimney or to slave labour. On the next morning after the selection Mr Kornreich who was a friend of the family said to my father “Jeno, I am sorry to tell you but the flames we saw last night and that terrible smell, that was the bodies of our families burning and my father said ‘Mr Kornreich where is G.d, can’t he see what they are doing to us, is he deaf, is he blind? ‘And this is how he came to that terrible knowledge called Auschwitz.

So why do we keep the memory alive? For us the families we have grown up with the Holocaust, it is part of us, our heritage and we cannot escape the past. We’d like to but it is too real. It is the same for everyone here tonight who has fled and survived. It is part of what makes us who we are and we have to embrace it somehow and put it to good use. Growing up we had no photos, we could not visit where father was born because it was behind the Iron Curtain at that time, at family parties there were no relatives from father’s side. There was no
internet for us to visit Munkacs where he was born. No, there was a long silence, heavy with unspoken words, fear of digging down into a dark pit where we knew unspeakable horrors lay. We knew our grandparents were gassed and we thought until 6 years ago his two sisters perished in the same way until we were told at the International Tracing Service in Germany that they had survived selection, were sent to a slave labour camp in Germany and killed in an RAF bombing raid because the SS would not let them shelter in the air raid bunkers. This was a big shock. I spent many years imaging their last steps and wondering what it must have been like and asking myself how this could have happened. I just couldn’t understand it, so I kept replaying the scenes, hoping there would be an answer but none came. We came to know his lost family through his stories of how they lived as a family, how his father ran his tailoring business, how he liked to play cards, how his mother was small and jolly and very religious, how she presided over Friday Shabbos, and told him off when he came back with dirty football boots and how his sisters spoiled him as the youngest. How he could not even say goodbye to them in Birkenau, so swift was the parting and he never saw them again.

We as a family came to the knowledge bit by bit through bits of conversation, through reading about it, watching films and eventually through a turning point when our father gave his full testimony to the Shoah Foundation and that is when our real journey started, eventually resulting in us all returning to Auschwitz and to Buchenwald and to Dora-Mittelbau and Harzungen concentration camps and then to Bergen Belsen from which he was liberated by the British troops. My father saw a new Germany, met young people, spoke to them and told them ‘It was not your fault, don’t cry. Just make sure it doesn’t happen again.’

So how do we connect to this and why does it matter today. The Holocaust did two things in my mind.

It showed us the worst in human beings. It showed us how people can be led by a regime and a perverted doctrine and set of values to believe another human being’s life is less worthy. It showed us that men and women can carry out acts of personal and mass murder. It showed us that people can stand by and do nothing. It showed us that people who were prisoners in the camp system could lose their own humanity, to fight for a piece of bread, to avoid selection, to become a guard amongst their own people, to live just another day, so brutalised were they by the conditions in which they tried to survive. I do not criticise these actions, but I want us to keep these memories alive, for us to know how terrible it was.

It also showed us the best in human beings. That people can survive and make a
new life, they are an inspiration to us all and we are lucky to know such people in this room tonight who have the courage to share their stories through the shoeboxes tonight. There were people who helped, even at a risk to themselves. And after the war, so many good people helped my own father,

So you see, the Holocaust left us with the legacy of knowing all of this in a very real way. We were not there but we can feel all of this at a very deep level and importantly, we have the knowledge to watch out for how it all started, with the erosion of human rights, by persecution, segregation, hatred and standing by when this happens. This is how we keep the memory alive, by holding our hand out to a stranger and choosing a path which means we can all live together in peace and with hope. We keep the memory alive by doing what we are doing this evening and by going forward with kind and loving hearts, by learning the lessons from the past and through our actions of challenging values and behaviours which are wrong.

The Illusion of Separation

Response to Eugene Black’s Shoebox

Kirklees Holocaust Memorial Day 2015
By Dieudonne Manirakiza

CHORUS
Eugene, we are connected
Eugene, we are connected
I never knew I’d carry his shoes
I never knew I’d carry his pain
I never knew I’d stand in his light

Eugene, we are connected
Eugene, we are connected
I am Burundian, I am Jewish
I am a child, I am an old man
I am alive, I make a difference
Eugene’s alive, he’s lived a good life

CHORUS
His story’s heavy but his life is light
He reaches out beyond the fences
There is no reason to fight

CHORUS
It’s an illusion this separation
We can wear each other’s shoes
We can walk in someone’s footsteps
We can heal each other’s pain

CHORUS
L’Chaim’ – To Life

A letter from Eugene Black to Sleman and Fatima

January 2015
Kirklees Holocaust Memorial Day
Dear Sleman and Fatima,

I am so sorry I am not with you tonight. I have been ill so I hope you will understand. I have sent my daughter and son Lilian and David with this letter which I would like you to have from me. As you will know from my shoebox I am a Jewish Holocaust survivor and I became an orphan when I was 16 years old. My parents were gassed in Birkenau and my two sisters were killed on 11 September 1944 by an RAF bombing raid on an oil refinery in Germany. They were slave labourers and the SS wouldn’t let them into the air raid shelters, only the German workers. I lost everything, my identity, my home, my family, my country and my faith, all because we were Jews. We were just ordinary people living our lives, wanting to make a living, get an education, I loved playing football – all destroyed because of a belief that we were less than human. I don’t understand it, even today, how they did it, why the world stood by, why nobody helped us – were they all deaf and blind? But worse than that there were people who saw us, miserable humans that we were, starved, beaten and worked to death. Ordinary Germans saw us dragging ourselves along everyday as they marched us to our place of work, and they spat at us and threw stones.

I looked for a long time at the shoebox. It made me very sad to see the images on the shoebox and to read your stories. Did you know that the world promised us after our liberation from the Camps ‘Never Again’? Well it did happen again. Fatima, when I read about the gas attack you experienced, I thought about my own mother and father walking down the steps into the gas chambers and their bodies burning. What do we have to do to get people to understand what it is like to be attacked, murdered? Why don’t people understand that when you are in flight it is fear for your life and survival that makes you come to a foreign land? Do people think this is easy?

When you lose everything and witness and experience things that no human eye should see it stays with you forever. I am sorry to have to tell you this at 86 years of age, but we have to live with these images and feelings of the fear and forever. And also our children, they carry the scars, because they love us and don’t want us to suffer anymore. There isn’t a day when I don’t think about my lost family. I came to the conclusion that human beings can be crueller than animals. People asked us many times, ‘Why didn’t you resist?’ – I tried to explain that every day of living in the camps was resistance, to fight hunger and cold, to fight the lice and just to put one foot in front of the other was a miracle. And Sleman, you resisted too, by not fighting for something you couldn’t believe in and which meant killing another human being. You are both survivors and we will be united always together, different time and different place, but all three human beings.
Now the letter is called ‘L’Chaim – to Life’. You might think this is a sad letter, but when I read your stories, it also reminded me of the many good people who helped me after liberation, like the many good people who helped you too. And this is what life is, it is good and bad. Life is precious and every day I say ‘Eyes open, good, that’s OK then!’ I told you before; you will always have the memories. I found a way to put them into a box and only to look at them when I could. Sometimes the box lid opens when I am not ready and this is not nice. We cannot change our past, it happened and it is real and we have to learn to live with this. My favourite saying is ‘You come into this world naked and you go out naked and what we do in between is up to you.’ And I mean this. I can see you are both making a new life with families and friends and education and doing this project is for the whole of the world, so that is worthwhile is it not? You see, you are both real heroes. You have survived and you are sharing your experiences. It took me 50 years to start speaking out, so you did well and you should congratulate yourselves! Just keep doing what you are doing, help others to feel what the end of discrimination and persecution looks like so we can try to stop what is happening today. Keep speaking out!

My final words are about Britain. The British troops liberated me at Bergen Belsen. I can tell you that those British troops had no idea what they were facing when they entered the camp on that day, Sunday 15 April 1945. You see we had had no food for 7 days, no water, we were just living skeletons. In fact when I saw the concentration camp in Bosnia on the television, I said to my daughter Lilian, look, it is just like we were. I cried. Well those poor troops were just devastated. They just couldn’t understand it. Eventually I came to Britain in 1949 and I was helped by so many British people, to get a job, to get citizenship, to register with the police, and to make a new life. I never suffered real discrimination here. I can vote. I am a free man and I am protected by the law. People don’t understand what this truly means.
So in my eyes, Britain is the most marvellous place in the world and you will not make a mistake if you stay here. You can make a new life here and there are many people who will help you. I do not know who they are, but I know British people. They are stubborn and individual and will not be herded along. They will do the right thing for you, just like they did for me.

Well I think I said enough now. I am older now with a lifetime of experience and I wish you both good health and happiness for the future. Work hard, never give up and be happy.

With my very best wishes,

Eugene
For further information find us at www.holocaustlearning.org

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