UNESCO – January 2015 - Culture, Remembrance and Transmission

Your Excellences, distinguished guests, mesdames et messieurs, I have the proud honour and great privilege to address you on this historic occasion at the home of this prestigious institution.

As we join to commemorate the anniversary of the liberation of the extermination camp whose name has become synonymous with the Holocaust, we reflect on the 70 years since the horrors of the Nazis’ atrocities become apparent.

The sight that met the eyes of the soldiers of the First Ukrainian Front as they entered Auschwitz on 27 January 1945 was the beginning of the realisation of the crimes perpetrated by the Nazis and while Auschwitz is the most notorious and identifiable of the network of Nazi death camps, Europe is littered with the corpses of innocent victims whose only crime was to have been born into a particular faith or way of life, or whose beliefs were contrary to the twisted ideology of their tormentors.

The deaths of six million Jewish people, including one and a half million children, as well as hundreds of thousands of other minorities are incomprehensible not least because there are simply no records for some of those who perished.

But thanks to the work of some extraordinary organisations around the world tremendous efforts to document these heinous crimes and catalogue the victims have produced some heart-breaking discoveries.

At precisely 10:30am on 12 April 1941 my great-grandfather, prisoner 8222, died at the Buchenwald concentration camp. He was 55 and had been deported to Buchenwald in October 1939 from the Gestapo prison in Cologne. What he endured in those 18 months dare not be imagined but the enforced separation from family, the transfer to an unknown destination and the dehumanising persecution are experiences we instinctively recoil from.

Like many Jews of Polish extraction living in Germany he relocated there to escape the pogroms that were common place in the late 19th and early 20th century. He lived a simple life with his wife and two children in a new country at the centre of civilised Europe; the home of the Reformation and a cultural heartland; the country that gave us Schiller, Mozart and Kant,
but this did not prevent the destruction of his family. His son was deported to the border of Germany and Poland, destined to perish in no man’s land. His wife was later taken to the Lodz ghetto and from there to Chelmno where she was murdered by the Nazis’ first crude attempt to asphyxiate people, by using a mobile gas van.

Only his daughter survived, by the skin of her teeth, escaping to Britain on a domestic visa and arriving on 31 August 1939. Through this quirk of fate, I stand here as the guardian of their memories.

Ladies and gentlemen, 70 years is what the bible prescribes as a man’s lifetime – this symbolic milestone resonates deeply with us today as we remember the countless lives who did not reach their three score years and ten and honour the refugees and survivors who continue to bear witness to this most darkest episode in history.

At the Association of Jewish Refugees we are acutely conscious of the changing demographic of our organisation. As our members – predominantly the first generation – grow frailer, we are witnessing a greater incidence of both physical and mental frailty and the ways in which we advocate and support them is steadily changing.

But alongside the additional social, welfare and care services that we now need to provide, we are seeing a growing interest and rising membership from the second and third generations eager to ensure continuity.

As the grandson of a refugee and the Chief Executive of the AJR I have both a personal and professional interest to preserve the memories but we all have vested interests: the first generation is eager that their experiences are writ large; the second generation is both receiving and passing on their legacy and the third generation has readily had at its disposal access to the academic and educational resources to complement the oral history passed down to them. And, although they may in many cases be very young, the fourth generation are, or will shortly be, beginning their own exposure to their family’s history.

But as we move from living memory to history the descendants of the survivors can play a leading role in shaping the future of Holocaust education. In the UK there is an embryonic programme to send the second generation into schools to talk about their parents’ experiences often combined with the earlier videoed testimony.
Work is also underway to record the next generation of survivor interviews, capturing the most commonly asked questions onto a databank that projects a hologram of a survivor who can provide responses at the click of a button.

However, in contrast to this progress it is an indictment that 70 years after these events we are still grappling with several unresolved yet critical issues. The failure of some countries to return properties and other assets to the descendants of Holocaust victims is a moral wrong that runs counter to the founding principles of numerous post-war international agreements, not least the European Convention on Human Rights and the 2009 Terezin Declaration.

The continued refusal to grant full access to archives that could help afford the international community a deeper understanding of the crimes that were committed stands against our collective thinking. Full disclosure will also enable us to build a comprehensive body of evidence to combat Holocaust trivialisation and denial, which if unchecked and rigorously combatted will continue to be a modern day scourge.

More also could and should be done to bring any remaining war criminals to prosecution – they may well be old but the world’s audience should see justice being done, something the perpetrators denied their victims.

Honoured guests, the theme for the UK Holocaust Memorial Day 2015 is Keep the Memory Alive. And this year the British Prime Minister David Cameron will announce the future plans of his Holocaust Commission, established to explore the creation of a permanent memorial to the Holocaust and the provision of educational resources for future generations.

International Holocaust Memorial Day has instilled in society the importance of the act of remembrance and provided the public the chance to reflect on the lives that were lost and to reflect on the rich Jewish cultures and customs that were destroyed; and of the centuries of learning that vanished; and of those whose thought and writing changed the face of Central Europe.

It was famously said that a Jewish refugee was someone who had lost everything except his accent, but the prospect of the wandering Jew has resurfaced. The atmosphere of 1930s Europe has been invoked in recent weeks. The tragic events here earlier this month, and of
other incidents in Europe, have created a culture of fear and caused many Jews to wonder whether their futures lie elsewhere.

Antisemitism has many faces. The author Ben Cohen contrasts the ‘bierkeller antisemitism’ of 1920s and 30s Germany to the more modern ‘bistro antisemitism’ of the Left, while his colleague Dave Rich refers to the idea of the ‘banlieue antisemitism’. The perpetrators change but the world’s oldest hatred is still here.

With the horrors of the Holocaust fresh in their minds, the post-war international community put in place an infrastructure to preserve human rights. UNESCO exists to promote, protect and deepen the very fundamental freedoms and rights and universal respect for justice that was so grotesquely abused; luminaries like Rene Cassin are rightly venerated, but it is incumbent on us all to honour and deliver those commitments.

Achieving this is the mission of both UNESCO and the AJR and our colleagues at the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance – and in doing so we reaffirm our dedication to the Stockholm Declaration.

It is our collective responsibility to ensure that an indelible record remains of the atrocities that occurred and that the next generations are empowered to speak out against intolerance, racism and antisemitism.

Today we recall the events of 70 years ago with the hope that our children and grandchildren can be similarly inspired to preserve and transmit the memories and culture of that lost generation. Thank you.