

Statement of Professor Stuart Foster
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The United Kingdom Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre Public Inquiry
The Planning Inspectorate
12 November 2020

It is a privilege to speak in favour of the proposed Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre. I am Executive Director of the University College London (UCL) Centre for Holocaust Education. I have led the Centre since its inception in 2008. The Centre for Holocaust Education is part of UCL Institute of Education, which has been ranked number one for education worldwide for the past seven years. As a Centre our primary focus is on developing the knowledge, understanding and practice of teachers and, by extension, improving students' knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust. In the past 6 years more than 14,000 teachers have participated in our educational programmes. We offer professional development courses for teachers at all stages of their careers, including at MA and PhD level. We also work closely with an ever-expanding network of hundreds of secondary schools across the country.

For many reasons, therefore, our Centre and senior colleagues at the IOE and UCL are keen supporters of the proposed Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre. Furthermore, senior staff at the Centre have been actively involved in the development of the project for more than 5 years. For example, the preliminary findings of our detailed national research study, *What do students know and understand about the Holocaust?* (full report published in 2016) were extensively used in the narrative framing of the Report of the Prime Minister's Holocaust Commission in January 2015. My colleagues Ruth-Lenga and Nicola Wetherall have also been centrally involved in supporting the Commission and Foundation and have advised on issues related to curriculum, teaching and learning, and the use of survivor testimony in classroom settings. Currently, I serve on the academic advisory board for the UK Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre.

The perspective I want to bring to this Inquiry stems from the experiences gleaned from almost 40 years working in the field of history and Holocaust education. I believe the proposed Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre will make a profound and positive impact on teaching and learning about the Holocaust in this country and, potentially, beyond. Thus, I am grateful for the opportunity to offer my insights and recommendations.

For clarity I have divided my submission into 5 sections in which I aim to reply to five significant and relevant questions. I want to begin by arguing that the Holocaust should be seen as a fundamental part of British history and not something that is separate and distinct.

1. WHY IS THE HOLOCAUST AN INTEGRAL PART OF BRITISH HISTORY?

The Holocaust was the systematic, industrialised, state-sponsored murder of 6 million innocent Jews during the Second the World War. Perpetrated by the Nazis and their collaborators across Europe, it was a product of a false, racist ideology and a poisoned world view which cynically drew on more than a thousand years of anti-Judaism and antisemitism. Its development and prosecution proved catastrophic for Europe and European civilization.

Far from being a historical phenomenon that was remote and distant from Britain, these horrific events originated in an ostensibly civilized, educated and democratic nation in the heart of twentieth century Europe. A Europe significantly shaped by the policies and actions of the British government and its peoples. In this respect, the rise of Nazism in Germany, the course of the Second World War and the subsequent devastation of the Holocaust must be closely connected and cannot be divorced from our national story. Indeed, the Holocaust is an integral part of our history. And, because of its significance and impact, it is a history that as nation we must reflect upon and better understand.

Thus, one of the most important and essential contributions of the Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre is that it will help us as a nation intelligently confront and navigate this complex and troubling history and Britain's central role within it. The Learning Centre will also compel us to appreciate and reflect on the uncomfortable reality that, as with all historical phenomenon, the Holocaust was not inevitable. It therefore obliges us to confront a range of difficult questions, including:

- How and why did the Holocaust happen?
- What did Britain and the British people do before, during and after the Holocaust to support Jewish people and other victim groups?
- What more could Britain have done ?
- What obligations do we have as individuals and as a nation to others who are persecuted and victimised?
- How fragile is democracy? What are its biggest threats and how do we as society ensure that those threats are challenged and diminished?
- What responsibility do we have to ensure the history of the Holocaust is - for generations to come - respected, remembered and commemorated?

These questions are not trivial or facile, but ones which require us to explore issues that lie at the very heart of who we are as a nation and as a democratic, civilized and humane society. Engaging with the Holocaust should not be easy or comfortable. It should challenge our assumptions about the past and the world around us. It should also compel us to consider the significance of the Holocaust and its relevance to contemporary society.

But, of course, to begin even to consider these significant issues it is imperative that we have some knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust and its history.

Unfortunately, however, a growing body of evidence suggests that people across the UK have a very limited understanding of the Holocaust and many often harbour troubling myths and misconceptions. More specifically, our 2016 UCL study - the largest of its kind conducted anywhere in the world - revealed numerous issues and concerns. Indeed, the findings of these studies strongly suggest that a national Memorial and Learning Centre will play a vital and necessary role in educating our nation.

2. WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST?

Our UCL Centre for Holocaust Education 2016 study, *What do students know and understand about the Holocaust?* resulted from a three-year investigation. It involved more than 9,500 secondary school students (aged 11-18), and was primarily based on analysis of 7,952 survey responses and focus group interviews with 244 students. The principal aim of the study was to provide a detailed portrait of students' knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust in order to inform and support efforts to improve teaching and learning about it.

The results of the research programme were carefully detailed in a 274 page report. On a positive note the study revealed that 83% of secondary school students surveyed believed the Holocaust was important to study, 81.8% found the subject interesting and 70% expressed a desire to learn more. The study also revealed that by age 15, 85% of students had learned about the Holocaust within school and most were familiar with the term.

Nevertheless, closer analysis revealed that significant numbers of students typically lacked core knowledge and many often harboured troubling myths and misconceptions about the Holocaust. Clearly, it is not possible to do justice into the full complexity of the results but brief attention to three areas hopefully illustrates why the development of a National Learning Centre is so critical.

1. Jewish Victims

Although students commonly knew that Jews were the victims of the genocide, most students did not know why. Revealingly, 68% did not know what 'antisemitism' meant and most appeared unaware of its long history and the racial dimensions of Nazi antisemitism. Furthermore, many students were ill-informed about pre-war Jewish life and largely unaware that 9.5 million Jews lived and worked in communities in every European country. A third of students grossly underestimated the number of Jews killed in the Holocaust, with 10% believing that no more than 100,000 were murdered. Most students were unaware where mass killing took place, with 55% believing it occurred in Germany.

In summary, the research revealed the need to educate young people about, among other things, pre-war Jewish life, the long-history of antisemitism, the impact of the Nazi racial state, the responses of Jewish communities, the geography and chronology of the Holocaust, and the loss and devastation caused by the actions of the Nazis and their collaborators. In my view there is no doubt that the national Memorial and Learning Centre will play a prominent role in addressing all these significant issues and the alarming and common gaps in knowledge and understanding.

2. Responsibility

Many students also appeared to have very narrow understanding of who was responsible for perpetrating the Holocaust. For example, more than half (56.1%) of 11-14 year olds believed the Holocaust was *solely* attributable to Hitler. Fewer than 10% attributed any blame or responsibility to the German people and many held the strong belief that the German people 'did not know' about the Holocaust. Typically, students in Years 7-9 also had a very limited understanding of the Nazis often seeing them as an elite paramilitary group rather than a political party that enjoyed the popular support of more than 13 million Germans in July 1932. Commonly missing from student responses, therefore, was knowledge of how many Germans - and citizens in other occupied states across Europe - were complicit. Indeed, this narrow Hitler-centric focus and the absence of important contextual knowledge appeared to inhibit students' explanation and understanding of how and why the web of complicity extended across Europe and the extent to which vast numbers of 'ordinary people' willingly participated in genocide, either out of greed, conviction, or peer pressure.

Overall, therefore, the research revealed the need for teachers to challenge the dominant narrative that it was Hitler who murdered the Jews and engage young people in more thought-provoking explorations of complicity, responsibility, agency and choice. Many educators argue that one of the key goals of Holocaust education is to ensure that young people are aware of the dangers of being a 'bystander' when discrimination and persecution rears its ugly head. Indeed, Elie Wiesel implored us 'never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.' I am, therefore, confident that the Memorial and Learning Centre will play a prominent role in considering these vital issues and addressing identified limitations in students' knowledge and understanding.

3. Britain and the Holocaust

Not enough time exists to detail all the problems, issues and challenges identified in the 2016 study. It is, however, worth ending this overview with a brief reflection on what students

appeared to know about Britain's relationship with the Holocaust. In summary, survey responses indicated that most students operated with a very limited and often erroneous understanding of this aspect of British history. For example, 34.4% incorrectly reasoned that the Holocaust triggered Britain's entry into war and a further 17.6% of students believed the British drew up rescue plans to save the Jews. Almost a quarter of students (23.8%) also incorrectly thought the British government did not know about the Holocaust until the end of the war in 1945.

Evidence from both the survey and focus-group interviews clearly demonstrated that many students were ill-equipped to answer and assess vital and challenging issues such as: when and what did Britain know? What choices and possibilities were open to Britain and her Allies? and what actions were and were not taken? Overall, therefore, the study revealed the need for young people to know so much more about Britain's actions and responses to the Holocaust. Only armed with this knowledge and understanding can they even begin to critically reflect on the complexities of Britain's role and the lives of individuals and communities so profoundly impacted by the Holocaust. A central aim of the Memorial and Learning Centre is to more robustly educate young people about Britain's relationship to the Holocaust and I believe it will play a significant role in addressing the lack of knowledge and understanding that appears to exist among our young people.

Of course, our focus at UCL was to explore in detail the knowledge, understanding and attitudes of young people in England. Our remit was not to look at the understandings of the broader population. Nevertheless, it is potentially significant that repeated national and international studies which have examined adult understanding of the Holocaust have consistently concluded that knowledge is typically limited and misconceptions abound. Indeed, the eminent Holocaust historian David Cesarani lamented 'the yawning gulf between popular understanding of this history and current scholarship on the subject.'

More troubling, however, is not the ill-informed and innocent ignorance of the broader population, but the alarming growth of individuals and organisations who, largely through social media, wilfully seek to distort and deny the Holocaust and disseminate pernicious antisemitic propaganda.

For all these reasons, therefore, improving the knowledge and understanding of people of all ages is a critical imperative and one that must be taken very seriously. The good news is that organisations like the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education have in recent years made demonstrable strides in educating young people about the Holocaust and a body of empirical evidence indicates that students in those who work closely with the Centre have significantly improved levels of knowledge and understanding. Nevertheless, despite these impressive gains immense challenges remain for all of us who work in the field of Holocaust education. It is, therefore, my fervent belief that the creation of the Holocaust Memorial and Learning

Centre has the potential to transform how people (and especially young people) understand and reflect upon the significance of this history.

3. WHAT WILL THE MEMORIAL AND LEARNING CENTRE ACHIEVE?

As stated above, it has been a tremendous privilege to be part of the Academic Advisory Group for the Memorial and Learning Centre. The experience has certainly impressed upon me the importance of the undertaking and the incredible expertise and knowledge of those involved in making the enterprise a success. Based on my involvement I would like to offer 4 key observations which speak to the power, potential and impact of the proposed development.

First, it is certain that the Learning Centre will offer visitors an engaging, interactive and dynamic experience. But, it is also clear that this experience will be underpinned by rigorous scholarship and the advice and expertise of some of the leading academics and specialists in the field. It will be a serious and ambitious enterprise that will tell the story of the Holocaust and Britain's connections to it in all its troubling complexity. Under the leadership of Ben Barkow (Chair of the Academic Advisory Board) it most certainly will not provide, as some critics suggest, a simplistic glorification of Britain's role in and response to the Holocaust, but rather offer different insights and critical interpretations of what Britain did and did not do in response to events. Above, all I believe it will challenge visitors to engage, reflect, and contemplate profound questions, such as those I have outlined above.

Second, I am convinced that the Memorial and Learning Centre will serve as a catalyst for deeper engagement and interest in Holocaust education across the country. The example of similar projects in other countries bears testament to this fact. For example, since the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) opened in 1993, more than 11 million school students have visited the site and its presence and programmes have stimulated a growth in Holocaust education across the country. I know that some critics have suggested that the development in London will divert funds and attention away from other Holocaust organisations and initiatives, but I believe the opposite will be the case. I contend it will amplify cross party commitment that every child has a right to learn about the Holocaust as part of his/her education. It will also increase the importance of teacher education and potentially strengthen collaboration among leading Holocaust education organisations. Indeed, our Centre is committed to the Memorial and Learning Centre by ensuring it is supported by the latest developments in educational research, Holocaust pedagogy and on-line learning.

Third, as evidenced by the incredible success of the USHMM, it is certain that the Memorial and Learning Centre will be visited by millions of people across the whole spectrum of society. Unquestionably, it has the potential to educate, inform and challenge common myths and misconceptions for this and for future generations. In light of the experience of the USHMM,

it is also clear that the Memorial and Learning Centre will attract and educate Jews and non-Jews. In fact, 90% of visitors to the USHMM are not Jewish. It is highly likely that the experience of visitors to the Memorial and Learning Centre in London will mirror the success of the USHMM in Washington. Increasingly, visitors will learn to appreciate that the Holocaust is very much a part of both their own and their nation's history and it will play a powerful role on increasing public historical understanding. Undoubtedly, it also will be a place where visitors will come not only honour the victims of this abominable crime against humanity, but also provide a space to contemplate the dangers to civilized society of increasing prejudice, discrimination, and extremist rhetoric and action.

A fourth and final point is the belief that one of the most important and profound decisions made by those responsible for the original proposal was the desire to ensure that the site featured both a Memorial and a Learning Centre which operated as part of an organic whole. This observation is particularly salient for the millions of people who will visit the site without extensive knowledge of the Holocaust. Because, by visiting the site and learning about the fate of the Jews of Europe and Britain's inexorable connection to events, visitors will begin to appreciate in more profound ways the disturbing narrative of those who were persecuted and murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators. Powerful human stories and testimonies of survivors will lie at the heart of the Learning Centre and engagement with these absorbing narratives will compel visitors to learn with empathy, respect and reverence. Thus, because they will be equipped with - often new-found, knowledge and compassion - visitors will experience the site of memorialisation in profound and meaningful ways. The memorial will therefore be a place to reflect, digest, commemorate and perhaps to consider broader questions about humanity our obligations to one another. Standing in isolation it is unlikely that neither a museum or a memorial alone would have the intellectual and emotional power to induce such strong connections. But operating in tandem, the Memorial and Learning Centre will be incredibly effective. As Michael Berenbaum stated, based on his extensive experiences in similar sites across the globe, 'I know it can be done because I have seen it done elsewhere.'

4. WHY SHOULD IT BE LOCATED NEXT TO THE HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT?

Many advocates of the Memorial and Learning Centre have spoken eloquently of the real and symbolic significance of locating it in Victoria Gardens, in the shadow of the Palace of Westminster. My intention is not to extensively rehearse all these compelling arguments. I do, however, wish to make two further points.

Firstly, it is a truism that, as Michael Berenbaum has also said 'the place from which you remember an event shapes how you remember it.' For this reason there is an explicit and direct relationship between the significance and prominence of any given site and the value and status that individuals assign to the events commemorated.

Thus, if we believe as a society that learning about and commemorating the Holocaust is profoundly significant, then it follows that the Memorial and Learning Centre should be in a place of immense national and international importance. Thus, locating it in London - the nation's capital city - and directly adjacent to the iconic Houses of Parliament, has an irresistible appeal. Indeed, if the Memorial and Learning Centre is not placed in such a prominent location it will severely diminish its impact and reach and, inevitably, raise questions about Britain's commitment to educate about the Holocaust and to memorialise its victims.

Secondly, locating the Memorial and Learning Centre right next to the seat of our democratic government powerfully emphasises that as a nation we are prepared to reflect on Britain's relationship with the Holocaust in a candid and honest way – potentially taking pride in its finest moments, but also humbly reflecting on its failures and the devastating effects of its inaction. From this frank and introspective confrontation with its past, the Memorial and Learning Centre will serve as a reminder of the fragility of our democracy and the responsibilities we have to others.

5. WHY MUST IT BE BUILT NOW?

It is perhaps almost unthinkable that in Britain, 75 years after the end of the Second World War, we have no national memorial or learning centre to commemorate and understand the tragic events of the Holocaust. It is time to put this right.

We are at a critical turning point: with the passing of survivors, the Holocaust will shortly depart from living history and enter the realms of documented history. Soon, we will no longer be able to experience first-hand survivors' powerful testimonies and witness their indomitable spirit. We will also not have the benefit of their remarkable resilience and courage to counter those who look to discredit the historical record and distort, downplay or deny the Holocaust. Without survivors in our midst, there is a risk of Holocaust revisionism and/or trivialisation. At a time when levels of antisemitism and hate crime are on the rise, both within and outside public and political life, this Memorial and Learning Centre situated next to Parliament, will send out a forthright message: this country is committed to standing against racism of any kind, and we pledge to work collectively to achieve this aim.

In January 2015 The Prime Minister's Holocaust Commission Report was published. It was entitled 'Britain's Promise to Remember'. For many survivors and members of the Jewish community this heralded a commitment, a promise, by the British government to establish a 'national memorial' and 'world-class learning Centre' which would be 'prominently located in Central London to make a bold statement about the importance Britain places on preserving the memory of the Holocaust.'

In the months leading up to the publication of the report I was honoured to be invited, on several occasions, to 10 Downing Street to present the findings of our national research with secondary school students. During a coffee break I had the pleasure of chatting with Jack Kagan, a Holocaust survivor and inspirational individual. In our conversation I was struck by how excited and grateful he was that a Memorial and Learning Centre was soon to be built in a prominent location in central London. Sadly, however, Jack died in 2016. He, like many other survivors of his generation did not live to witness the realisation of the “promise”.

In my view we simply cannot allow more time to elapse. We must build this new Memorial and Learning Centre. We must honour our commitment to our survivors. We must educate current and future generations. And, in my humble opinion, we must do this now.