

10.40 Natasha Kaplinsky

I have listened in on as much of the Inquiry as I can and have tried to craft what I say to be of maximum use to you.

I have heard with interest (and a great deal of respect) the multitude of experts who have appeared so far, but what I feel, I might best add is a bit about the soul of the project.

I will start with a bit of background to my involvement - and then explain its relevance later. I have been involved in this project since its inception in 2014. As you will know, it was then that the then PM David Cameron launched the Holocaust Commission, and I had the great honour of being one of his Commissioners. I believe that I was included in response to an episode of the BBC Programme Who Do You Think You Are? where my family heritage was researched and linked back to Belarus. To our immense sadness, the programme detailed how a number of my father's family had been murdered by the Nazi's in Eastern Europe.

I spent much of 2014-2015 travelling with the Commission to see how other countries commemorated the victims of one of the darkest periods in history - in order to inform our recommendations. The report, Britain's Promise to Remember, was written and submitted in time for Holocaust Memorial Day in 2015 when the PM endorsed and accepted all of our recommendations.

One of our key findings was the urgent need to gather survivor testimony due to the obvious, and diminishing time, we have left with these extraordinary people. The Holocaust Memorial Foundation was formed to advise the Government on the implementation of these recommendations, and as the only journalist on the Board, I volunteered to record the testimony of five initial Survivors. The premise of each of these interviews was to record the testimony of a survivor who had never before spoken. It was a deeply intense and extremely moving experience requiring days of preparation prior to each interview; the five hour interview itself (that needed very careful and delicate handling) and then the significant after-care of these very frail survivors and their families.

The first five interviews, were so powerful, so significant and so emotional, that it was decided that we had only touched the very tip of the iceberg and funds were then found to extend the project to record a further 107 - so 112 in total. The common theme of these survivors was that they had not told their story before - to anyone. They had kept their secrets in order to protect their families from the horror - but then, toward the end of their lives, there seemed to be an urgent (an almost panicked) need to unburden themselves of their experiences before they left us.

At that time, I was working as a news anchor for ITN - hosting key national bulletins. The project was so significant, that I stepped out of the newsroom (giving up my salary), to commit myself wholeheartedly to this project on a voluntary basis.

The proceeding interviews took place over a 15 month period and took every ounce of strength from me. Towards the end, I was a nervous wreck and needed a great deal of counselling to come to terms with the horror of what had been shared with me. My husband genuinely thought I was going to have a breakdown. The Chief Rabbi at the time, comforted me by telling me what we were doing was a sacred task. And it felt so. It felt like a mission. It was certainly the hardest period of my professional life and, at the same time, it was 100 percent the honour of my life to be part of a team that helped these extraordinary people unburden themselves of their secrets. But I will be honest in saying, I feel a great weight of responsibility in representing them today.

The survivors I spoke to trusted me with their testimony in large part because they knew it was being recorded for the benefit of generations to come and that it would be housed in a learning centre that would and could be accessed by their grandchildren and their grandchildren's children.

At the end of every interview, I would always ask whether they felt that any lessons had been learnt from the past. In almost every case - the answer was no. And that, was always the hardest answer to hear - that despite their unimaginable suffering and torment - it was all for nothing.

And it is this answer that drives me on. It is this answer that has ensured that I have committed a large part of the sweet spot of my professional career to ensure that their pain is heard and that their horror is recognised. That six million people did not die for nothing.

The voices of these 112 survivors haunt me and in equal measure inspire me. I feel so fortunate to have spent so much time with such exceptional people but in sharing their pain - they have given us collectively the responsibility to do something with it and to learn from them. That is what this whole project is about - Memorialising their pain and the immense loss and Learning from a period of history that must never be repeated.

Please forgive me, but I have listened to an endless list of people over the past two weeks - with a great deal of respect (of course), and in many cases, with understanding and sympathy for what they have said, but I feel they are missing the point of what this Memorial and Learning Centre is about and why the significance of it's positioning in Victoria Tower Gardens is so poignant. The placement of the memorial gives the subject the prominence it most certainly deserves and changing it's location, as many of the past speakers seems to promote, would profoundly relegate it's significance. The view of Parliament from the Memorial will serve as a permanent reminder that political decisions have far-reaching consequences and highlight the responsibilities of citizens in a democracy to be vigilant and responsive whenever and wherever our core values are threatened. I am sure, that it has not escaped you all that we are living in extremely volatile times and as a Nation, I believe that we have the obligation to confront extremism and hatred in all its forms.

I am fully aware that I am up against time here - but if possible, I would briefly like to address, what I understand to be the two key issues at stake here. The first being the specific location of the Memorial in Victoria Tower Gardens. I have heard a number of speakers highlight that they feel the park will be taken over by the memorial. This is blatantly not the case. I believe we have shown that the Memorial will only take up 7 percent of the park. That being the case, I see no reason at all why the Memorial and the current uses of the park cannot happily continue to co-exist. I understand that it might be important for some people to sunbathe or to have a picnic in the park, but I find it very hard to hear that this cannot be squeezed into the remaining 93 percent of the park and that it is to be prioritised over the opportunity to juxtapose a monument marking the worst example of the disintegration of democratic values against the greatest emblem of Britain's aspirations for democracy. Our current national memorial in Hyde Park is wholly inadequate, it is not much known about - and through our consultations we have learnt that it is felt to be out of sight and with no context. We should not shy away from our ambition or lose sight of the statement we are trying to make. Political decisions have far reaching consequences and the location, is exactly the point of this Memorial. It gives us the opportunity to view the depths of tyranny against the high ideals of the Mother of all Parliaments.

Now in my last few minutes, I would like to refer to the less than positive comments made about the Learning Centre. Please forgive me, but it feels that these comments are made with what I believe is a limited understanding of what we are trying to achieve. Firstly, the content of this Learning Centre is a work in progress - though the principals are set. We would, I am sure, welcome

any constructive input from the experts who have commented if they feel we can improve the content going forward. I have been aghast to hear the progress we have made belittled to a “series of four small rooms measuring 30 by 30.” We are working in collaboration with a range of institutions across the UK to craft an educational resource that promotes the deepest understanding possible of the Holocaust and subsequent genocides that goes far beyond the outer perimeter of the learning centre. For example, in the next few days, I understand that you will be hearing from one of my colleagues Adrian Packer who will tell you about a very significant Educational Project called Echo Eternal that has sprung directly from the testimony spoken about above. Echo Eternal is a commemorative arts, media and civic engagement project that has already won a very prestigious Pearson education award inspired solely by the survivors who will be memorialised in the Learning Centre.

Fifteen minutes isn't enough. But I return now to the survivors who are at the heart of this project - and who are in my heart. Those who are still with us, will no doubt be following every twist and turn of this Inquiry. The placement of this Monument and Learning centre is an opportunity to give them a semblance of peace and stillness at the end of their lives. I believe it is the greatest chance we all have to illuminate our thinking and enlighten the generations that follow.

This is a project that goes well beyond any boundaries and I beseech you to see its National and International significance for the sake of humanity.