

# NATIONAL HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL AND LEARNING CENTRE

MARIE VAN DER ZYL - STATEMENT

THURSDAY 5 NOVEMBER 2020

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## Statement

My name is Marie van der Zyl and I am the President of the Board of Deputies of British Jews – the democratic, representative body of the British Jewish community. I would like to thank the Planning Inspectorate for granting me the time to make a statement in support of the proposed National Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre.

The Board of Deputies wholeheartedly supports the proposals for the UK National Holocaust Memorial. I wish to outline why I support it so strongly today.

The Holocaust was the single greatest crime against humanity that the world has seen – so great, in fact, that the term ‘genocide’ was coined to describe it by Polish Jewish lawyer Raphael Lemkin. Six million Jews, alongside other victims of Nazi persecution, including Roma, gay and disabled people, were murdered in industrial death factories as the Second World War raged. In less than four years most of Europe’s Jewish population – 2 out of every 3 Jews – were murdered.

In 2014, the Board of Deputies submitted a response to the Prime Minister’s Holocaust Commission recognising the need for a new Holocaust memorial. A permanent commemoration to the 6 million Jewish people murdered in the Holocaust is an important and timely project. At a time when the number of Holocaust survivors is dwindling by the year, and when antisemitism and racism are on the rise across Europe and in the UK, a permanent and visible memorial will serve as a constant reminder of the danger of complacency to those whom we elect to represent us. Whilst there are existing memorials in the UK, they all currently lack the stature and the visibility that the proposed project promises.

Much has been said in recent months and years about the proposed memorial in Victoria Tower Gardens – about whether it is the right location and the right form of memorial.

It is my belief that there is something uniquely powerful in locating a memorial and learning centre to humankind’s greatest crime right next to the centre of the UK’s democracy in Westminster. The symbolism of a memorial to victims of genocide alongside our national Parliament would be hugely powerful. Whilst the Holocaust was a particular crime against Jewish people, alongside other victims of Nazi persecution, including Roma, gay and disabled people, the messages and learnings that one should glean from its memorialisation are a powerful reminder of the universal values of fairness and justice that a democratic society has the responsibility to bestow upon its citizens. Moreover, in

our era when there are politicians and political movements, in different countries, who purposely or passively spread hatred of minority groups, including our own, it sends an important message about the importance of the Holocaust to our nation's history and our collective memory.

It would be fair to say our country had a mixed record in its response to the Nazis' attempted genocide. On the one hand, we should be rightly proud that refugees were accepted prior to the War as part of the Kindertransport programme. My own grandfather, Max Lustmann, came to this country on the Kindertransport on the 16<sup>th</sup> of February 1939. At the same time, Britain could and should, have done more to save the threatened Jews of Europe. This Centre will recognise that duality and show our Nation's own confidence in engaging with that complex past.

Crucially, it will give a voice to those who cannot speak about what they endured. The diminishing group of Holocaust survivors have themselves said how important it is to have a memorial on a specific and important site.

Despite commitments that this kind of tragedy will never happen again following the Holocaust, there have been millions murdered in subsequent genocides around the world. It has never been more important to have an important, national institution dedicated to preserving the memory of the Holocaust, to serve as a constant reminder of what happens when hate goes unchecked. It will provide a stark lesson about the horrors of racism and persecution which have been high on the news agenda too: whether it be the systemic racism that Black people suffer on both sides of the Atlantic, or the state-backed persecution of the Uyghurs in China.

The additional component that makes the case for the memorial so compelling is the learning centre. In our 2014 submission to the Prime Minister's Holocaust Commission, we outlined that a new memorial should be 'more than just an inert statue and must contribute to real education about the Holocaust'.

The UK's new Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre will certainly achieve that aim. The impact that the associated learning centre will have is incalculable. An interactive learning centre as a part of the permanent fixture of the memorial will ensure that future generations are able to learn the lessons of the Holocaust and ensure that 'Never Again' is not only a slogan, but rather a call to action against any future abuses of human rights.

Holocaust education is being taught to our children and in recent years the country has paused to mark Holocaust Memorial Day. We are pleased that the government supports the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, the Holocaust Education Trust, as well as other initiatives including Yom HaShoah. This vital education work is by no means mutually exclusive to the National Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre at Westminster. The centre will enhance the educational possibilities we can give to our children on this most important of themes, by looking at the Holocaust in addition to harrowing subsequent genocides. Knowledge and understanding of what happened during Europe's darkest hour is fundamental to ensuring that we build a kinder, more compassionate Britain and world.

Some have already told the planning inquiry that the Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre will be a target for terrorists and extremists. I am afraid that we regard such arguments as self-defeating and, whilst surely unintentional, an insult to the victims and survivors whose story the Memorial and Learning Centre will seek to tell.

I reflect that the UK Jewish community has painfully learned over the past 50 years, schools and synagogues need to be protected against those who would do us harm.

What we have not done, however, is to close down those centres of prayer and Jewish learning. We have carried on, proudly, as British Jews. The very fact that the enemies of democracy and justice would have us abandon plans for a significant memorial, is not a reason for us to cower in defeat, but to redouble our efforts to get it built.

We are delighted that both the Government and the Opposition are in favour of this centre. We look forward to the time that our fellow citizens and guests from abroad will be able to visit, learn and understand more about this dark period of genocidal intolerance, and come away determined to play their part in a better, more peaceful and more inclusive future. Thank you.

Marie van der Zyl

**Marie van der Zyl**

President