

Ellie Olmer – Wednesday 4 November 2020 at 0930

I am addressing the panel in support of the proposal.
I express my interest as a teacher, Holocaust educator and with a personal connection.
My response will be in three parts;

What?, Why there? Why care?

WHAT?

A state of the art Holocaust memorial and educational learning centre; a masterful architectural collaboration internally curated by some of the greatest minds in Holocaust historiography and education. It will commemorate and contemplate the immense, incomprehensible murders of millions of people. A chronicle of history, it will honour the victims of the unprecedented crime of the Holocaust and provide a prism through which to view contemporary genocides. A confrontational reminder of humankind's inhumanity to each other.

The 22 large bronze fins that will sit above its surface will symbolically represent the destruction of 22 Jewish lost communities across Europe, reminding us of the brutal gaping cuts into the living landscapes where life once flourished. In contrast, I understand, it will gradually rise from a gentle hill to minimize any visual intrusion.

Critics argue, it's big, it's rude, loud and angry. And, so it should be. That is its job. It has integrity. It must shout out that this happened because people made choices and many simply weren't good ones.

It should be a physical provocation, a deafening reminder to wake our sensibilities that shameful actions took place not long ago and not far away. This happened in the 20th century, in the heart of a civilized, legitimate democracy in Europe, a history we are very much a part of and it asks the question, how was this humanly possible on our watch?

There's nothing like a memorial to get people fired up and few things are as contentious. That's good thing.

Each memorial tells a story – what is the story we want to tell here?

This is a complicated, challenging and brutal narrative, a weighty history that needs to be engaged in to understand how this stain on humanity erupted and spread.

The Holocaust is not a single event but a vast and complex history which evolved and morphed over time – for teachers we are concerned that there is little classroom time to truly grapple with its complexities and global repercussions. As we know only too well, a lack of knowledge allows history to be distorted. The experiential educational centre will be of immense value, teaching trauma without traumatising, allowing students (and visitors from across the globe) to construct their own informed meaning, enhancing their knowledge and challenging their understanding. It will educate this and future generations about the dangers of prejudice, discrimination and hate speech in a time of rising extremism. It will be a place to go, to allow time and space to learn, to sit, to engage, to

challenge, to listen, to reflect and ponder, to set the record straight and actively educate for the common good.

For its visitors, seeing will be believing, understanding and remembering. The Nazis and perpetrators since have gone to great lengths to hide the extent of their crimes, remembering is an act of justice that gives dignity back to the victims. As Elie Wiesel reminds us, 'To forget is akin to killing a second time.'

We know the Government recognises the value and great importance of Holocaust education and has done since 1991. It is the only mandatory history topic to be included in the curriculum for most secondary schools across the UK. This would be the completion of that aim. This is the right and proper response to keep the conversation alive.

WHY THERE

The place from which you remember an event shapes how you remember it - and it has radically different meaning in the place that it's told. That place, where we are telling the story, Victoria Gardens, Westminster, has immense strategic interest. An energy and dynamism of its own. A place of prominence - and it's that, that will shape and guide a visitor's all-embracing experience. This is the heart of British democracy, of the rule of law, of justice and fairness. All roads lead to here. It has unique sense of majesty and power with a proud history of British values. Surely if it's going to be built anywhere, for purpose, meaning and relevance, this is where it has to be.

Critics have asked the question, 'What's the Memorial got to do with Britain?' That's one of the very reasons we need it. The learning centre, right there, will address this misinformed perceived knowledge. British history does not sit in a vacuum from Europe. We are very much part of the story.

It will allow us to face the truth of that history - which is not quite the well-established redemptive narrative we are led to believe. The reality is far more complex, problematic and messy. It is flawed. We must face the past with truth and honesty, address its misappropriated and miss-sold aspects in our collected and selective memory.

Put simply, this is also the place where, along with our allies, the government failed to take appropriate action, repeatedly. The signs were all there and missed.

We proudly cite The Kinder transport, as Britain's noble humanitarian child rescue operation. Yes, it did allow up to 10,000 mainly Jewish unaccompanied children to enter Britain - but, their parents weren't allowed in. Let's not forget that from the very same platforms where they took the best choice available to them - sending their children away into the arms of complete strangers, most would be transported to their deaths.

1938 The Evian Conference - Britain did not open its doors, denied entry to the thousands of beleaguered refugees. Their fates we now know.

Some would contend, 'But we didn't know'. Again, wrong. British policy makers had knowledge of the unprecedented acts of mass atrocities taking place across Europe early on in the War, as I remind my students; In Parliament, on 17th December 1941, Anthony Eden, the then Foreign Secretary described to the House how the German authorities, who had already stripped the Jews of their

human rights, were carrying out “Hitlers oft repeated intention to exterminate the Jewish people in Europe....in conditions of appalling horror and brutality.”

He then read out the declaration made by the allied governments which, condemned “in the strongest possible terms this bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination” After he delivered his statement, MP’s stood in the chamber for one minute - adding their voices to the screaming silence. No other action was taken.

Reports of the systematic annihilation of the Jews of Europe continued to seep through, but as the war progressed, the Foreign Office felt that any attempt at rescue would ‘divert resources away from the war effort’.

Even in the final spasms of the war, in Spring ’44, the British policy makers had knowledge of the death camp Auschwitz-Birkenau where the Hungarian murders were in full flow. Again, British justifications of a non-response are problematic.

Perhaps, a simple understanding would suggest that the Nazis wanted to murder their victims more than the world wanted to save them.

The memorial is an important tangible reminder of Britain’s moral failure to act right where those decisions were taken. This cannot happen again. A learning centre will provide a more nuanced response and the opportunity to unpick this assumption of ‘indifference’ whilst reflecting in the context of its contemporary relevance. We cannot afford to sit back or more urgently, look the other way again.

Placing it there will have a valuable presence as an addition to the physical and moral landscape of our self-understanding. This is the right and proper place to keep the conversation alive.

As history is lived forwards and studied backwards, the presence of a Holocaust Memorial and world class learning centre will allow all peoples to reflect on the likely ramifications of past and contemporary decisions and ask, ‘What can I do’?

WHY CARE?

The Holocaust happened because it was allowed to happen. Genocide is a social act; it concerns a group of people unable to rely on others. What resonates here is that more could have been done by policy makers and society to prevent it. That’s why we should care.

We should care because it was about ordinary people in extraordinary times. In an outbreak of primitivism, friends, neighbours and communities turned against each other. It was a betrayal of humanity in the heart of a civilized modern world where a racist, divisive regime crossed an entire continent, sweeping up willing accomplices in its hateful wake. Ordinary people became complicit in the murder of their neighbours or simply indifferent. It is a chilling reminder that in the right conditions, anything is possible. Politically impossible, organisationally unworkable and ideologically unthinkable and yet...it happened.

George Santayana’s prescient, ‘Those that don’t learn from history are condemned to repeat it’ reminds us, to avoid repeating the mistakes of history we need knowledge &

understanding, we need empathy and tolerance, to be open to diversity and to the stranger and education is our greatest tool. The memorial and learning centre are part of that learning.

When we look back in the tarnished mirror of history, what do we see? The catastrophe of the Holocaust is that it has not finished. There has been a failure of genocide prevention since 1945, atrocities, injustices, prejudice and discrimination continue.

We should be appalled. Never again is meaningless, the single imploring, 'Still?' would be more appropriate. It's not too late. It's our world, it touches us and we have to care.

Building the memorial is an important, urgent, natural and right evolutionary step in our story. We have an obligation to the past and to each other.

When it's built it will be a central, beacon of hope, of living history, a reminder to those that need reminding in the face of obscene revisionists, deniers and conspiracy theorists. Its compelling voice will be one of education and of action. We have to be informed and active participants in countering hate in today's world.

What if we don't build it? History and future generations will never forgive us as we face the moral implications of our government's inaction then and now. It is not a noble project, it is essential.

And if it is rejected? It means that Britain sees the Holocaust and subsequent genocides as less important and its tragic abiding contemporary relevance insignificant. It would also mean we turn our backs on many of the critical issues that are present in the world we live in today. That's unthinkable.

Why would we want to build it?
How could we afford not to?

END

13 minutes.