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Karen Pollock CBE – Speech to the Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre

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This year we mark 75 years since the end of the Second World War. 75 years since the world saw the horrific images coming out of the camps. 75 years since the world started to grapple with the truth of what had happened – that 6 million Jewish men, women and children had been annihilated; that a state sponsored genocide now known as the Holocaust had taken place in the heart of Europe. That of that 6 million, 1.5 million were Jewish children.

It happened in towns, villages, fields and ravines across Nazi occupied Europe.

The Nazis identified people as Jews, marked them with a yellow star, forced them out of their homes, beat them, starved them, worked them to death.

They shot and gassed people whose only crime was to be born Jewish.

When the camps were liberated – some by British soldiers – there were a small number of Jewish prisoners left. Too many died in the days and weeks that followed, despite the best efforts of the young soldiers. Many of these battle hardened soldiers were traumatised by what they saw at the camps - the walking skeletons and the mounds of bodies who died where they fell.

Of that small number who survived, some made their life here, in Britain. I am privileged to have worked with and got to know many of the survivors who rebuilt their lives here.

I am forever in awe of their strength and determination. Even today, in their 80s and 90s, these incredible people share their stories with the next generation. They know, as we do, that when you hear from a witness, you become a witness, and they continue to spend every living moment working hard to ensure that the horrors of the past are not forgotten. Yet they also demonstrate a zest for life and a kindness that after all they have been through you would not presume - they are a true example of humanity.

The Holocaust is part of our nation's story. After all, it is still in living memory. But in another 10 or 25 years – when we mark 85 or 100 years since the end of the Second World War – how will this nation remember? Will there be eyewitnesses to tell us what happened?

When we can no longer hear the testimonies from the eyewitnesses, when we can no longer be awestruck as they tell their unimaginable stories of survival, when we can no longer almost touch history, how will we ensure that this stain on world history, this seminal moment in British history is remembered and

learned about. How will we ensure that the experiences of those survivors – who despite all they had endured made a life here, became part of the very fabric of this nation – live on?

The answer of course – and the reason I am speaking to you today – is Britain's Holocaust memorial and Learning Centre, to be built right at the heart of our democracy, in the centre of our capital city, next to our Parliament. A Parliament that made decisions that shaped the Second World War. A Memorial and Learning Centre that will take a central place in our city – a place to pause, reflect, and challenge - for generations to come.

A place where we can come together to reflect upon our shared humanity. A place where the very human stories of the Holocaust will be told. A place where the Jewish community can come together to mourn. A place where people from around the world will learn about this abominable part of human history. A place that will tell our nation's story and stand forever as a warning of what can happen when liberal democracy fails. Here we are, 75 years after the end of the Second World War and up to now there is no notable memorial in this country. It is time that that changed.

There is no doubt that Britain's relationship with the Holocaust is a complex one and there will always be debates about whether more could have been done. On the one hand, Britain allowed 10,000 Jewish children to seek refuge here, through the kindertransport, undoubtably saving their lives.

British armed forces liberated concentration camps, most famously Bergen-Belsen on April 15th 1945 and their care gave survivors their health and humanity back. Whilst other countries rounded up Jews to their deaths, Britain and its allies, fought the Nazis.

The Memorial and Learning Centre has a duty to tell the story - warts and all. We must pay tribute to those brave British liberators and those that risked their lives to save Jews. But equally, this will be a place to tell the full story.

Most of those 10,000 children were orphaned by 1945, their parents having been denied entry to Britain, murdered in the Holocaust. Allied forces made the decision not to bomb the train lines to Auschwitz – for lots of reasons, a decision that is still debated and controversial to this day. The Channel Islands were occupied by the Nazis, Jewish residents persecuted and in some cases deported to Auschwitz.

But what is clear is that what happened in Europe, affected Britain and was affected by Britain. This is our story.

And yet, even today, there are those who claimed it never happened, or that it did happen but not to the extent people say.

That Jews have made this up to gain sympathy or that it was a hoax. As our beloved eyewitnesses grow fewer and frailer, as the Holocaust moves away from living history to just history, we have a duty to protect the truth of the past and we must be able to stand up against the scourge and danger of Holocaust denial, the most spurious form of antisemitism.

And that is why our Holocaust memorial needs to be here, in the shadow of Parliament, the shadow of our democracy. The place where decisions are taken. The home of British history.

Of course, the Memorial and Learning centre will complement the work of brilliant organisations ensuring the Holocaust is not forgotten – including the Holocaust Educational Trust that I run. We have been working hard for many years to ensure that teachers and young people in schools up and down the country know what the Holocaust was, hear the testimony of Holocaust

survivors, understand why the Holocaust matters *here and now*. This Memorial and Learning centre will help us reach *more* people, it will help us reach *different* people, it will help us strength the impact of what we do.

And its location will send an important message to us all – that the horrors of the past are central to Britain, that what happened during the Holocaust must never be forgotten and never repeated, that the leadership of our nation sees the central place that the Holocaust has on our shared history and identity. The tragic story of the Holocaust is a lesson for all humanity, a warning for the future about the danger of despots and dictatorship and what can happen when racism is left unchecked.

75 years after the world said Never Again, this memorial could not be more timely. It will be a place to learn, to be inspired, to become advocates. It will help to ensure that the horrors of hatred and the evils of antisemitism are called out and stopped in their tracks. It will be a place to remember. And, this could not be more important as the we see a resurgence of the world's oldest hatred spread across our country and the world. It is a warning for us all. We know that education about the Holocaust is not a panacea - antisemitism existed long before the Holocaust and will exist long after it.

75 years on, our survivors – the witnesses - who allow us to almost touch history – who, at the end of the War, had nothing and no one – today they have hope.

The prospect of this Memorial next to Parliament reassures them – that for generations to come, long after they have gone, there will stand a place, in the heart of our democracy, the place of influence and decisions, where they and their lost loved ones will be remembered. And the stories of their liberators, their saviours, will be heard.

I grew up down the road to a Holocaust survivor, Gena Turgel. She was known as the Bride of Belsen as she married one of her liberators, Norman – in the shadow of the Belsen camp in a dress made from an army parachute. She embodies the very tie between the Holocaust and Britain. I adored Gena – an indomitable character with such drive and grace. 75 years on from the Holocaust, it is right that future generations know about Gena and all the survivors who made Britain their home.

It is time that this country has a fitting Memorial and Learning Centre in a fitting place – for the survivors, for this generation and for the next. It is our duty.

