

Robert Rinder – Statement to the UK Holocaust Memorial Planning Inquiry, 10th November 2020

I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today.

This Inquiry is of course a planning hearing. It is a legal process of a type I am – after nearly two decades in the law – vaguely familiar with.

The obligations of the Inspector are to fairly and without fear or favour to anybody, consider the law by assessing all the evidence to determine whether the proposed Holocaust memorial and learning centre in Victoria Tower Gardens should be built.

To that end I have read a great deal of the available material before this inquiry, including the National Planning Policy Framework and the various submissions made by people of good faith from across the country and locally who represent a range of opposing political backgrounds, with differing personal points of view.

Of the numerous documents I considered, perhaps the one that speaks most powerfully in support of my submission today, as is often the case, was not to be found at the top of the bundles or placed noisily at the centre of the material. It was not in the statements made by politicians neither was it contained in the thoughtful opinions of architects and designers. I found this paper placed quietly in an Appendix submitted to the inquiry by Historic England (at 4.11). In that document, a critical question is posed by that public body whose mission it is to safeguard England's historic environment. It articulates the fundamental purpose of why I am here giving evidence of today.

Historic England ask, what is the meaning of cultural heritage?

The answer they give? *That cultural heritage is an asset which people identify and value as a reflection of their evolving knowledge beliefs and traditions and of their understanding of the belief and traditions of others.*

These, I emphasise, are not my words. They are the precisely articulated policy language of an organisation designated to think and reflect on behalf of us all. To be the curators of the architecture that informs and shapes our community spaces.

At a time when there is a challenging conversation about the purpose of national monuments and statues, I reflect on the words of Historic England, written not in reaction to protest not in response to recent events, but over a decade ago in 2008.

The problem with Historic England's language is that it is wrong in one critical respect. Some knowledge, beliefs and tradition do not evolve. First amongst these is the knowledge and belief that the rule of the law is a golden thread which binds the fragile tapestry of our democracy together. It protects each and every one of us and, in so doing, ensures that we understand the beliefs and traditions of others so that peaceful coexistence can endure.

Last night millions of my fellow citizens from every community, representing every age and creed across our country watched a programme I presented on the BBC about the holocaust. The stories we witnessed were not only of my family. They represented a tiny group of countless others. The bond between each of the courageous men and women who went back to discover the fate of their relatives (parents, uncles and grandparents) in Europe was that the early lives of those we watched were not characterised by anti-Jewish racism or hate.

The architecture of Amsterdam and Berlin in the 1920s we saw were modernist, experimental works of art. They reflected their time. A time when people believed with justifiable confidence that, having suffered the trauma of the first world war, democracy and the rule of law would protect them. They were tragically wrong.

My mother Angela Cohen has given her evidence to this inquiry, so I can do no better than to echo some of her words here. The descent into human depravity did not happen in one explosion of violence. It happened slowly & gradually: Catastrophic economic events, a treaty people felt aggrieved by and the wrong man at the right historical moment with the power to galvanise the most civilized democratic nation on the planet against millions of Jews and other communities including gypsies, members of the LGBTQ community and the disabled. It left my aunts and uncles (the youngest a 9 year old little girl) gassed and discarded in unmarked earth.

The horrors are of course too numerous and appalling to recount here. We will never know fully of the suffering of millions, their last desperate thoughts of terror and their incalculable loss to the world.

What we do know is that this happened because the beliefs and traditions of our humanity died as democracy was subverted and destroyed.

Those beliefs and traditions of tolerance, of respect, and of the rule of law evolved over centuries of dispute, war and anguish in our nation. So, by the time we were tested, we stood firm as the last bastion of freedom. A freedom we owe to the sacrifices of men and women of courage. Those values are not only reflected in the statues of political leaders or stone monuments to the bravery of that great generation; there must be something more.

The proposed Holocaust memorial stands, some have said, in the looming shadow of our Parliament. That is the wrong way to describe it. The design and position of the monument places neither edifice in darkness. They are precisely positioned to bring light to each other.

The memorial will illuminate the halls of parliament where those exercising political power do their work. And, at the monument itself, each and every one of us, regardless of our background, faith or sexuality, will be able to speak to our representatives through bronze and stone.

It is difficult to think (as Historic England put it), of space that would gift our nation, *an understanding of the belief and traditions of others* more than a teaching centre at the heart of the memorial. For this is not just about commemorating a story of tyranny. It is the story of what happens when we forget to delight in, celebrate and - above all - remember the values that have made our nation last. It is a story to be taught to all the generations to come and in doing so will serve us all by safeguarding democracy so that we may be able to say, with renewed confidence, that oppression and discrimination by one group of human beings over another can and will never happen again.

Thank you.