



Minister for Education and Training

SPEECH BY THE HON VERITY FIRTH MP
HOLOCAUST COMMEMORATION CEREMONY ORGANISED BY THE NSW JEWISH BOARD OF DEPUTIES
1 PM, SUNDAY 19 APRIL 2008
SYDNEY JEWISH MUSEUM, DARLINGHURST ROAD, DARLINGHURST.

Let me begin by acknowledging that we are on the traditional land of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. I pay respect to their Elders, past and present.

I am truly honoured by the opportunity to open commemorations on this important day of Holocaust remembrance: Yom HaShoah.

I note that the date of Yom HaShoah marks the official end of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, and the initial liberation of the Nazi death camps.

I also note that the exact translation of the Hebrew word 'shoah' is actually 'whirlwind' which refers to Hitler's so-called 'Final Solution'.

It is as a result of this hideous 'Final Solution' that we are gathered today, a solution that resulted in a third of world's Jewry – 6 million

individuals – being systematically annihilated by the Nazi regime between 30 January 1933 and 8 May 1945.

I would like to thank the organisers of today's commemoration ceremony for choosing education as a focus for our shared moments of reflection this afternoon.

I understand that I am joined here today by a number of experts and professionals from the field of education and training as well as school students from across the state.

As the Minister for Education and Training, I would like to express the Government's commitment to the role of educators in contributing to the ongoing lessons to be learnt from the horrors of the holocaust.

In particular, I ask you to consider the continuing importance of Holocaust education and the crucial question of how we teach our young people the skill of meaningful living remembrance.

I would like to draw your attention to another significant event that is taking place over the next two weeks as part of Yom HaShoah commemorations.

The event, of which many of you are probably well aware is called *The March of the Living*. It is an international, educational program that brings Jewish teens from all over the world, including Australia, to Poland to march from Auschwitz to Birkenau, the largest concentration camp complex built during World War II.

Since the inaugural march in 1988, over 30, 000 young Jewish people have participated - it is the strongest protest of Jewish youth all over the world against Holocaust denial.

The principal goal of the march is *Zachor*, or, “keep the memory alive”.

A key element of the program is the participation of Holocaust survivors who share the memory of their war-time experiences with younger generations.

I was 18 when I visited the Dachau Concentration Camp outside Munich. I was backpacking across Europe with schools friends, and I will never forget that day. I'll never forget how as the day went on we became less and less talkative, and by the time we arrived at the station to catch the train back to Munich, we could no longer speak. We could barely look at each other. The effect of seeing Dauchau in its chilling reality was to force you to make the horrific realisation about what human beings are actually capable of. And to make you realise that as a human being you must always stay vigilant, you must always ensure that something like this never happens again. I believe every young person should visit a concentration camp. It's so difficult to really understand until you have been.

Upon returning home from the march students are required to participate in presentations to other students. The hope is that these young people will be the bridge between the survivors and the next generation.

The March of the Living is an excellent example of the new traditions and forms of commemoration being embraced by the third generation of survivors.

However, the third generation of young people have a huge task ahead of them.

The young people of the 21st century are the generation of the grandchildren.

They are, significantly, most likely the last generation who will have the privilege of personal contact with Holocaust survivors.

In some ways, this generation of grandchildren can connect with Holocaust survivors in a way others cannot.

The third generation has a unique connection to the past and perspective on the future to be able to confront the full, horrific impact of the Holocaust, to be clear about the incredibly important lessons learned, and what that means in a modern context.

As many third generation survivors will attest, it is not uncommon for a grandparent to feel more comfortable speaking about their experiences of the Holocaust to their grandchildren rather than to their own children.

Youth commemorative events such as the *March of the Living*, raise important questions about the direction of Holocaust education for the third generation.

Most importantly, how do we as a society continue to commemorate the Holocaust as the nature of remembrance changes across the different generations?

The Holocaust, however, is not just a significant event for young Jewish people, it is a significant event for all people.

The lessons of the Holocaust strike deep into the heart of our democratic tradition.

The Holocaust is an atrocity that is unfathomable, firstly in its scale and the scope of the cruelty, suffering and inhumanity involved; but secondly, and perhaps most significantly for the future generations, is that it occurred so recently.

The Holocaust serves as an important reminder that democratic institutions and values are not automatically sustained, but need to be appreciated, nurtured, and protected.

The Holocaust demonstrates the essential fragility of civil society.

In Vikram Seth's 'Two Lives' he talks about being a young Indian dentistry student in Berlin in the early 1930s. He talks about his friendship circle – Christians, Jews, Hindus – all attending university together. Their friendships seemed so solid and impenetrable, but one of the most confronting points his book makes, is that the terror of the Nazi regime did not make heroes of people. That friends ceased to be friends. That families that had lived next door for decades did not come to each other's aid. The power of the state succeeded in making people forget their humanity.

The Holocaust, more than any other event in history, has the power to sensitise young people to the dangers of indifference, intolerance and the dehumanisation of others.

It has the power to send a strong message about what it means to be an active and responsible citizen, as well as a graphic lesson about our choices as individuals and as members of communities.

Students are quick to challenge injustices that they recognise in the school and the community.

As many teachers and principals know, when students learn about the Holocaust, or Apartheid, or the Stolen Generations they see how unjust racism can be, and are keen to act to challenge racist behaviour.

Each generation shapes and understands the Holocaust in ways appropriate to their time.

Strong cross-sectoral networks are one important strategy the NSW Government is using to better promote greater understanding, respect and acceptance amongst students from diverse backgrounds.

In 2004 The NSW Government established the *NSW Cultural Exchange Programs in Schools* initiative, involving the NSW Department of Education and Training, the NSW Catholic Education Commission and the Association of Independent Schools NSW.

The project aims to encourage school communities to share and learn from schools different from their own.

I know many Jewish schools are involved in this program, for example Masada College with Punchbowl Boys.

It is by fostering this kind of cross-cultural understanding amongst the next generation, that we can help ensure a genocide like the Holocaust will never, ever happen again.

Cultural exchange programs may have a curriculum, or cross-curriculum, focus and address areas of local concern.

The NSW education community is proud to support a robust and comprehensive range of anti-racism and discrimination policies.

All NSW schools are committed to promoting acceptance of Australia's cultural, linguistic and religious diversity; challenging prejudiced attitudes; and ensuring that sanctions are applied against racist and discriminatory behaviours.

All schools in NSW are required to report on anti-racism policies in their annual school reports.

One of the most important strategies used in our schools is that of peer-based learning.

This involves incorporating anti-racism education activities into peer support programs and allowing older students to demonstrate to younger students that racism is not tolerated in the school.

Initiatives such as the *Cooling Conflicts* program have had great success in empowering school students to manage their own conflicts and to become leaders in conflict management in their school communities.

We should always be mindful of how we can effectively communicate the lessons of the Holocaust to our students.

I would like to thank the NSW Jewish Community for the remarkable and tireless work that they do in helping us in that regard.....and I am personally grateful to the Jewish Community for their ongoing input into holocaust education in the state.

The Sydney Jewish Museum is an outstanding example of this, and a crucial resource for assisting educators to pass on the memory and lessons of the Holocaust to future generations of young people, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

I hope as educators we will always share this responsibility.