

YOM HASHOAH COMMUNAL COMMEMORATION 2009

Masada College, St Ives

NOW MORE THAN EVER

My daughter went this year to Poland, with other young Australian Jews, to visit the death camps of Treblinka, Majdanek and Auschwitz. Auschwitz is the place where her great great grandmother, and my great grandmother, Ida Ransenberg died at the hands of the Nazis in 1942.

My father has a photograph of Ida's husband, Albert Ransenberg, my great grandfather, taken in the yard of the railway station in Wiesbaden on 29 August 1942. It is part of a series of photos taken secretly by a local policeman, showing the last 800 Jews being deported to the East. My father found this photo in 1983, on a visit to Germany looking for family history.

The photograph is shocking because we know the fate of the group of well dressed, middle class German Jews shown standing in the railway yard. They are mostly elderly, and already gaunt – by mid 1942 all Germans were hungry with rationing, and Jews were starving on only half rations. Albert Ransenberg was murdered in Theresienstadt. His wife's journey was a little longer. She got to Auschwitz.

My other German great grandparent, Paula Dreyfus, was living in Wuppertal, my father's birthplace, in 1942. My father has written this about her death:

”When Hitler came to power in 1933, there were some 3200 Jews in Wuppertal, including my grandmother Paula Dreyfus, a grand and dignified lady. By 1939 most had left. In 1941 the remaining 1500 Jews were concentrated in sixteen *Judenhauser*, sometimes ten to a room, in preparation for resettlement in the East. Transports of Jews

left Wuppertal in October that year for Lodz, in November for Minsk and in April 1942 for Izbica. In mid-July 1942 Paula was notified by mail to prepare to leave her lovely house in the *Kirchbaumstrasse*. She took poison on the night of July 18, just four days before the last transport left for Theresienstadt. Perhaps she knew ...”

I thought of the trains to the East, which carried the Jews of Germany to their death from 1941 to almost the end of the war in March 1945, when in 2006 I stood on a disused platform of the railway station in the Grunewald, in Berlin. That platform is now a particularly striking memorial to the Holocaust. Along the edge of the platform, running for many metres, there are small metal plates, each recording the date of a transport to the East, and the number of victims it carried, thus graphically representing the thousands of Jews who left for the East, to their deaths, from that railway station in Berlin.

I thought of the trains to the East when I stood in the elegant neo-classical rooms of the Villa Wannsee in Berlin, the place of the Wannsee Conference in 1942 where the “Final Solution” was planned and documented. The documents on display brought home to me the fact that the Holocaust was carried out by a national government . This was the government of a people who saw themselves as the most civilized people of their time, but also a government with a plan for total destruction of all Jews, and the ability to carry out that plan.

The fate of my German great grandparents casts a shadow to this day. It is a fate shared by the millions of European Jews murdered at the hands of National Socialist Germany. And it is that shared fate which we remember on Yom Hashoah.

The Germans have remembered. In 1996 their President, Roman Herzog, declared 27 January as the “Day of Remembrance for the victims of National Socialism” in Germany. 27 January was selected because on that day in 1945, the last survivors of the death camp in Auschwitz were liberated by Soviet troops. The Germans pushed, with other nations, for international recognition of this day, and it was designated in 2005 by the United Nations General Assembly as the International Holocaust Memorial Day. This year, the present German President, Horst Koehler spoke on 27 January of the need to remember, and the need for rejection of those who deny the holocaust, saying “The responsibility from the Shoa remains part and parcel of German identity”.

Just as the Germans have not forgotten, we must not forget either. Now, more than ever, we must not forget. We must not forget for at least two crucial reasons.

First, the generation that lived through the Holocaust grow smaller in number each year. Most of those with direct memory and experience are no longer with us, and this means that we have to make a larger effort to learn as much as we can from our parents, grandparents and all Holocaust survivors and to record, to repeat, to interpret and above all to remember the terrible events of the mid 20th Century. If humanity forgets these events, we will forget their lessons also. And for me, that lesson is a lesson for the whole of humanity. As Yehuda Bauer has said, “The Holocaust should be remembered not because it happened to Jews, but because of what it tells us about humanity.”

There is a second reason why now, more than ever, we must not forget the Holocaust. Anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial are on the rise across the world, particularly in Europe and across the Arab world. Vile stereotypical caricatures of Jews, violently expressed anti-

Zionism, attacks on Jewish institutions and assaults on individuals have become more common.

Holocaust denial has become marginalised in most western countries in recent years, the preserve of a lunatic fringe. The condemnation by an English court of the chief European denier, David Irving, as a liar and anti-Semite, greatly helped that marginalisation. The recent condemnation by an Australian court of the Adelaide Holocaust denier, Frederick Toben, in contempt proceedings pursued to great effect by Jeremy Jones, will help too.

But at the national and international level, Holocaust denial continues to grow. And because it is *governments* engaging in Holocaust denial and the promotion of genocide, now more than ever we must not forget the Holocaust.

We have seen in recent times a nationally sponsored conference of Holocaust denial, held in Iran. We have seen the President of that country call for the killing of Jews and the destruction of Israel and refer to the Holocaust as a “myth”. That same man, the genocidal Holocaust denier who hosted the conference of deniers, yesterday addressed a UN conference on racism in Geneva, the Durban Review conference. His speech led to the walkout of delegates from 23 nations, including the European nations and Jordan.

The run-up to this Durban Review conference has been particularly troubling. It is supposed to be an “anti racism” conference, but the preparatory meetings have shown a particular blindness to anti-Semitism. The draft declaration, as it stood at the commencement of the conference, reaffirmed the 2001 Durban Declaration, which mentioned only one state – Israel. Only one state is associated with racist practices – Israel. And in 2009 that 2001

Declaration is to be reaffirmed. Mention of the Holocaust has been reduced to bare bones in the draft declaration. Earlier preparatory drafts had more expansively remembered the Holocaust. But even this was apparently too much for many of the participating nations, and just last week Syria and Iran expressed reservations even about the minimalist surviving draft.

Showing again that Germans have not forgotten the Holocaust, Germany has withdrawn from the Durban Review Conference. Canada, Israel and Italy announced a long time ago that they would not participate, and in recent days the US, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland and our own country have withdrawn. Withdrawal was the right course to take, and the number of withdrawals shows the strength of international resistance to Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism.

What we see in the rantings of the President of Iran are what George Orwell memorably referred to in 1946, in the immediate aftermath of the defeat of Nazi Germany, as “the organised lying of totalitarian states”¹ In the same essay he observed that “Totalitarianism demands, in fact, the continuous alteration of the past and in the long run probably demands a disbelief in the very existence of objective truth.” The then recent experience of totalitarianism, and of the Holocaust, gave rise in 1949 to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 60th anniversary of which we celebrated on 10 December last year. We need to hold on to that understanding of totalitarianism and the Holocaust. We can keep up the fight against “the organised lying of totalitarian states” and reject the alteration of the past, by speaking the objective truth about the Holocaust.

¹ George Orwell, “The Prevention of Literature” (1946) in Collected Essays, Secker & Warburg, 1961, p330

Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism may have multiplied in recent times, but so too have the efforts of resistance to them. The withdrawals from the Durban Review conference are a good sign that people and governments around the world understand the lessons of the Holocaust. Those lessons, of the need to respect human dignity, the need to fight against evil and racism, and the need to guard against genocidal ideologies, are lessons which are learned more easily by remembering the Holocaust. I will remember. My daughter will remember. All of us here will remember. And we should make sure that the world will remember.

Mark Dreyfus QC MP

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