

## **Speech by the Board's Chief Executive Officer, Vic Alhadeff**

### **At North Shore Holocaust Commemoration Ceremony**

**April 21, 2009**

It took just 30 seconds, yet it encapsulated the modern history of the Jewish people. How does one convey the significance of Israeli Air Force jetfighters flying over Auschwitz? Iconic symbols of the State of Israel within striking distance of the ultimate factory of death, whose primary objective was to expunge forever 5000 years of Jewish history.

Yet that extraordinary juxtaposition of the best and the worst of the Jewish experience occurred at noon on September 4, 2003 - when three F-15 jetfighters, distinctive Stars of David emblazoned on their wings of steel, flew over the very railway tracks which carried 1.5 million of our people to the grotesque destination which has come to personify hell on earth for the Jewish nation.

All six pilots were descendants of Holocaust survivors. And adding to the symbolism was the presence on the ground below of 200 uniformed officers of the Israel Defence Force.

Ladies and gentlemen, good evening. On behalf of the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies, it is our solemn duty and privilege to bring you tonight's Holocaust remembrance ceremony. At a personal level, may I add that I stand here in honour of my grandparents, who were murdered at Auschwitz, as were 151 Alhadeffs, members of my family.

Modern history is replete with poignant moments such as the one I described a moment ago. Permit me to relate another.

You are well acquainted with the name Ehud Barak, Israel's Foreign Minister and most decorated soldier.

Barak's grandparents perished at Treblinka. Recently, one of his three daughters graduated as a pilot in the Israeli Air Force. The nexus between those two seemingly unrelated events?

The graduation ceremony required the pilots to fly their jets over an outdoors assembly of dignitaries, who included the Defence Minister, generals and Barak himself.

When it was his daughter's turn, she guided her jet over the gathering - and then did a detour. She flew her aircraft over Lochamei Hagetaot - the Ghetto Fighters Kibbutz, named for the courageous men and women who led the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. As she did so, she dipped her wing - in honour of her murdered grandparents.

The responsibility facing every one of us is to replicate - in our own way, within our own individual context - what Barak's daughter did, what those six pilots did over Auschwitz. That is - to know and to understand our history, so that we may protect and advance our present and our future.

Without awareness and appreciation of our past, all endeavours to protect and advance our present and our future, and the Jewish future of our children and grandchildren, are vulnerable at best.

At the Board of Deputies, we are working hard to have the study of Holocaust and genocide studies made a mandatory inclusion in the school history syllabus.

We are in consultation with the Minister of Education, who addressed our Ceremony at the Jewish Museum on Sunday, and participated in reading the names of some of the six million.

We annually bring together almost 1000 Christian, Jewish and Muslim students in harmony programs. Every program includes exposure to the Holocaust as the endpoint of where racial hatred can lead.

And we have arranged for the training program of police superintendents to include a seminar at the Jewish Museum, so that they will be made aware of the Holocaust and sensitised to antisemitism as a form of racism.

We will launch a similar program for anti-racism officers in all state schools.

Many of the teachers who are reached by our programs are from Muslim schools;

and in fact in Europe last month, Muslim and European leaders launched a website designed to counter Holocaust denial and antisemitism.

It is called Project Aladdin, it includes Arabic translations of The Diary of Anne Frank, and it is supported by former French President Jacques Chirac, former Indonesian President Abdurahman Wahid, former German Chancellor Gerhard Shroeder and Jordanian Prince El Hassan ben Talaal.

Our local Muslim colleagues have been very receptive to this initiative.

On the subject of Europe, I should mention that Holocaust education *is* mandatory in the British school syllabus - contrary to the email we have all seen, claiming that Holocaust education is banned in British schools. In fact, the British Government pays to send two students from every school in Britain to Auschwitz every year.

Friends, some of you will be familiar with six lines which were scratched in pencil inside one of the railway cars which transported Jews to the camps. Written by a Rumanian, Dan Pagis, they read:

*here in this carload  
i am eve  
with abel my son.  
if you see my other son  
cain, son of man,  
tell him that I ...*

There it ends. *If you see my other son, Cain, son of man, tell him that I ...*

It is not widely known, but Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi were at Auschwitz at the same time. Two of the most brilliant writers on the Holocaust.

Wiesel recently wrote: "We were in the same camp, in the same barracks. We passed each other every day - unacquainted and unaware. He was a chemist and therefore useful; I was only a number.

"We encountered each other again after the war. The bond was immediate. Our exchanges continued over the years. Equipped with survivors' codes, we could read each others' minds. "Just before Primo Levi's tragic suicide in 1987, he called me," Wiesel wrote. "His desperation haunts me still. I well remember the thought that occurred to me at the time - Here is proof that one can die at Auschwitz *after* Auschwitz."

As we reflect on the Holocaust tonight - at this very moment, in fact - 97 of our sons and daughters are assembling at the entrance to Auschwitz, about to undertake the four-kilometre March of the Living.

They will form a proud component of an armada of 7000 Jewish teenagers from around the world, clad in blue and white, waving thousands of Israeli flags - a powerful and uplifting counterpoint to the fact that they will be standing in the shadow of blown-up crematoria, and that beneath their feet is human ash - ash which will cling to their souls forever.

That unambiguous declaration which says *Am Israel Chai* - the People of Israel Live - is *their* primary answer to Dan Pagis' unfinished sentence on the inside of that railway carriage. But what would we tell Son of Man that we did - with *our* knowledge of history? With *our* appreciation of our past?

With *our* awareness of the twin pillars of our story - Auschwitz and the State of Israel?

We too have an obligation to respond - each of us in our own way. Doing so will mean we will have responded too to Primo Levi and Eli Wiesel - ensuring that no-one else dies at Auschwitz after Auschwitz.

Thank you.