

Speech for Holocaust Memorial Day
27th January 2011

1. Each Holocaust Memorial Day has an official theme and this year's theme is "Untold Stories". What does this mean? I believe it resonates with something I have said on previous occasions, namely that the sheer scale of the slaughter means that there is a risk that the numbers become just a statistic. But behind each death there is an individual who was somebody's father, mother, child or friend. Telling stories of individual suffering or heroism helps bring the horror of what occurred to life. There will clearly be millions of untold stories about the holocaust, not simply because all those who were murdered cannot tell their story, but also because, as time moves on, most of those who survived are no longer with us to tell their stories. So it is important that we discover and tell all the stories we can so that the memory of what occurred is not lost.

2. I would like to refer to a couple of such stories today. I do not say that they are untold but they are perhaps not as well known as some.

3. The first relates to what is now the peaceful town of Hadamar near Wiesbaden, where there was a sanatorium and hospital which had been there since the 19th century. When we think of the Holocaust, we think first and foremost of Hitler's plan to eliminate the Jews and the steps he took through the gas chambers to achieve that objective. However, the Jews were not the only victims of the holocaust. The perverted thinking of the Nazis believed that some human beings were

superior to others and they wanted therefore to create a pure or 'untainted' group of people. They planned to purify Aryan blood by preventing anything they saw as 'undesirable' from polluting it. These undesirables included the disabled. Soon after they took power, the Nazi propaganda machine started presenting the disabled community as incapable and as a burden on society. In July 1933, the Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases brought in a compulsory sterilisation programme, which targeted people with mental or hereditary illness. The most common reason for this compulsory sterilisation was simply given as 'feeble mindedness', a broad term which could cover almost anything.

4. But then in 1939 a more drastic step was taken. Registration of all 'malformed' newborn children was made compulsory. German midwives and doctors were ordered to report any child known to them that was born deaf or blind or with some disorder such as Downs Syndrome. The reports were sent through to Berlin to be studied by a panel of experts. Although these experts did not actually see or examine the children concerned, they made decisions, marking a plus or minus sign on the reports. A plus sign meant that the child was to be murdered. The children singled out for extermination were then transferred to special wards where they were killed and one of these was the sanatorium at Hadamar.
5. As the children's killing programme continued, the Nazis turned their attention to disabled adults. Under a secret plan named T4, records of disabled people were examined by experts who decided whether

individuals should live or die. Those selected to die were killed by injection or by gas in 6 different centres. Again, Hadamar's sanatorium was one of these. All in all, it is estimated that at least 5000 disabled children and 200,000 disabled adults were murdered under the Nazi regime.

6. A second story concerns the Jews in Greece. It is estimated that, out of a pre-war Greek Jewish population of 70 – 80,000, only about 10,000 survived. When Greece was occupied, it was divided into three zones, the Nazi zone, the Bulgarian zone and the Italian zone. In their zone, the Nazis began immediately to discriminate against Jewish people just as they did elsewhere. Eventually, in March 1943, the deportations began and in three months 45,000 Jews were sent from Thessalonica to the death camps in Poland. This left behind a complete void. All aspects of Jewish life were obliterated. It was as if there had never been a Jewish community. The Bulgarians supported Nazi policies and over 4000 Jews were deported from the Bulgarian zone to the death camp at Treblinka, leaving another complete void. Those in the Italian zone were initially safer as the Italians did not cooperate with implementation of the Nazi policies. But in September 1943, after the Italian surrender, the Nazis moved in and deportations began there as well. The Jewish citizens of the Greek Islands were the last to be deported. The Nazis began to round them up between March and July 1944, only months before being forced to withdraw from Greece themselves. Very few Jews survived these deportations. There is a harrowing eyewitness account. Dr Nyiszli, who was forced to work for the infamous Dr Mengele in

Auschwitz, recorded the fate of some of them in June 1944 in these words:-

“Last night they burned the Greek Jews from the Mediterranean Island of Corfu, one of the oldest communities in Europe. The victims were kept for 27 days without food or water, first in small boats then in sealed cars. When they arrived at Auschwitz’s platform the doors were unlocked but no-one got out to line up for selection. Half of them were already dead and half in a coma. The entire convoy without exception was sent to number 2 crematorium.”

7. But even amongst this horror, one can find stories of hope and bravery. On the Island of Zakynthos, every member of the Island’s Jewish Community survived the holocaust because their neighbours protected them. As was their practice, the Nazis demanded a list of all Jewish residents to be handed over but the Mayor of the Island and its Christian Bishop provided the Nazis with a list of only two names – their own. The Islanders defied the Nazis and hid all their Jewish neighbours. This was not forgotten by the Jewish people because when, in 1953, an earthquake struck Zakynthos, Jewish people were among the first to provide aid to the Island’s community.
8. One’s faith that we have learned the lessons of the Holocaust is sometimes tested. The most recent occasion is perhaps in relation to the events in Darfur in the Western part of Sudan. There Arab militia groups, known as the Janjaweed, supported by the official Sudanese army have waged a violent campaign against the black African

population of Darfur. It is estimated that some 300,000 black Darfuris have been deliberately targeted and murdered since the genocide began in 2003. Dr Halima Bashir, now living in the UK after being driven out of Darfur, has told of her first hand experience of sexual violence being used as a weapon of war. She was a doctor in a remote village in the Darfur region and one day the Janjaweed attacked the girls' school there. Government troops guarded the school while the Janjaweed raped the students. One of the victims told Dr Bashir that during this ordeal the Janjaweed shouted "*We have come here to kill you! To finish you all! You are black slaves! You are worse than dogs! Either we kill you or we give you Arab children.*" After treating the victims who were aged between 7 and 13, Dr Bashir told visiting UN officials about the attack. As a result she was punished by military and security men taking her to a remote location where she was repeatedly gang raped.

9. But there is cause for hope. The world at large has become aware of what has been occurring and has reacted. Thus in 2009, the President of Sudan was indicted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity and subsequently for genocide. It is true that he has not yet been brought to justice but the indictment has sent a powerful message that, even within the borders of one's own country, there will be consequences for those who commit or encourage genocide.
10. Many of you will be familiar with the story of Alice Herz-Sommer, who survived the concentration camp because she was an acclaimed pianist and at the age of 107 she is the oldest living survivor of the

camps. In an interview which she gave a few years ago, she expressed some concern as to whether the world had really learned the lessons of the Holocaust or whether people would forget what happened. She pointed out that terrible things happened during the Spanish Inquisition but that this was hardly ever referred to nowadays.

11. That is why Holocaust Memorial Day is so important. We must not stop speaking about the Holocaust. We must not forget the sheer horror of what was done in that period. We must recall and tell the individual stories of those who suffered. In the case of our Island, as we shall do shortly, we must pay tribute to and recall the 22 local victims of the Holocaust. Only by keeping all these events in our minds can we do our best to ensure that the lessons of the past are learned. That is the significance of the Untold Stories of the Holocaust.