



The Fragility of Freedom, HMD 2024

The brief today was straightforward. Explore the significance of Holocaust Memorial Day and help you prepare to hear testimony. In half an hour. Simple. And at the same time completely impossible.

So I'll break it down into three sections.

- *What was the Holocaust?*
- *What is Holocaust Memorial Day?*
- *What is testimony?*

I'll be honest: this may not help all that much. The literature on every aspect of the Holocaust is vast; far more than anyone can possibly read. And even if they read all of that, there would still remain the book that nobody can read: the Book of Names, which lists four million people identified as victims by surviving family and through historical research. Each page is a metre high and densely printed. You could not read it in a lifetime, and if you did, all that you'd know would be the names and scant biographical information. You wouldn't know how or why they died, and you wouldn't know who they really were.



(Photo: Jaime Ashworth)

And you'd still be missing another two million names. Those are the people who were killed alongside anyone who might have remembered them. The children who were born on the way. We say in Judaism that to not speak of the dead is to kill them a second time. But many of these people barely lived at all.

But simply overwhelming you with tragedy is not helpful, though it is a part of understanding what the Holocaust was. Before I go any further, I want to tell a story and say a prayer.

The story is an old one, concerning the two sages, Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai, in the Temple in Jerusalem. They were approached by a man who wished to learn the whole of the Torah (the Jewish bible) while standing on one leg. Shammai, who was a strict disciplinarian, hit the man and scolded him for his impertinence. Hillel, however, paused and thought. "The whole of the Torah while standing on one leg," he said, "is this: do not do to others that which is repugnant to you. The rest is commentary. Now go study!"

I tell this story because all I can do is offer some thoughts while (metaphorically) standing on one leg. I urge you to study, but I know that

being a young person is a demanding business. So perhaps instead just listen.

The prayer comes from the Reform Judaism *Siddur* (prayer book): it actually begins with another story.

405 CALENDAR OF THE YEAR	HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL DAY	HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL DAY	CALENDAR OF THE YEAR 406	<p>Seder Ha-Tefilot. Forms of Prayer: Daily, Sabbath, and Occasional Prayers. 8th Edition. Movement for Reform Judaism, 2011.</p>
NATIONAL HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL DAY (January) <p>וַיֹּאמֶר קַיִן אֶל-הַבֵּל אָחִיו וַיְהִי בְהִיּוֹתָם בְּשָׂדֵה וְיָקָם קַיִן אֶל-הַבֵּל אָחִיו וַיְהַרְגֵהוּ: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-קַיִן אֵי הַבֵּל אָחִיךָ וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יָדַעְתִּי הֲשֹׁמֵר אָחִי אָנֹכִי: וַיֹּאמֶר מַה עָשִׂיתָ קוֹל דְּמֵי אָחִיךָ צֹעֲקִים אֵלַי מִן-הָאֲדָמָה:</p> <p>The first murder recorded in the Bible occurs before there is any division between tribes, races, nations and creeds. Cain and Abel are brothers, the first children of the first human couple, yet needless hatred leads to the violent death of one, the victim, and exile and suffering for the other, the perpetrator. Since that moment the earth has had reason to cry out each day at the blood that has been shed.</p> <p>Despite our own history of suffering as victims of prejudice and hatred, nothing prepared us for the horror of the Nazi genocide, the deliberate, systematic, cunning and brutal attempt to wipe the Jewish people from the face of the earth. The pain of the loss of one third of our people is deeply embedded in our hearts, our minds and our souls. Vainly we hoped that such an atrocity could never be visited again on another people. Yet still daily we learn of new horrors, justified by perverse reasoning, conducted with ever more efficient weapons or with brutal slaughter. Each such destruction is unique to those who endure it; each generates new potentials for revenge and an escalation of the horror.</p> <p>This day we join with people throughout the land in calling for an end to such brutality, to murder in the name of tribe, race, nation or creed. We know that good intentions, or prayers alone are not enough to stop the slaughter. We pledge our support for the United Nations and all agencies that work for international understanding, for conflict resolution, management or transformation. We affirm our commitment to interfaith dialogue and combating racial prejudice here in our neighbourhood and wherever a Jewish voice is present. As our tradition has taught us, we acknowledge that within ourselves too are the seeds of violence against others, so that we too must take responsibility for actions carried out in our name.</p> <p><<<</p>				
		<p><i>Together</i> God of Cain, God of Abel, help us work for a time when such horrors cease from the earth; when violence is no longer acceptable to solve conflicts; when no conditions exist to warrant acts of brutality and terror. May our small contribution, as individuals and as a community, together with all people of good will, help bring this about. And let us say: Amen.</p> <p>לֹא יִשָּׂא גּוֹי אֶל-גּוֹי חֶרֶב לֹא יִלְמְדוּ עוֹד מִלְחָמָה: Nation shall not lift up sword against nation. Never again shall they train for war.'</p>		

I say this prayer because we live in challenging times, and it's easy to lose sight of the fact that we are a community, and that that community - of people of good will - is our only hope. I also say it to remind you that the *values* of any of the faiths represented *here today* are much more closely aligned than the news might make us think at times - let alone social media.

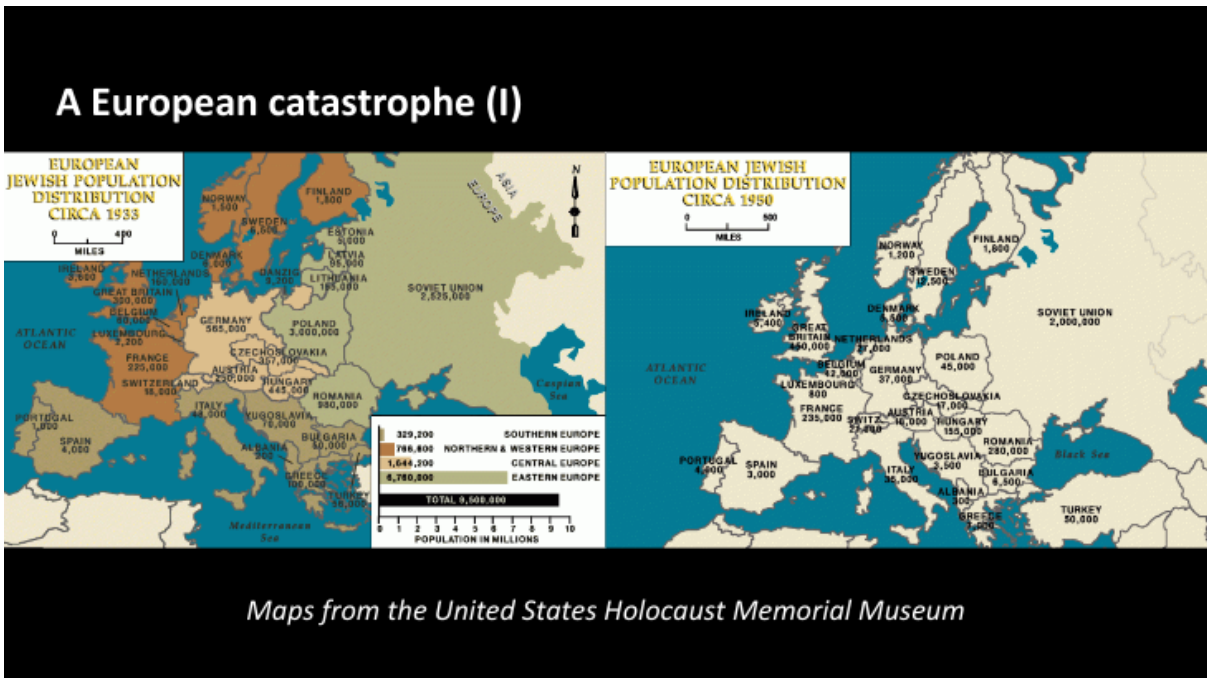
What was the Holocaust?

There are many answers to this question and, as you might have guessed from the discussion of the Book of Names, none of them are perfect. The Holocaust Educational Trust, which I'm representing today, uses the following short definition.

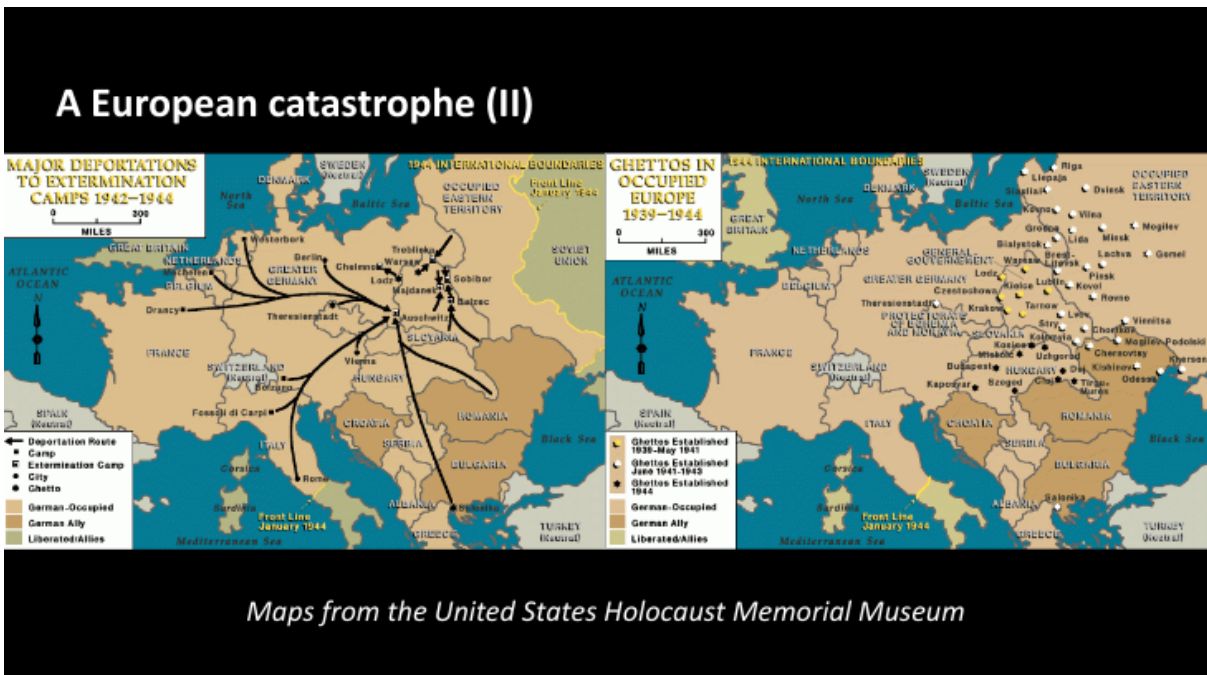


But to me *any* short definition does something very wrong. It compresses the individuals into the shorthand “six million Jewish men, women and children” - though they all had names, and faces. Just like these two boys, Sril and Zelig Jacob, standing on the ramp in Birkenau in May 1944. They were dead a matter of hours later. This image, miraculously found by their older sister after the war, is what is left of them.

The definition also says nothing at all about the teeming, tumultuous diversity of European Jewry. The Polish capital, Warsaw, had a Jewish community of 350,000 in the 1930s. To put this into context, the UK census of 2021 recorded 271,327 Jews *in the whole of the UK*. This slide gives you an overview of the difference between 1939 and 1945: in every case, in the countries occupied by Nazi Germany, the communities are smaller. The total number of Jews in the world only recovered its prewar level in 2022.



The Holocaust involved every part of Europe. On the left, the map shows major deportations to extermination camps. On the right, the map shows the sites of ghettos.



In January 1942, a meeting of senior mid-level bureaucrats calmly discussed - over lunch, with wine - how they would comb Europe “from west to east” for the 11 million people they were targeting as Jews.

What is Holocaust Memorial Day?

This pan-European nature of the Holocaust is why, in January 2000, politicians, academics and educators from across the continent met in Stockholm to discuss its history, legacy, and commemoration. One of the results of the conference was the decision that from 2001, 27 January would be marked across Europe as Holocaust Memorial Day.

The date was chosen because on 27 January 1945, the concentration camp at Auschwitz, the largest, most deadly, and most complex of the camps, was liberated.



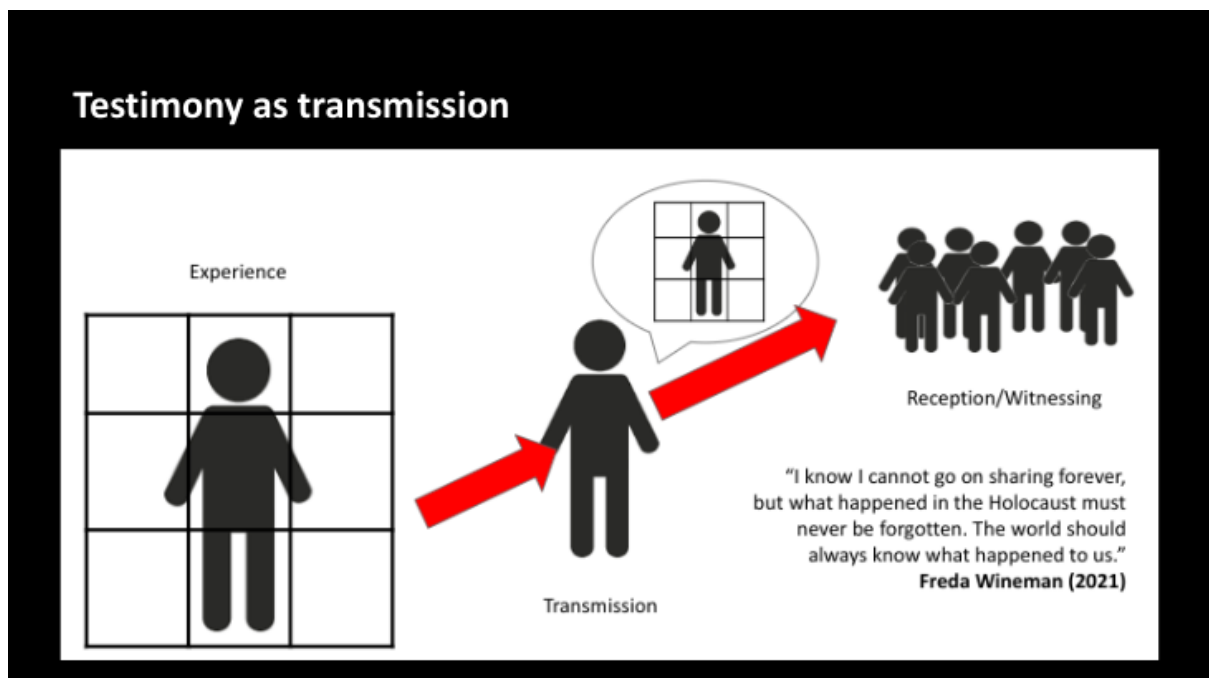
Auschwitz II-Birkenau, 2023. Photo: Jaime Ashworth

But it was never purely about the Holocaust. HMD has *always* remembered subsequent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, former Yugoslavia and Darfur. And if the passionate debate about including other crises and locations has not expanded its remit, then the discussion has raised awareness of them. To anticipate one particular set of questions, my job here today is neither to discuss current events nor to engage in advocacy. I am neither an international lawyer nor a diplomat. My concern is with the past and how it informs the present, *here*.

What is testimony?

This is one of those questions where academics say a lot without necessarily saying much at all. It's a long debate and trying to define it is often either stating the obvious or (to be honest) failing to state the obvious. Two elements are, in my opinion, crucial:

Firstly, it is telling someone about an experience they were not present for. It is the transmission of a *witnessing*.



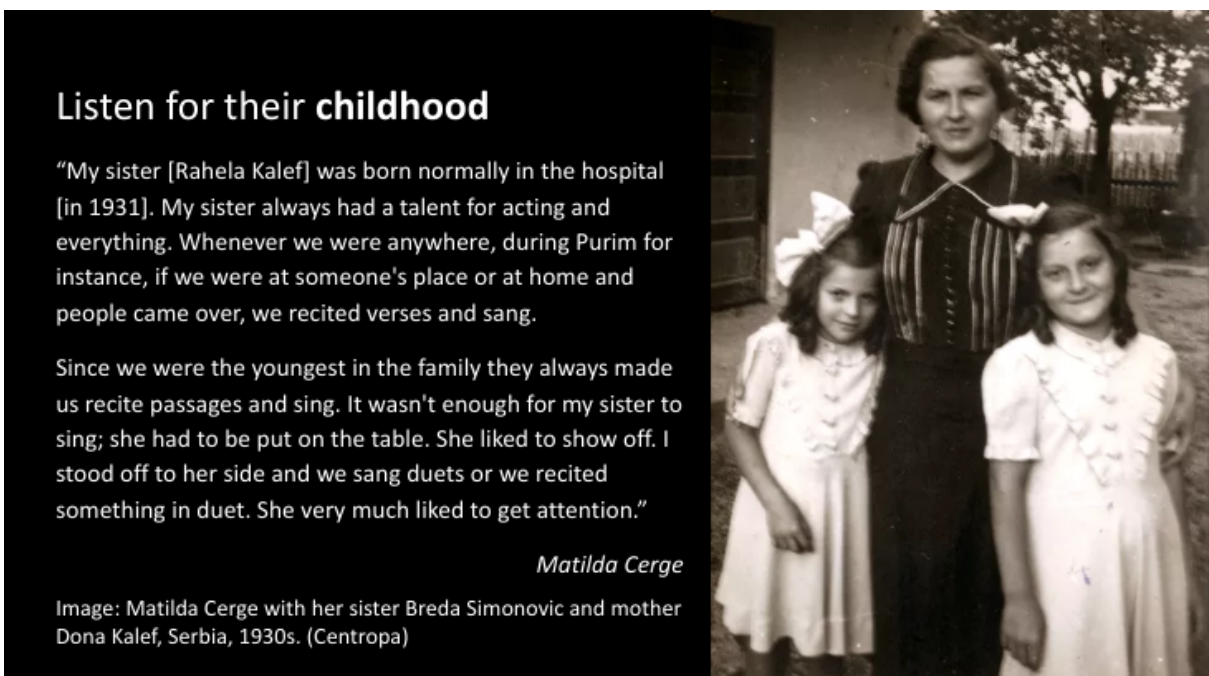
Second, it offers a *truth*. To designate something testimony is to give it weight and authority, based on the idea that it is telling us a truth. This may be a moral or religious truth rather than a legal or historical truth, but truth is central to testimony's importance. The person testifying is saying, quite simply, *I was there, this is what being there then means to me now.*

How to listen to testimony is another long debate. I've listened to a lot of testimony over the years. Sometimes, as in this image, as part of a crowd.



But other times, I've been lucky enough to be in small groups, the person testifying just an arm's length away - or even less. I've listened to testimony in audio recordings, and I've watched them as videos. The best suggestion I have is this: listen to them not as saints or heroes but as ordinary people. Listen for what they tell you.

Listen for their *childhood*.



Listen for their *family*.



Listen for their **family**

“I remember Grandma and Grandpa Drutowski, my mother's parents, well. I was their single, beloved grandchild and that gave me, of course, many privileges. I often went to see them and stayed the night. Grandma and Grandpa were wholly assimilated. I don't recall them observing the Jewish traditions.”

Jerzy Pikielny

Image: Maurycy Drutowski and his family in Warsaw, c.1910. (Centropa)

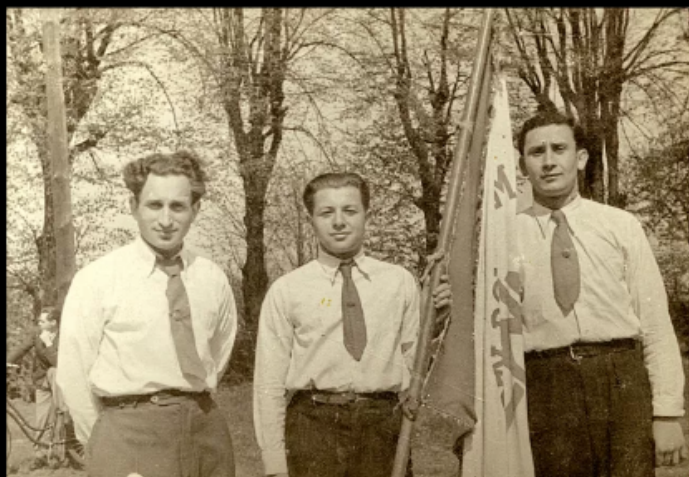
Listen for *who they wanted to be*. Did anyone expect their lives to turn out this way?

Listen for **who they wanted to be**

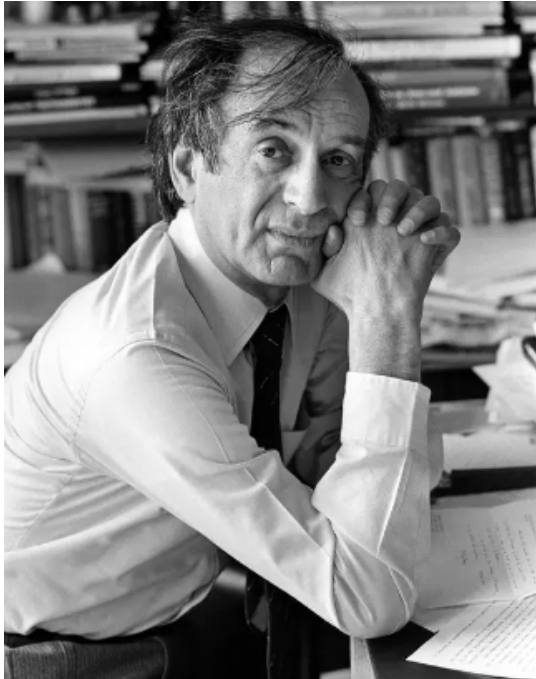
“It was mine and my parents' dream that upon completing elementary school I'd go to a vocational school to learn the trade of a metal worker, a turner, or something like that. That would have been the greatest achievement.”

Feliks Nieznanowski

Image: Feliks Nieznanowski (centre) with his friends, 1940. (Centropa)



Listen for *how their lives changed*: this moment, from Elie Wiesel's memoir *Night*, describes the last time he saw his little sister. I think it may have been the central moment of what became a long life.



Listen for **how their lives changed**

“Tzipora held my mother’s hand. I saw them disappear into the distance; my mother was stroking my sister’s fair hair, as though to protect her, while I walked on with my father and the other men. **And I did not know that in that place, at that moment, I was parting from my mother and Tzipora forever.** I went on walking, my father held on to my hand.”

Elie Wiesel

Image: Elie Wiesel in 1985. (Neal Boenzi/The New York Times)

Listen for their grief: every time I’ve heard the redoubtable Mala Tribich speak, her strong voice almost breaks into tears at the thought of Idzia. Even now, eighty years later.

Listen for their grief

“In order to avoid the deportations to labour and death camps, my parents arranged for me, along with my cousin Idzia, to travel to Czestochowa to stay with a Christian family, for which they paid. However, soon after this Idzia asked to return to the ghetto because she missed her family. **I stayed and when I returned to the ghetto I found out that Idzia had never made it back to her parents.** We never heard from her again and her parents never got over her disappearance. She was only a young girl.”

Mala Tribich MBE

Image: Mala Tribich MBE. (March of the Living/Sam Churchill Photography)



Listen for their guilt: of course, Yisrael Abelesz couldn't have known that sending his little brother “back to mummy” was sending him to death. But sixty years later, his shoulders still slumped as he told the story.

Listen for their guilt

“When we arrived in Auschwitz, there was banging on the doors. ‘Open up!’ They opened it from the outside. I remember, I saw my sister went with my mother...I went with my father and older brother. And my younger brother also wanted to come with us. And I remember I said to him ‘Better that you go with mummy.’”

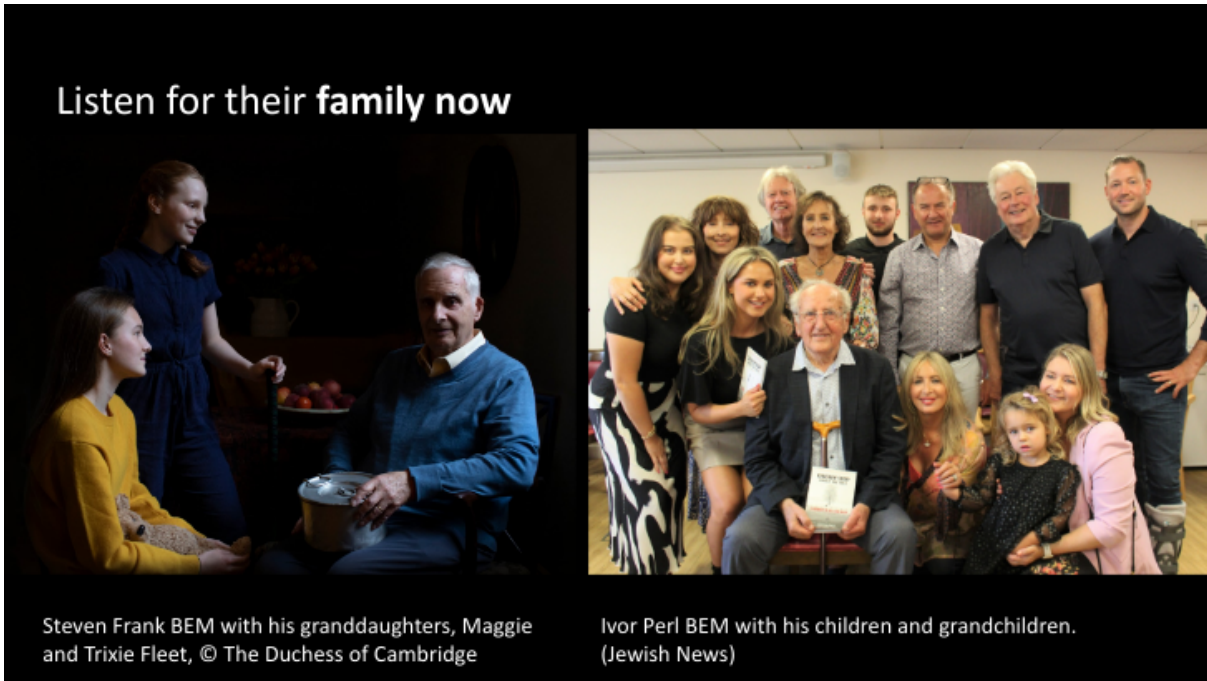
Yisrael Abelesz: Testimony to the USC Shoah Foundation (1995)



Listen for their duty: Susan Pollack is a wonderful, kind, warm human being. But she is always concerned that she has not done enough to tell her family's story.



Listen for their family now: Steven Frank and Ivor Perl are both kind, genial men. Their pride in the lives and families they have created is palpable. I last saw Ivor in December and he didn't have the words for how wonderful his granddaughter Lia is.



Listen to *who they have become*. Brought from Prague in the *Kindertransport* aged 6, Lord Dubs has become a champion of unaccompanied child refugees. In 2017, at the end of the speech he is pictured here giving, he said “I would like other children who are in a desperate situation at the moment to be offered safety in this country and be given the same welcome and opportunities that I had.”



But never forget to listen for their pain. Jean Améry said that “Qualities of feeling are as incomparable as they are indescribable. They mark the limit of language to communicate. If someone wanted to impart his physical pain, he would be forced to inflict it and thereby become a torturer himself.”

But there is another way. *Listen*. At every point in a testimony, however well-rehearsed, there is a moment at which the individual is in pain. Be with them in that pain, that joy, that grief, that humanity. Let them communicate by listening to *them*; not just to the words but to the silences and the pauses, and the hesitations. Remember that you are the last generation of young people to hear survivors speak first-hand.

I would also ask that you not do something. Don't ask survivors to tell you what the meaning of the Holocaust is. Don't ask them what the future of Holocaust memory might be. Not because they won't have an answer, but because it isn't really their problem. It's ours. What happened is their concern. What's next is up to us. I often quote this poem by Dan Pagis:

*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*

It's in that silence, in the blank space after “i”, that you come in.

Every year, HMD has a theme. This year, it's the *Fragility of Freedom*. The theme vision suggests that participants reflect on the ways in which freedom is taken by the perpetrators. This is important, because it's true: Luise Stein, for example, would never have guessed that her father's ardent patriotism would be irrelevant, and that just a few years after the

Nazis came to power she would leave her home by idyllic Lake Constance. But it happened.

Historical resonance

“We were a thoroughly assimilated Jewish family. My father was so assimilated into German culture in his behaviour, feelings, and thoughts that he never would have said he was a Jew or a German Jew but only that he was a German and an ardent patriot.”

Luise Stein



A family taking a Sunday walk on the shore of Lake Constance, Germany 1930s (Bridgeman Images)

But I think there is an even more powerful message. We all know that since October 2023 there has been a particularly violent chapter in the history of the Middle East. If you live in North London, as I imagine most of you do, I'm sure you've seen sights like this: the tit-for-tat of posters being torn, defaced, and then covered with responses.



This conflict has come to our streets. In the month following 7 October 2023, the Metropolitan Police recorded 679 antisemitic offences and 258 Islamophobic offences. These are record numbers: with no end in sight.

Freedom is fragile, because what we do and say - what we use our freedom *for* - has effects beyond us. If stating our beliefs mean belittling or threatening those of others, we all lose. And the steps taken to redress the balance, to keep us safe, will make us less free.

Freedom is *mutual*: it relies on kindness, respect, compassion, and peace. For each other.



My suggestion is this. At every moment, however demanding it is, however angry, worried, or desperate we are, we stop and remember that we are a community that lives in freedom. But that freedom can only exist safely if we first make a space for peace: if we put our common humanity ahead of hatreds. If we *listen* to each other in our pain, distress and confusion as closely as I hope you will listen to the survivor who will speak to you. *Do not do to others that which is repugnant to you.* The rest indeed is commentary. Now live its meaning.