

Speech: Holocaust Educational Trust – Holocaust Memorial Day Reception

Last October at the Holocaust Educational Trust Appeal Dinner, I sat next to a man named Harry Spiro.

Unfortunately, Harry couldn't be here today but he was just 8 years old in 1939 when war broke out in Poland.

By 1945, aged just 14, he was the only member of his family to still be alive.

That evening, Harry told me his story.

In 1942, Harry was working in a factory in his home town of Piotrkow, when the call came from the Nazis for the workers to gather outside the nearby synagogue.

Harry didn't want to go, but his mother – anticipating that things were about to get much worse – insisted.

As she pushed him out, she said: "Hopefully one of us will survive."

Tragically, she – and the rest of Harry's family – were murdered at Treblinka.

But her words – and their message of hope and endurance through the darkest times – live on.

They live on through Harry, who survived a death march that killed 2,300 of the 3,000 who set off.

Her words live on through Harry's children and grandchildren.

And through Harry's exceptional work on Holocaust education, work for which he has just been awarded a British Empire Medal in the Queen's New Year's Honours list.

An honour he shares with Freda, another extraordinary survivor, who has just spoken so movingly.

My warmest congratulations to them both.

And now stories like Freda's and Harry's are inspiring a whole new generation through the work of fantastic young HET ambassadors, like Georgia (Adkins).

Thank you for everything you're doing to keep these stories, these words, alive.

They matter immensely.

We know, particularly from the world of instant of communication on social media how words can entertain us, educate us, unite us, and uplift us.

But, also, how they can wound and divide.

How they can inflame prejudice in echo chambers where ignorance goes unchallenged.

How they can drive people towards hatred and even violence.

So it's fitting that this year's Holocaust Memorial Day asks us to consider the power of words.

The [Holocaust Educational Trust](#) has never shied away from teaching young people where hatred, intolerance and misinformation can lead.

The way we use words and language is key to this.

Which is why the government has been proud to support HET's vital work through initiatives such as the [Lessons from Auschwitz programme](#).

This programme has enabled thousands of children and their teachers to understand a little of what it meant to live through.

What Harry Spiro described to me, as "hell on earth".

In 2011, I was privileged to accompany a group from my constituency to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

It was one of the most moving experiences of my life.

The hateful inscription on the gate might be familiar, but there are no words to convey the feeling when you walk inside.

Of imagining all the men, women and children who perished there and whose cries were silenced forever.

Cries – against hatred, intolerance and misinformation – that we must ensure are heard.

We all have a duty to speak out in their memory.

Of course, Holocaust education is not the only answer.

But it remains one of the most powerful tools we have to fight bigotry today.

That's why I am delighted to announce today that my Ministry – together with the Department for Education – will fund a new strand of the Lessons from Auschwitz programme.

A new initiative, proposed by HET and the Union of Jewish Students, to tackle antisemitism, prejudice and intolerance on university campuses.

I know this is something that the Trust has been keen to get off the ground.

And Karen – as anyone who knows her well will agree – is someone you do not turn down or disagree with!

So I hope this will be welcome news.

And I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Karen and everyone at the Trust for their tireless dedication to Holocaust education.

The programme will invite 2 Sabbatical Officers from each university to visit the death camps.

Vice-Chancellors will also be encouraged to take part.

I look forward to seeing how this work proceeds and the difference it makes.

HET's work is invaluable and I'm honoured to be associated with it.

Not just because it's the right thing to do, but because I have seen it works.

I remember Harry telling me about a visit to a school in London's East End.

When a pupil refused to attend his Holocaust presentation because he didn't want to, in the words of that pupil, "hear from Jews."

Harry refused to deliver his talk unless the young man was present.

And so he was persuaded, reluctantly, to attend Harry's talk.

That same young man later wrote to him and said it was one of the most moving experiences of his life.

So much so, he was inspired to become a passionate champion of greater tolerance and understanding among his peers.

So our efforts to tell stories like Harry's, to challenge antisemitism wherever it exists, are absolutely crucial.

Not just now, but for future generations.

This is the thinking behind our commitment to build a new national Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre.

Its presence, right next to the Houses of Parliament, will ensure that the testimony of survivors will never be forgotten in Britain.

That the message of hope and a better future...

...whispered from a mother to son all those years ago...

...serves as a beacon for centuries to come.

Thank you.