

HMD THEME VISION 2017: HOW CAN LIFE GO ON?



'For the survivor death is not the problem. Death was an everyday occurrence. We learned to live with Death. The problem is to adjust to life, to living. You must teach us about living.'

Elie Wiesel – author and survivor of the Holocaust¹

Background

Each year, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust chooses a different theme to enable audiences on Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) to learn something new about the past, and to make it easier for HMD activity organisers to create fresh and engaging activities. Every theme is relevant to the Holocaust, Nazi Persecution and to each subsequent genocide, and has the life stories of those who were murdered and those who survived at its heart – as well as the experiences of resisters, rescuers and witnesses.

Introduction

How can life go on after a genocide? The aftermath of the Holocaust and of subsequent genocides continue to raise challenging questions for individuals, communities and nations.

How do people react in the immediate aftermath of unimaginable suffering? How can life be rebuilt after such trauma? Is justice after genocide possible? What role do we in the UK have towards individuals, communities and nations who have survived genocide?

Holocaust Memorial Day is not only about commemorating past genocides and honouring those who died, but about standing with those who survive.

By phrasing the theme as a question, HMD 2017 asks audiences to think about what happens after genocide and of our own responsibilities in the wake of such a crime. This year's theme is broad and open ended, and there are few known answers.

Scope of the theme

Trauma and coming to terms with the past

How can those who have survived the horrors of genocide begin to come to terms with the past? How does a person cope with living when so many others died? How can nations heal when society has been torn apart? Can a person or a community, or even a nation, ever fully recover from the trauma of genocide? How can we all help those who have been through genocide find a route to recovery?

The trauma suffered by individuals, communities, and nations during genocide is unimaginable. Many of those who survive suffer post-traumatic stress and depression, while the smallest reminders such as scenes in films, smells, tastes or certain clothes can trigger memories of what happened.

'The sight of someone dressed entirely in black would also trigger a memory – the uniforms of the Khmer Rouge. And for a moment it could paralyse me as if I was under a spell... Memories seep back to me in ways I hadn't imagined.'

Chanrithy Him – survivor of the Genocide in Cambodia²

The pain of remembering, the need to focus on working and rebuilding life in the present and a belief that people are not interested in hearing about the past make it impossible for some survivors to speak about their experiences for many years after. Some never do.

'In the intervening years I did not talk about my childhood experiences during the war, and although my family and friends knew that I had lived through the Holocaust, they did not ask any questions. They felt that it was too sensitive and that it would be too painful for me... In recent years, however, there has been a lot of interest in the subject and when I am invited to speak to school children and other groups, I accept whenever possible. I feel that it is my duty to speak for all those who have not survived to speak for themselves and tell what happened in those dark days in Europe. By speaking out, it is my greatest hope that something positive will be handed to the future generation.'

Mala Tribich – survivor of the Holocaust³

Nations where genocides were perpetrated have followed different paths in addressing their past. For example, the Action Reconciliation Service for Peace (Germany) and the Austrian Holocaust Memorial Service arrange for young people to work abroad as volunteers for organisations working in Holocaust commemoration, education and survivor support, as part of their national service.

In Rwanda, the government has set up organisations and government bodies tasked with supporting survivors and remembering and commemorating the genocide. This contrasts with other countries such as the Baltic states, where there is a reluctance to acknowledge the extensive complicity of the population in the killing of Jews during the Holocaust, and in the former Yugoslav states where denial or minimisation of genocidal crimes such as the Srebrenica Massacre is still a political issue.

HMD activities could try to build understanding of the trauma faced by survivors through life stories. Activity organisers may wish to reference some of the organisations and initiatives that work to support survivors as they rebuild their lives and call on those involved in the activity to think about how they, individually, can support survivors.

Displacement and refugees

The question of *how* life can go on is bound up with *where* it goes on. Times of genocide are always times of acute social upheaval; tens of thousands, sometimes millions, of people are forced from or flee their homes. In Cambodia most of the population was displaced; in Bosnia, Muslims were systematically removed from their homes. During the Holocaust Jews from across occupied Europe were forcibly transported to ghettos, concentration camps, and extermination camps sometimes thousands of miles away from their homes. This meant that when the Nazi camps were liberated, the few who had survived found themselves scattered across a continent.

‘When they came to collect us from Dover one of the first things my uncle said to me was ‘I don’t want to talk about anything that happened to you. I don’t want my girls upset’. It was a huge disappointment that nobody wanted to know, it was horrific. I was really, really angry, not only about what had happened, but the reaction from other people.’

Kitty Hart-Moxon – survivor of the Holocaust⁴

Where do the displaced go when the genocide ends? How can individuals and nations assist those refugees who have survived genocide but have no place to return? In Bosnia, thousands of Muslim refugees found sanctuary in Europe, while others returned home. However, there remain villages in Bosnia that are impossible for Muslims to return to.

For survivors who can return home, the process is painful and in many instances involves living side-by-side perpetrators and bystanders. For those who have to make a new home, there are different challenges: they may not feel a sense of belonging in a newly adopted village, city or country. Many do not know where to call ‘home’.

‘Because I did not return to Hungary, I lost my nationality. I became stateless. An outcast. No papers, no residence permit, no work permit. I often worked illegally, was cold and hungry, travelled with a false passport. It took me 12 more years to obtain a nationality and become a recognised civil being again.’

Trude Levi – survivor of the Holocaust⁵

Activities may wish to focus on stories of displacement and refugees from the Holocaust, Nazi persecution and the subsequent genocides and draw parallels to debates over refugees of today. Millions of people have fled the genocide in Darfur, with some seeking refuge here in the UK.

Justice

Seeking justice after genocide is complicated and raises a number of challenging questions. Is justice possible after genocide? Who gets to decide what form that justice takes? Is it ever too late to seek it? Can there be lasting peace without justice and accountability? Does holding perpetrators to account in a criminal court act as a deterrent?

International and national attempts to seek criminal justice after genocide have evolved since the Nuremberg Trials, where Nazi leaders were put on trial by the Allied forces in the wake of the Second World War. Since then, ad-hoc courts have been established in order to prosecute individuals deemed most responsible for genocide. These include the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, and the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia.

In Rwanda where the national court system became overwhelmed by the number of people in prisons awaiting trial for crimes related to the genocide, the government made the decision to set up a series of local courts called *gacaca*. These community courts were held once a week in villages all over the country, in informal settings. Over 12,000 *gacaca* courts were set up and prosecuted one million people for genocide crimes, from looting to committing massacre. However, the use of these courts has been controversial, as they were never intended for crimes of this scale, only previously having been used for local disputes. The aims of the *gacaca* was to achieve truth, justice and reconciliation. The courts gave many survivors the chance to hear what had happened to their families, find out where their bodies were buried and gave the community as a whole a chance to face those who were accused and hear their story.

On 17 July 1998, the international community reached an historic milestone when 120 states adopted the Rome Statute, the legal basis for establishing the permanent International Criminal Court. The court began operating in 2002 and is responsible for trying those accused of 'most serious crimes of concern to the international community as a whole' including genocide. In 2010 the President of Sudan, Omar Al-Bashir, became the first sitting head of state to be indicted by the International Criminal Court for genocide. The arrest warrant against him has yet to be executed. As the genocide continues in Darfur Omar Al-Bashir remains president in Sudan, and justice of all kinds eludes Darfuris.

'We hope that peace will come someday soon to Darfur, that the conflict which has destroyed so many lives, caused so much suffering and allowed so many crimes, will be brought to an end. But we know that we cannot return to peace without accounting for what has been done. The women and children of Darfur deserve justice, they deserve the chance to hold those responsible to account, they deserve to be treated, at last, with dignity.'

Letter from 28 Darfuri women to the African Union and Arab League⁶

Holding those responsible for genocide to account is a crucial component to life after genocide. Seven decades after the liberation of Auschwitz, those suspected of playing a role in the Holocaust and Nazi persecution continue to be arrested and tried for their crimes. Because genocide is deemed to be an international crime, responsibility for prosecuting genocide suspects extends beyond the borders of where the crime took place. In Today, UK law states that individuals in the UK suspected of committing crimes of genocide after 1991 should be tried in UK courts. This means those suspected of being involved in genocides in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur could face justice in the UK. However, the UK has yet to try a single person for the crime of genocide.

While criminal justice is certainly important, and should be pursued wherever possible, the challenge for securing justice for survivors of genocide surely goes beyond the courtroom.

Activity organisers could create activities that consider the meaning of justice after genocide. What could it look like? Indeed, is a court judgement really justice if survivors cannot return home, or continue to be persecuted?

Rebuilding communities

Genocide destroys communities. Genocide also divides communities. How can communities and nations rebuild after genocide?

There is a physical aspect to the process of rebuilding. After World War Two, many urban areas that had previously been home to thriving Jewish communities were rebuilt in a way that cemented the eradication of Jewish culture.

In Bosnia, a Serb nationalist mayor stated 'There never were any mosques in Zvornik' after all the town's mosques were destroyed and the entire Muslim population killed or expelled between April and July 1992. In a town previously known for its Muslim heritage, with this line, the Mayor denied the community had ever existed and helped to destroy evidence of 500 years of shared living between Muslims and Christians.

In Poland, a country with a rich Jewish history and once home to Europe's largest Jewish community, only a handful of Jews remain today. Before the World War Two nearly a third of the Warsaw population were Jews and the city was home to a vibrant Jewish district. During the Holocaust that community, with its synagogues, theatres and political representation, was virtually wiped out. In April 2013 The Museum of the History of Polish Jews based in the former Warsaw ghetto opened its doors to the public to recall and preserve the memory of the history of Polish Jews. The Program Director of the Museum's Core Exhibition Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has said about it 'Here in Poland I think this museum can make an enormous difference in the renewal of Jewish life. The renewal is small, the community is small, but that doesn't make it any less important'.

'In 1946, on 4 July to be exact, a group of survivors – I think the number was forty-two – who came back to their town of Kielce, were massacred. This was a year after the war ended and it was a signal to dad that there was no future for us in our town of Kosow and our country of Poland and we had to leave; because if those things can happen after the experiences of the Second World War, then our lives were not safe. That was the signal to many other survivors who did the same thing.'

Jerry Koenig – survivor of the Holocaust⁷

The existence of Roma and Sinti communities who no longer have a physical or cultural presence in so much of Europe have in many places been completely (and perhaps purposefully) forgotten. In stark contrast, The Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma based in Heidelberg celebrates more than 600 years of Roma and Sinti communities in Germany. It works with survivors to remember the genocide of these communities and promotes Roma and Sinti culture and tradition today.

When surviving communities are able to return, it often means survivors are forced to face those who were responsible for their suffering through either active support or through their indifference. In Rwanda, survivors live side-by-side perpetrators. Because aspects of the genocide in Rwanda were very local, this means some survivors have returned to their homes and villages where neighbours, friends, and even extended family members, participated in the genocide. In these circumstances how can life resume and social cohesion progress after genocide?

Activity organisers may wish to highlight stories of rebuilding after genocide. Activities could investigate and celebrate Roma or Sinti communities in the UK today or consider how we can all support communities to be rebuilt or celebrated today.

Reconciliation and forgiveness

Should perpetrators ask for forgiveness? Is true reconciliation and forgiveness possible or even desirable?

There is no right or wrong when it comes to reconciliation and forgiveness. Everybody's experience is different:

Simon Wiesenthal's book tells the story of how he was approached by a dying member of the SS so he could confess and ask forgiveness from a Jew during the Holocaust. In the book, Wiesenthal reflects on his reaction at the time (he said nothing) and how he has thought about this over time since – being torn between compassion, justice, silence and truth.

'I saw him briefly, just a glance. He's a broken man, an elderly man. Forgiveness? Who am I to forgive him? I'm lucky I survived. I think perpetrators have to answer for what they've done. Germany is at the forefront of reconciliation, and it has been for a long time. Thank God for that. But we must never forget.'

Survivor of the Holocaust, Susan Pollack, speaking on the trial of Oskar Groening⁸

'Forgiving is difficult, but it's not impossible because the few genocide survivors can't develop Rwanda by themselves. We all need to combine our energy to develop the country. But I think it's better for those who committed the crimes to start asking for forgiveness. They should come to us to talk about it. Let's say if it's a Hutu who killed, he should come and say, 'I killed people and I am really sorry.' They should show us that they are truly sorry. Then things could proceed.'

Freddy Mutanguha – survivor of the Genocide in Rwanda⁹

'Sometimes there is nothing you can do about a particular individual or the situation. Therefore retaining the anger in your heart continues to bring pain and bitterness to you and may affect your children in future. Forgiveness is therefore not for the other person, but for you who are bitter. When you forgive, you heal yourself.'

Jean Paul Samputu – survivor of the Genocide in Rwanda and musician¹⁰

HMD activities could include discussion about forgiveness and reconciliation, can those involved in the activity imagine forgiving the perpetrators of such a crime? Whose place is it to forgive such crimes?

Remembering

Why is it important to memorialise and remember genocide? Who can remember when a whole group has been destroyed – or when the group has little voice? Whose responsibility is it to remember? How can we ensure memorialisation and remembrance is inclusive and not divisive?

So much of our ability to remember the Holocaust, Nazi Persecution and the subsequent genocides is thanks to those survivors who have been able to speak about their experiences. Through memoir, testimony, poetry and art, survivors have led us all in ensuring memory never dies.

Many communities that were systematically persecuted and destroyed by the Nazis such as the Roma and Sinti, disabled people and gay people were unable to pass on a strong collective memory of their suffering. This has meant their persecution has often not been remembered or memorialised.

'Somehow, my family knew nothing of this story. It seemed to me as if these terrible events had been completely erased from memory'

Sigrid Falkenstein on his aunt Anna Lehnkering, murdered as part of the Nazi programme of killing disabled people¹¹

The history and memorialisation of a genocide can be key to how life continues post-genocide. How individuals, communities and nations recall, recount and remember genocide can be contentious.

Today there are a large number of Holocaust museums and memorials around the world, but this is a relatively recent development. Memorials and museums in Cambodia, Rwanda and Bosnia mark the genocides that occurred there, but are not as frequently memorialised abroad.

Holocaust and genocide studies are now major academic disciplines, with vast numbers of books, journals, fictional narratives and memoirs available. HMD activities could explore the nature of memorialisation and the writing of history. Activity organisers may wish to reference the different national exhibitions at Auschwitz, and the plans being developed by the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation.

Facing hate: denial and trivialisation

Denial is the final stage of genocide. Examples of denial can be found for each of the genocides marked on HMD. In some countries Holocaust denial is a crime. The UK does not have a statute that reflects the 2007 EU directive which made 'publicly condoning, denying or grossly trivialising crimes of genocide' punishable by law.

The theme will explore the question of how life can go on after the Holocaust and genocide whilst denial and trivialisation exist. Some survivors have given this as their reason for testifying at trials of alleged perpetrators: to provide proof to those who deny the Holocaust.

'To me the most important part of the trial was to let the world know about the Holocaust, to counteract denial. To me Holocaust denial is just as painful as the tragedy I went through.'

Survivor of the Holocaust, Ivor Perl, at the trial of Oskar Groening¹²

In 1994 historian Deborah Lipstadt published her book *Denying the Holocaust*, in which she named antisemitic 'historian' David Irving as a Holocaust denier. Irving sued Lipstadt and her publisher for libel. In court Lipstadt demonstrated that Irving has systematically distorted history and was an active Holocaust denier, antisemite, and racist. The story of the 1996 libel trial will be told in a film starring Rachel Weiss, to be released this year.

HMD activities can actively stand up against denial and trivialisation by teaching about the Holocaust, Nazi Persecution and the subsequent genocides. Activity organisers should consider how they can best increase understanding of these crimes.

Facing Hate: today

Antisemitism and other forms of hate continue today. Failing to learn the lessons of the past, extremist groups are growing in strength and voice across Europe and the world often espousing hatred of Jews, Muslims, Roma and immigrants.

I'm afraid that Europe is forgetting its past and that Auschwitz is only sleeping. Anti-Gypsy threats, policies and actions worry me greatly and make me very sad.

Ceija Stojka – Roma Auschwitz survivor¹³

Jewish people today often face hate from far right, far left and Islamic extremists. A study by the Community Security Trust recorded 924 antisemitic incidents in the UK during 2015, 86 of which were violent assaults. A different study undertaken by the Rabbinical Centre of Europe showed 70% of the continent's Jewish population are afraid to expose their religion in public.

From January to October 2015, Tell Mama recorded approximately 2,500 cases of anti-Muslim hatred in the UK whilst the year 2014/15 saw 5,597 hate crimes in the UK motivated by the victim's sexuality and 2,508 motivated by the disability of a victim.

Some describe the Roma as 'the most persecuted group in Europe'; their growing stigmatisation led the United Nations Special Rapporteur on minority issues in 2015 to warn of the 'resurgence of unacceptable myths about Roma criminality, unworthiness and inferiority'.

Conflict in Burundi, although political in its origins, is at risk of descending towards communal violence. Like its neighbour Rwanda, Burundi's history has been marked by violence between Hutu and Tutsi communities. Today use of rhetoric reminiscent of that heard in the run up to the genocide in neighbouring Rwanda where up to 1,000,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutus were murdered, is of major concern.

In Darfur, genocide rages on.

These are just some of the examples that show groups who have been the victims of genocide continue to be threatened with identity-based violence today. This raises serious questions about individual, organisational, community and governmental responsibilities for protecting the rights of marginalised communities.

HMD activities can help encourage participants to stand up against hate in our world today. Activity organisers should consider if there are ways their activity can fight antisemitism and other forms of hate in the UK, or can encourage participants to support efforts to tackle identity-based hate around the world.

Teaching about living:

On HMD we should not remember only how the victims of the Holocaust, Nazi persecution and subsequent genocides died, but also how they lived. We should learn and teach about the cultures and practices the perpetrators wanted to destroy and ensure the world never knows more about how these people died than it does about how they lived.

Everybody should stand together with genocide survivors, and anybody who has been the victim of identity-based hate, to support them in ensuring life can go on. Each of us must ask ourselves what we can do to answer Elie Wiesel's call to help teach genocide survivors about living and to make their recovery just that little bit easier.

Activities might focus on celebrating cultures, for example activities could increase understanding about Judaism or Islam. Perhaps those involved in activities could learn the Intore 'cow' dance of Rwanda or a few words from the language of the Fur tribe in Darfur.

Further resources:

We have created an extensive further resources list to support activity organisers in exploring this year's theme. The list includes information on books, films, web resources, museums and memorials, archive material and court records, articles and organisations.

[The further resources document can be found here.](#)

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- ¹ Ellie Wiesel, *"The Holocaust Patient," an address to Cedars-Sinai Medical Staff*, Los Angeles, 1982. Referenced in: Robert Krell, *Alternative therapeutic approaches to Holocaust survivors*. In: Paul Marcus and Alan Rosenberg ed. *Healing Their Wounds: Psychotherapy with Holocaust Survivors and Their Families*, Praeger, 1989. Page 216
- ² Chanrithy Him, *When Broken Glass Floats*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2000. Page 25
- ³ Wendy Whitworth ed. *Survival: Holocaust survivors tell their story*, Quill Press, 2003. Page 380
- ⁴ Sunday Mercury, *Auschwitz survivor Kitty Hart-Moxon honoured by University of Birmingham*, 24 July 2014. <http://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/local-news/auschwitz-survivor-kitty-hart-moxon-honoured-5313594>
- ⁵ Wendy Whitworth ed. *Survival: Holocaust survivors tell their story*, Quill Press, 2003. Page 263
- ⁶ Letter from Darfuri Women to the African Union and Arab League, 4 March 2009. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2009/03/04/letter-darfuri-women-african-union-and-arab-league>
- ⁷ Lyn Smith ed. *Forgotten Voices of the Holocaust*, Ebury Press, 2005. Page 300
- ⁸ *Auschwitz trial: 'We were dehumanised completely' says British survivor*, Telegraph 13 May 2015. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/11602741/Auschwitz-trial-We-were-dehumanised-completely-says-British-survivor.html>
- ⁹ Wendy Whitworth ed. *We Survived Genocide in Rwanda*, Quill Press, 2006. Page 118
- ¹⁰ Jean Paul Samputu, Samputu Forgiveness Campaign. <http://www.samputufc.org/node/9>
- ¹¹ Sigrid Falkenstein, *Nazi "euthanasia" and forced sterilisation in one family's memory – a reflection on the collective repression of memories and their increasing recollection*, Speech given at Commemorative event "Psychiatry under National Socialism – Remembrance and Responsibility", Berlin, November 2010. http://www.dgppn.de/fileadmin/user_upload/medien/download/pdf/presseservice-kongresse/2010/2010-commemorative_event-speech-falkenstein.pdf
- ¹² Ivor Perl, at the trial of Oskar Groening, July 2015. <http://hmd.org.uk/news/hmdt-statement-oskar-groening-trial-verdict>
- ¹³ Ceija Stojka (Chaya Stoyka), <http://hmd.org.uk/resources/stories/ceija-stojka-chaya-stoyka>