

HANSARD 28th January 2010

Holocaust Memorial Day

Topical debate

1.2 pm

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon) (Lab): I am pleased that my right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the House accepted my request for the debate, which has become an annual institution. Yesterday was the 10th national Holocaust memorial day commemoration. I take pride in the fact that I devised the parliamentary strategy that led to its being established. I do not take credit for the idea behind it, but for focusing the campaign to make it happen. That occurred after a visit I paid to Auschwitz with the Holocaust Educational Trust and the personal impact it made on me.

We all have our memories of a visit to Auschwitz and it is always something little that suddenly strikes us. What struck me, from the industrial scale of what I saw, were the piles of shoes and boots, from which every single shoelace had been removed by some poor slave labourer. That brings home the industrial nature of what happened.

I pay particular tribute to Rabbi Barry Marcus for his work. On the plane back from the visit, I thought, “What can I do as an individual to stop this happening again?” Having the privileged position of being a Member of Parliament meant that I had access to the private Member’s Bill process and parliamentary questions to push forward the idea of a memorial day on a cross-party basis.

The motivation was not just to draw attention to the visits to Auschwitz, but to reflect on what I picked up from my constituency. I have the biggest Jewish constituency in the country—one in five people are Jewish. The holocaust is in many ways a living thing in that community. Many debates, discussions and arguments about its implications for modern society go on. However, those discussions are introverted and go on among Jewish people, and I took the view that we needed to try to turn them outward to engage society as a whole. If there were another holocaust—please God, there will not be—it would not come from within the Jewish community, who would be the victims, but from wider society, as happened in Germany. It would come from people from my sort of background—an ordinary small town in Yorkshire or wherever, where there are not many Jewish people. That is why it is important to turn the debate outwards.

The idea was not to rival Yom HaShoah, the Jewish community’s own commemorative day. There were arguments in the Jewish community about whether it was a good idea and what day it should be. The purpose was to educate and inform about the lessons of the holocaust, not just on one day, but to use that day as a focus for schools and communities throughout the country. Consequently, events happen throughout the country, including in my borough of Barnet, though, for the first time, I was not invited this year, which I found distressing. We see a lot on broadcast media. Wonderful documentaries have been made and there is good news coverage. Of course, tribute has been paid to the Holocaust Educational Trust, and I am pleased that the visits to Auschwitz are supported by grants from our Government.

As has been said, the holocaust was not about just the Jews, but the Roma and Sinti, gay people, disabled people and political opponents. I have had the opportunity of meeting holocaust survivors at the Holocaust Survivors Centre, which is part of Jewish Care and is based in my constituency. An estimated 5,000 survivors of the camps or refugees live in the UK now, but they are, inevitably, a dwindling band. Indeed, I spoke to the chap sitting in front of me, who was a holocaust survivor, at the ceremony yesterday and he told me that seven of his friends had died in the previous year.

I pay tribute to Judith Hassan, Jewish Care's director of services for holocaust survivors and refugees, and her staff for the work of the Holocaust Survivors Centre. It provides a social centre for survivors, practical advice, befriending and, most important, a recording of testimonies. As survivors age, it is vital that their legacy is recorded. The imaginative legacy of hope means that those testimonies must live on.

We have all heard the moving stories of many prominent holocaust survivors—Ben Helfgott, Gena Turgel and others, who do such magnificent job going around schools—but talking to those who perhaps do not have the same confidence or are less prominent, such as the chap to whom I spoke yesterday, also sends out the message.

Like my hon. Friend the Minister, I visited Poland with the Holocaust Educational Trust and the all-party group on anti-Semitism. We went to Warsaw and Majdanek. As my hon. Friend said, in Warsaw, we saw the effort not just to eliminate the Jews, but to obliterate all memory of them. The first thing we saw were tram tracks going nowhere in the middle of a wasteland. Our guide said, "Before the war, this was the Warsaw equivalent of Oxford street." It had been completely obliterated. We have heard of the ghetto uprising—the first civilian uprising against the Nazis. The Jews were outnumbered 1,000 to one, and the Germans' technological advantages were enormous, but they held out for nearly a month—27 days in 1943—to make the point that there were people who were prepared to resist.

My hon. Friend the Minister mentioned Oneg Shabbat, the extraordinary archive—the secret archive, which was inspired by Emmanuel Ringelblum, a holocaust victim, to ensure that the memory of the Jewish community lasted. Those people had no way of knowing whether the milk churns would be found, or whether they would be found by the Germans and destroyed, but that was their legacy of hope. In Emmanuel Ringelblum's words:

"It must all be recorded with not a single fact omitted. And when the time comes—as it surely will—let the world read and know what the murderers have done."

I also had the opportunity of meeting Elie Wiesel when he came to receive his honorary knighthood. He said that

"hope without memory is like memory without hope."

On our visit to Poland, we went to villages where all traces of the substantial majority Jewish population have been eliminated—completely wiped out. In one village, we found the synagogue down a back street, locked up and now used as a store room. The grave stones had been dug up and used to pave the roads. Some had been recovered and turned into a moving and poignant memorial in the forest some distance away from the village.

As my hon. Friend the Minister said, we visited Majdanek on the outskirts of Lublin. The Polish people must have known what was going on there; they were pretty powerless to do anything about it. We visited the Parliament in Warsaw, and what brought matters home to me there was the memorial to hundreds of Polish Members of Parliament who had been murdered by the Nazis. Those who had not been murdered by the Nazis were killed by Stalin. That brings it home that if it had happened here, none of us would have survived because the intention was to eliminate the leadership of the country.

It was interesting to talk to the Chief Rabbi in Poland—an American rabbi who had gone to live there—and hear how children of the holocaust who had been adopted by Polish families and become Catholics, because that was predominant religion in Poland, were now rediscovering their Jewish heritage and looking into their backgrounds and families.

I pay tribute to the Yad Vashem “The Guardian of the Memory” scheme, which I launched in Parliament two years ago on 23 January 2008. The idea behind it is for us all to take on the responsibility of remembering a victim of the holocaust and light a candle on Yom HaShoah. I asked Yad Vashem whether it could identify victims of the holocaust who were MPs, and it came up with 12 names, whom we paired with living MPs. I chose Itzhak Seiakis who was a Greek MP—the whole House knows that I am quite interested in Greek affairs and speak Greek. Seventy-seven thousand Jews lived in Greece before the holocaust; 60,000 were murdered. All we knew about Itzhak was that he was born in 1882 in Larissa and died in 1942 in Auschwitz. Rather than just light a candle, I felt it was incumbent on me to find out more about him and to turn him into a person, as it were, in memory.

Using my connections in Greece, I was able to establish that his family in Larissa were merchant tailors, originally from the island of Khios. He had been educated to a high level, probably in either Athens or Istanbul. He moved to Thessaloniki, where he became a Member of Parliament and director of the community charity organisations of the city. He was arrested along with the rest of the panel of the directorate on 14 April 1941 only six days after the Germans invaded. After a few weeks in prison in that city, he was deported to Auschwitz, where he died in 1942.

My researches enabled me to identify a living relative, Alberto, who was living in an old people’s home in Thessaloniki. He did not speak any English, so I had to try to make contact with him in Greek, but unfortunately he died weeks before I was able to do so. I regretted that I had not been able to find Alberto Seiakis’s legacy of hope and hear his story, and fill in the gaps about Itzhak.

For me, that was about trying to build on that legacy of hope—learning about people whom it is difficult to find out about. We can easily find out about prominent people, but the people who are not easy to find out about make up the 6 million Jews and the 11 million victims. Every single one was a real living person. When we talk about the telephone numbers of people who died, it is easy to forget that each was an individual person with their own family, hopes and aspirations, all of which were snuffed out by the Nazi holocaust.

Have we achieved very much? There are still many outstanding issues from the holocaust—holocaust restitution, for example. Only last year, Parliament unanimously passed the Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) Act 2009, which I introduced as a private Member’s Bill. It will come into force in a few days’ time so that we can close

yet another chapter in the holocaust and enable people to reclaim their looted works of art.

Has Holocaust memorial day achieved the objective we originally set out for it 10 years ago? There is no doubt that there is a much wider knowledge of the holocaust now than 10 years ago; that the holocaust features in our school curricula much more than it ever did; that Holocaust memorial day has provided a focus for communities to come together to talk about the holocaust; and that it has provided an opportunity to confront those Holocaust deniers such as the British National party, as we saw with Nick Griffin on "Question Time".

Holocaust memorial day has also, indirectly, brought alive the holocaust for the Armenians, although they are not commemorated as part of the process. However, it has not prevented the genocide in Darfur. We remember Rwanda, Bosnia, Cambodia, East Timor and all the other genocides that have taken place since 1945, but genocide is still with us. We must remember, through Holocaust memorial day, that there is still an awful lot more for us to do if we are ever to eliminate genocide from our planet.