

International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust

Memorial Ceremony, General Assembly Hall

28 January 2015

Statement by Charlotte Cohen, Youth Advisor to the UK Prime Minister's Holocaust Commission

Good afternoon. My name is Charlotte Cohen and I am 17 years old. I live in Lancashire, in the United Kingdom.

I would like to begin by thanking the United Nation's Holocaust Outreach Programme for inviting me to speak. It is a real honour to address you today, on the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

In 2013 my Prime Minister, the Rt Hon David Cameron MP, established a Holocaust Commission in order to ensure that Britain has a permanent and fitting memorial to the Holocaust. The Commission launched an essay competition for young people asking 'Why is it so important that we remember the Holocaust and how can we make sure that future generations never forget?'. Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate, Elie Wiesel, judged the essays from young people across the UK and, in October, I was appointed as the Commission's Youth Adviser. Yesterday, the Commission published report recommending reforms for UK Holocaust commemoration and education, including plans for a new memorial in London.

I am proud to be part of a body that will shape the way that Britain remembers the Holocaust for generations to come.

'Why should we remember the Holocaust?' It is a good question, and one that we must discuss openly if we are to engage all people of all ages with Holocaust commemoration.

The Holocaust was the murder of 6 million individual Jewish men, women and children. It was therefore an intensely human tragedy.

We must not forget that the attempted destruction of Europe's Jews caused incalculable damage and grief which is still felt today. I recently discovered, completely by chance on holiday in Berlin, that I too had lost a family member in the Holocaust. There is a part of my history, of my ancestry, that until then I was totally disassociated from and unaware of. This led me to realise how voids caused by the eradication of whole communities and families has ramifications worldwide. In remembering the Holocaust, we acknowledge and contemplate this huge loss.

Mine is the last generation who will have the opportunity to speak to survivors of the Holocaust. My contemporaries and I will therefore be instrumental in passing on their memories, and have a special responsibility to ensure that the legacy of the survivors endures.

Recognition of the contemporary relevance of the Holocaust is extremely important to me. When I hear my friends using pejorative terms, referencing someone's ethnicity or sexuality, I wonder if they comprehend the true implications of their words. Would they use these phrases if they knew exactly where discrimination and racism had led to in their grandparent's lifetimes? That it had created an atmosphere in which the mass murder of millions of people had become possible? My friends are not bad people. Nor are they unintelligent, or irrational. So for me, the answer has to be "no"- they wouldn't. Understanding how the Holocaust started, and how prejudice and intolerance became the norm before the mass-murder began, highlights to young people the gravity of their words. It might help them make better choices, and it is a further reason why Holocaust education is so imperative.

Last year, I took part in the Lessons from Auschwitz Project run by the Holocaust Educational Trust, a British charity which engages young people like me with the issues surrounding the Holocaust. The Project includes the opportunity to visit Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Having seen how racism and discrimination led to such atrocities, the schoolchildren in my group returned to the UK with a renewed will to combat prejudice wherever we encountered it. It was heartening to see how, despite the different backgrounds of those taking part in the project, we shared common values including those of Liberty and Life, two of the themes of the UN's Holocaust Commemoration programme. We recognised the Holocaust as an attack on our values, and understood that it stands as a part of our shared history, an assault on our right to life, and on our right to live in liberty.

Today, as we remember the millions of victims of the Holocaust, we must also reflect on the actions taken- and not taken- by the rest of the world. I hope that in the future Holocaust commemoration and education will continue to act as a unifying force, bringing people from all walks of life together to challenge hatred wherever we find it.

Thank you very much.