

Never, But Never, Be A Bystander

Thought for the Day

Ephraim Borowski (Director, Scottish Council of Jewish Communities)

Broadcast on Radio Scotland, 27 January 2012

Today is Holocaust Memorial Day. This date was chosen internationally because it's the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz concentration camp in 1945. Here in Scotland, the national commemoration took place in Dundee last night, and all this week schools throughout the country have been studying the Holocaust – the systematic, state-organised, industrial-scale, extermination project that remains unique, even in a world sadly used to genocide and ethnic cleansing.

Last night we were privileged to listen to Rabbi Bent Melchior, the former Chief Rabbi of Denmark. In a very traditional Jewish way, he told stories and asked questions. He asked: if the Jewish calendar commemorates a few hundred victims of the ancient Egyptians, or a few thousand victims of the Romans and Babylonians, how should we remember six million victims of the Nazis?

He refuted the well-known story that the King of Denmark wore the Nazi yellow star, but said the truth is even more compelling: just before the Nazis occupied Denmark in 1943, the king had been invited to visit the main synagogue. The Jewish leaders wanted to cancel to spare him embarrassment, but he replied, "Had you not already invited me, I would have asked for an invitation".

Contrast that with yesterday's report that one in five Germans still shows antipathy to Jews, and here in the UK, MPs having to apologise for abusing Holocaust imagery, and the National Union of Students reporting that almost one in three Jewish students have been the victim of a hate incident.

Rabbi Melchior asked, how should the world have acted like the Danish king? The answer is the theme of this year's Holocaust Memorial Day – "Speak up; speak out", or as Prof Yehuda Bauer of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem once put it in a speech to the German parliament: "it's time to strengthen [the Ten Commandments] with three more: thou shalt not be a perpetrator; thou shalt not be a victim; and thou shalt never, but never, be a bystander."