

HINDE STREET METHODIST CHURCH

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Rabbi Helen Freeman

Erev Holocaust Memorial Day

My husband and I decided to go to Poland the year that we got married. Both of us came from families that originated from the large Jewish community in pre-war Poland, and we wanted to get some sense of where their culture flourished, in Warsaw and in Cracow and in the small villages around Lodz.

Our first shock was at the Jewish Museum in Warsaw, when my husband used his knowledge of Yiddish to ask about the little shtetl, or Jewish village his family came from. His old uncle, who came to England at the age of 15 had talked about the wooden houses, the shared celebrations, and the warm community where everyone knew each other. It really sounded like something out of Fiddler on the Roof, but we were told that the Jewish community of Sgerz was absolutely destroyed to the last man, woman and child, and it is now an industrial suburb of Lodz. More than that, they suggested we didn't visit at all, as the only remnant of Jewish life was the memorial erected by Jewish family members who had escaped to Western Europe or to the United States, and wanted their loved ones to be named, as they had no proper grave.

On the way from Warsaw to Cracow, we stopped off at Czestochowa, the famous cathedral where the black Madonna is kept, the beautiful icon which is considered the 'mother of all Poland.' We were, as foreigners, very privileged to be allowed to witness the service, which was all in Polish, with no prayer books required as the whole community knew the Mass off by heart. At the highpoint of the service, there was a trumpet blast, and the silver screen over the icon was raised to reveal the black Madonna. It was not my language or my religion, but it was a very powerful service and it was clearly incredibly moving for those who were present. For my husband and I, both trained in Jungian psychology, it was a real living example of an archetypal experience of the divine feminine and how deeply moving that can be.

And then, the very next day, we went as a group to Auschwitz. You may recall the famous gates that have inscribed over them 'ARBEIT MACHT FREI'-work makes you free over them. Apparently, the idea was to reassure the inmates, who had often travelled long distances in closed railway carriages, that there was a better future awaiting them. Our former Senior Rabbi, Hugo Gryn,

arrived at the gates of Auschwitz when he was a fifteen year old Hungarian boy, who beyond a deep insight, had little experience of the world. As the inmates moved amongst the new arrivals, they whispered in Yiddish 'you are 19 and you have a trade.' That saved Hugo's life, he claimed to be able to work for the German war effort, and so he lived through the horrors of the camp. He wrote a book 'Chasing Shadows' together with his daughter Naomi that outlines this whole experience. There are many vignettes that stick in your mind when you read it, not least that , having found a secret hiding place and calculated when Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year was due to fall, he decided to fast, foregoing even his meagre rations, and prayed to G-d all day, crying more than he ever had before or did afterwards. Hugo used to do the Thought for the Day on Radio 4 and one of his best known broadcasts recounts a story of Chanukah, another Jewish festival when you light a candle for eight nights to recall the Jewish people's redemption from another tyrant, in this case Antiochus Ehipanes. Hugo's father gathered the people in their barracks together after dark to where his melted margarine ration was sitting with an amateur attempt at a wick, ready to light and say the Chanukah Prayers. When Hugo at fifteen complained about the waste of a precious food source, his father said to him that they had once lived for three weeks without food, they had once lived for three days without water, but they couldn't live for three minutes without hope. Sadly, Hugo's dad didn't make it to the end of the war, but he took that lesson forward with him and dedicated his life to rebuilding a family and caring for the family of the Jewish people , particularly at West London Synagogue.

Hugo, like so many Auschwitz survivors, couldn't speak about the Holocaust or return to the city of his birth for around fifty years after the war. A visit to the camp makes clear why, the enormity of the evil perpetrated is almost unbearable, the piles of suitcases, the spectacles that were taken from prisoners, the piles of hair, it was as if a heavy black cloud hung around the whole camp. With us on the coach was a lovely retired Catholic priest, he had come all the way from Luton to pay his respects to the memory of Maximilian Kolbe. He was an extraordinary man, who was in the punishment cells with a Jewish father of five. Kolbe offered to change places with him, so he went to his death and the Jewish man lived to bring up his five children. But by the time we reached the punishment cells, the poor Catholic priest was too overwhelmed with the horrors he had seen, and couldn't bring himself to go in. In fact, on the way back to Cracow, he asked my husband, who is also a rabbi, if he would join him in saying a prayer. We had a lovely moment when he read a prayer and David read a psalm in Hebrew. The priest asked him how human beings could possibly behave

towards each other with such immense cruelty? David's answer was a comment on opposites, he said that in the church in Czestochowa, we had been looking into the light, and at Auschwitz, we looked into the eyes of the devil.

The coach was very silent as we returned to Cracow, and later one of our new friends appeared at our door with a bunch of flowers, she didn't really know why, but she knew that she too wanted to bring some light into the deep darkness of that day. That priest's question of how human beings can allow such evil to happen, is THE question as we approach Holocaust Memorial Day. One of the Hugo Gryn's understanding, having survived Auschwitz, is that we have to make a commitment, not only to avoid being perpetrators, but also to avoid the sin of being inactive bystanders to persecution. I am not diminishing how very hard that is, to resist the temptation to 'follow after the multitude to do evil', as the book of Exodus puts it, is really hard. But it is possible, and done with great courage doing the Holocaust by many of the Righteous Gentiles who are commemorated in Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial Centre in Jerusalem. There were good and brave people who made the decision to 'Stand Together' with the oppressed not only in the Holocaust, but also in Bosnia and Darfur and Rwanda and more recently with the Yazidis of Iraq. This Holocaust Memorial Day, as we commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz, the theme across the country is that very phrase, to 'Stand Together.'

In choosing the theme 'Stand Together' the organisers explained that 'During the Holocaust and genocide, communities were deliberately divided and individuals persecuted because of their identity. Despite the dangers of doing so, some people chose to stand together with those targeted challenging the divisive action of genocidal regimes.

Our question, as we approach Holocaust Memorial Day 2020, is what exactly gives someone the inner strength to stand together with the persecuted and against the hatred that is sowed by totalitarian regimes? It takes a lot of courage to stand out against the crowd who wants to express hostility to those who are different, to the Jews or blacks or gays or Muslims, whoever is the archetypal 'other' whom they have been educated to hate. So, part of the inner strength to 'Stand Together' comes from an education and an upbringing that sees the spark of the divine in every human being.

At West London synagogue, at last year's Holocaust Memorial Day, we honoured an extraordinary group of young Germans who can be a role model for us as we confront the many and complex challenges of our polarised world. They were known as the White Rose Group and were centred

upon a group of students at LMU university in Munich. If you know your German history, you will appreciate that Bavaria was a haven of support for the Nazi party. In fact, two young people who became the inspiration for the White Rose Group, Hans and Sophie Scholl, were initially members of the Hitler youth. Hans, a natural leader, was chosen to go to one of the Nuremberg rallies as a flag bearer, one of the greatest honours offered to a young leader in those pre-war days. But he was a man of depth and thoughtfulness, influenced by his Christian upbringing and anti-Nazi father, and he came back nauseated by the mass hysteria and adulation of Hitler that felt like a substitute religion.

He and his great friend Alex Schmorell became the centre of the White Rose Group that took the immense risk of writing and distributing anti-Nazi material, not only in Munich, but also further afield in other cities. Hans and Alex had been in the medical corps in the army and were particularly influenced by the cruelty they saw on the Russian front. Alex related an experience when their troop train stopped in Poland. He saw, women and girls with heavy pick axes bent over with work, each one wearing a star of David. At the front was a young emaciated girl, with small delicate hands, a beautiful expressive face and an expression of unspeakable sorrow. Desperate to help, even a little, he jumped off the train and gave her his special ration of chocolate, raisins and nuts. At first she threw it down, too proud to take a gift from a German soldier in uniform, but he told he wanted to do something for her, and picked a daisy and put it on top of the package. He had to run to rejoin the train, and just saw the girl pick up the package, and put the flower in her hair. That tiny touch of humanity didn't save the girl's life, but it made that day more bearable, and it inspired Alex and his friend Hans and their whole group to 'Stand Together' with the persecuted Jews of Nazi occupied Europe.

The group of friends took immense risks to publicise the need to resist Nazi brutality, inspired by their mentor, professor Huber, who wrote the sixth and final leaflet. Sophie and Hans took a suitcase full of leaflets to the University in Munich. When Jakob Schmidt, the handyman, spotted them, they threw the leaflets over the balcony to the Courtyard below. They were all arrested and interrogated by the Gestapo, so cruelly that Sophie appeared in court with a broken leg.

Their extraordinary bravery and moral courage has inspired generations since. Sadly, the original White Rose Group were nearly all executed, Sophie just 21 years old. But their integrity and knowledge that a moral person must 'Stand Together' with the oppressed is memorialised in a museum in their honour in Munich. The university courtyard now has a sculptured version of their

White Rose pamphlets in the very same place where they threw them all those years ago.

There are schools all over Germany and further afield named after Hans and Sophie Scholl who knew from the depths of their souls that they must 'Stand Together' with the oppressed.

Just last summer, a group of students at Oxford University translated the White Rose Pamphlets into English, aware that the moral imperative to 'Stand Together' is true not only on Holocaust Memorial Day, but every day of the year. The book, called 'The White Rose: Reading, Writing, Resistance', enables us to learn anew that we may not look the other way when we see prejudice and persecution, and that the words we speak should be said with thoughtfulness and sensitivity. That is a counter-cultural narrative, but one that we as religious people have a responsibility to model for the wider world.

Amen