

GLEN EIRA TOWN HALL MELBOURNE

SUNDAY 2 APRIL 2006

**LAUNCH OF HEIRLOOM - THE SECOND ANTHOLOGY OF THE
MELBOURNE CHILD SURVIVORS OF THE HOLOCAUST**

**EDS: MARIETTA ELLIOTT-KLEERKOPER, HELEN GERSHONI AND
FLORIS KALMAN**

HOLOCAUST - WHIRLIGIG OF EMOTIONS

The Hon Justice Michael Kirby AC CMG*

THE HAUNTING MEMORY

There will always be memories of the Holocaust. Even when every distorted mind that conceived and executed the oppression are dead, there will be memories. They are written into the consciousness of humanity forever. Human beings everywhere will continue to recall the pitch black moments of human history that come together in the Holocaust.

There was genocide before the Nazis oppression. There have been fearful acts of genocide since. But never was genocide so

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carefully and methodically planned. Never was it executed by people of such high civilisation. Never was it performed by such fastidious human beings, who returned to their homes and children at night, attended meticulously to their hygiene and settled down to listen to recordings of Schubert and Beethoven that made them cry.

Never before were evil acts so carefully recorded in words, sounds, songs and images. For this reason, human beings will never be entirely free of the records of the Holocaust. The memories are never far from us. Nor should they be. We must remember them and learn from them. We should never let them go.

The Nazi Holocaust was a terrible oppression for many hated minorities who did not fit in to the oppressors' notion of an Aryan people. Those with such ideas turned their hatred on gypsies, socialists, communists, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, the disabled and others. But overwhelmingly, the planned mass murder of the Holocaust was targeted at Jews. They were hated because of their race and religion. Millions of them were hounded, cattle-trucked, selected, gassed and burnt. This happened when I was a boy, living safe in far away sunny Australia. It happened in my lifetime. It is impossible to be free of the images.

I am grateful that I have been asked to launch *Heirloom*, the second anthology of the Melbourne Child Survivors of the Holocaust. I honour those who initiated and edited this work. I pay my respects to

those who have contributed. I greet those who have come to participate in this launch. And to remember.

There have been many books that describe the special burdens placed on children of the Holocaust¹. One-and-a-half million Jewish children died. Analysis, statistics, records, maps, medical aspects, social research, backgrounds, nationalities. All of these historical studies are important. All should be collected, written down and remembered. But the precious quality of this book is that it tells the story of the Holocaust from the viewpoint of those who lived through it, and after it, as a child. As their intelligence and understanding of the world expanded, they came to know what it has meant to them and to their families. They share their experiences with us. They tell it as it felt to them.

Before I read this book, the best description I had seen of the experiences of a child in the Holocaust was written by another Melbourne child survivor: Abraham Biderman. In his autobiographical work, he described living from day to day and hand to mouth in the Lodz ghetto. It was a story filled with fear. But the most vivid image was his

¹ For example, M R Baker, *The Fiftieth Gate - A Journey Through Memory* (Flamingo, 1997); J E Young, *The Texture of Memory* (Yale, 1993); D La Capra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Cornell, 1998); O Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst* (Oxford, 1996); B Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget* (Chicago, 1998); I Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust* (Cambridge, 1999); D E Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust* (Free Press, 1993); T Cole, *Selling the Holocaust* (Routledge, 1999).

recollection of the SS guards in the death camp to which he was sent, singing carols on Christmas Eve. There he was, a boy, behind barbed wire, starved, terrified, lice-ridden and with little apparent hope of survival. And through the cold night came the haunting sound of men's voices singing "*Stille Nacht, heiliger Nacht*". He remembered their return to their religion and to its songs. A powerful image from another powerful book. It came into my hands a few years back when I was asked to judge the best Australian biography of the year. I chose Abraham Biderman's book² as the best. I did so for the power, the simplicity and the grace of his writing.

Every year since, he has sent me a Christmas card. Not a New Year's card. Not a Hanukah card. A Christmas card sent out of love and, despite all, a feeling of respect for my spiritual tradition. A signal of forgiveness. I cherish his card every time it arrives.

I hope that people of every religion, race, gender, sexual orientation and culture will come to exhibit the same feelings of reconciliation. If not in my lifetime, soon. Especially amongst the people of the Book - those of the shared Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions that are presently so divided.

² A Biderman, *The World of My Past* (self-published), 1994.

THE EMOTIONS OF THE BOOK

As I read *Heirloom*, I felt the whirligig of emotions that run through the contributions. What are the emotions to which the contributors give voice?

- * *Determination*: A feeling of the need to be silent no more. A need to record the story. To put on paper the memories of lost family members, fragments from mental photographs and recollections. This determination is voiced by the editors in their foreword³;
- * *Mutual respect*: The insistence that so many voices have still to be heard and that many will come to their descriptions from different viewpoints, demanding space for different opinions and attitudes to the subject of this history⁴;
- * *Minimisation*: To survive, many had to minimise and suppress the terrible events that unfolded around them. Floris Kalman declares that she had always believed that nothing had happened to the children⁵. Only now is she willing, in older age, to confront the numbing of feelings that was essential for survival;

³ M Elliott-Kleerkoper, H Gershoni and F Kalman (eds), *Holocaust - Second Anthology of the Melbourne Child Survivors of the Holocaust* (Hybrid, Melbourne, 2006), v.

⁴ *Id*, vii.

⁵ *Id*, 1.

- * *Fear*: Effort is still needed to quieten the fears that remain acute, even sixty years later. Anne Handelsmann-Braun describes⁶:

"What images ... keep coming back as flashbacks, nightmares, triggered by smells, the rattle of trains, certain foods, hospitals, large crowds, uniforms, dogs. Even the smile of a beautiful child can remind us of lost relatives".

Fear is woven through all these stories. Including the fear that made it seem "hazardous to love again", recounted by Paul Valent⁷;

- * *Resilience*: The determination to live, to resist the evil-doers and to survive against all the odds. It was this emotion that led Marietta Elliott-Kleerkoper and her family to migrate from Amsterdam, where thirteen survivors had huddled together in a three bedroom flat. It was resilience that brought so many of these contributors to Australia and to the hope of a better life⁸;

- * *Humour*: The redeeming bitter-sweet feature of Jewish culture. The story by Judy Kolt of her arrival in Melbourne and the invitation to attend a party thrown by a neighbour in honour of her family⁹:

⁶ *Id*, 4.

⁷ *Id*, 35.

⁸ *Id*, 9.

⁹ *Id*, 18.

"'Bring a plate', says the neighbour. 'What a strange place, where people invite you and do not have enough crockery to serve you on', Mamma remarks, and decides to bring them not one but two plates nicely gift wrapped, to alleviate their shortage. Our hostess smiles, and in a lady-like manner, thanks us".

- * *Empathy*: The story told by Dita Gould of the Australian woman who pulled her up on a bench to watch the Olympic torch pass by in 2000, reminding her of the communitarian attitudes of Australia at its best¹⁰;
- * *Silence*: The need for silence to reflect soulfully upon the abuses of the past and the difficulty that some parents had to help their children over the awful pain of their memories. Even in safe and sunny Australia, the special burdens on the children needed attention, although to adults theirs must have seemed trivial burdens by contrast to the enormities they had witnessed.
- * *Unruliness*: The unruly memories that keep returning. As Floris Kalman describes it¹¹:

"I cannot reduce my unruly memories to a standard set of facts - that would be to deaden that part of me all over again".

- * *Gratitude*: The feeling of thanks for the survival. Thanks even to the unkind¹²;

¹⁰ *Id*, 24.

¹¹ *Id*, 28.

¹² *Id*, 28.

- * *Puzzlement:* The feeling that many of the survivors, including children, felt¹³:

"About being Jewish: we were secular, did not observe any rituals and I was too young to know that I was Jewish or what it meant. I did grasp that a malevolent power wanted to get rid of us"

- * *Trauma:* Paul Valent's description of the trauma which is "a wound that threatens survival and compromises physical, psychological, spiritual and social life"¹⁴;
- * *Recognition:* The recognition of the vital importance of recording every little part of the story of suffering. Through personal stories, the full dimension may one day be understood;
- * *Generous spiritness:* The recognition that there were others, beside Jews, who were afflicted. For them the Holocaust was just as terrible. Their numbers were smaller but their suffering in such company makes them brothers and sisters of the Jewish people. I thank Paul Valent for his insight into the suffering of gypsies and homosexuals. And his recognition that, unlike the affliction of these and other minorities, whose suffering was less well documented, the Jewish people have "produced a vast collection of testimonies, books and films". Their suffering commands us all

¹³ Kalman, *id*, 28.

¹⁴ *Id*, 33.

to reflect on the oppressions in Cambodia, Bosnia and Rwanda¹⁵. We must embrace erstwhile enemies. The Ulsterman must embrace the Catholic in Northern Ireland. The Bosnian must embrace the Serb in the former Yugoslavia. The Jew must embrace the Palestinian in the Holy Lands. Our times and their weapons are too dangerous to cling to hatreds. All of us must extrapolate from the wrongs done to ourselves, and to our own communities. We must be champions of peace and justice for all. As Paul Valent wisely observes¹⁶

"Past traumas need to be fully understood and lessons learned from this understanding, fully digested and applied to new situations"

- * *Down to earth*: Henri Korn describes the down to earth characters of the Royal Navy with whom he served as they captured "Captain Schweinehund" and his crew from a sinking German U-boat. The fears and admirable ordinariness of those who fought for the Liberation still need remembrance¹⁷;
- * *Laconic perceptions*: The memories of first perceptions of Australia, including Frankie Paper's memory of the "dreary Melbourne docks" that welcomed her, "rain-sodden, wind

¹⁵ *Id*, 35.

¹⁶ *Id*, 36.

¹⁷ *Id*, 43-44.

swept"¹⁸. I never thought I would see this admission in a Melbourne publication. Those "dreary docks" are now near the fashionable hub of a vibrant city, thanks in large part to the contributions of the refugees and others who came to this land following the Holocaust;

- * *Screaming sadness*: Helen Gershoni's recollection of her mother's grief and her mother's inability to deal with the reality and all the pain¹⁹;
- * *Intuitive insights*: The same author's desperate attempt to reconstruct her father arise from her insights and memories;
- * *Rebellion*: The need to give the child within the man and woman a voice - if necessary to turn away from professions and wealth in order to speak out and to protest against continuing wrongs²⁰;
- * *Sharing*: Paul Valent's determination to beat the Holocaust, including by writing down the memories, getting them out of the dark recesses of the brain, sharing them with others. Speaking to future generations through words and pictures;
- * *Struggle with demons*: Wrestling with demons and remembering the haunting moments, as Lucy Gould does in her vivid story²¹;

¹⁸ *Id*, 47.

¹⁹ *Id*, 57.

²⁰ *Id*, 71.

²¹ *Id*, 72.

- * *Regret and guilt:* The feelings of guilt, about the inability to fully love others, even an aunt who for a time pretended to be a mother. Miriam Kanat writes²²:

"Even as an adult, I continue to have feelings of abandonment, bewilderment and fear: the legacy of deprivation during my childhood. It has left me with a deep-seated sadness and a pervading melancholy, which no amount of good fortune can overcome.

I am now in my sixties. It is time to confront the past and to acknowledge my aunt's contribution and her rightful place in our family history. Her selfless devotion to her sister's child should not go unrecognised. I hope writing this story brings some finality to our tragic journey".

- * *Solitariness:* Henry Borenstein's story on being on his own²³;
- * *Gratitude:* For survival, for memories, for dignity, for friends²⁴;
- * *Haunted recollections:* Like Eva Slonim's memory of the little boy Schmucl, nine years old, who knew that his time had come and extracted a promise from her to say *Kaddish* after him and to remember the day, the date and his name²⁵.

So many stories. So many poems. So many drawings and paintings - haunting images of what it was like - such as Hetty Lubliner's

²² *Id*, 77.

²³ *Id*, 97.

²⁴ *Id*, 120, 124.

²⁵ *Id*, 127.

picture of her father's last breath before his was gassed. Puzzles, lost dolls, cemeteries. But also bright pictures, full of life and hope and the redeeming human spirit.

ALL OF US

No-one in twenty-first century can escape the Holocaust. In 1972, my brother David, now a Supreme Court judge in New South Wales, married Marie-Line Hervic. Her parents and grandparents were Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Many of her relatives perished in the death camps. Tragically, in 1986, this beautiful, intelligent, gifted woman died young, of cancer. Out of respect for his beloved first wife, my brother ensured that their son, Nicolas, and their daughter, Elisabeth, grew up as Jewish children, attending Jewish religious instruction, proud of, and honouring, their Jewish traditions. There are many similarities between the Irish and the Jews. Guilt trips and over-rich food are two of them. But family life, and respect for tradition, pride and spirituality are others. They are precious. In our family, we cherish the link.

An essay by Danial Kogan gives the title to this book. He describes what it was like arriving in Australia to the home of Marie-Line's parents. He tells how, at the time of his arrival, her mother was resting with her pregnancy. It was just before Marie-Line was born²⁶.

²⁶ *Id*, 129.

This memory brought me directly and personally, into the chapters of this book. Unimaginable to most Australians are the sufferings that walk around in our midst and the memories that Danial and others carry with them, to which they have now given expression. I honour Elisabeth and Michel Hervic, as Danial Kogan also honours them. And Aunt Rachel, whose "palace" bungalow in suburban Sydney was Danial's first home in Australia. May such welcomes always be there in our country for refugees and people who have suffered and are suffering. It is our duty and our privilege to reach out to them with love.

In every corner of Australian society there are people who have suffered from the Holocaust. Recently I saw how Justice John Sulan of the Supreme Court of South Australia, had been honoured for his contributions to our multicultural society. I wrote to congratulate him. I questioned him on his life. He told me how his mother, from Czechoslovakia, spent the war years in Terezienstadt. She lost her parents and her two sisters. But she survived the murderous Nazi regime. As a child he witnessed her frail condition. Yet she never expressed hatred towards the German people. She protected John, her only child, against the burdens of her own suffering. She and the Sulan family were extremely proud of their Jewish ancestry. They were involved in Jewish community life and in support for Israel. Justice Sulan told me that²⁷ "the suffering of my family is part of my life, but the

²⁷ Letter from Justice John Sulan to the author, 22 March 2006.

positive attitude to the future is one of the most enduring legacies my parents left me". Everywhere in our own land there are such people. They are blessings for the country that received them. They rise above their own suffering and learn from it for the suffering of others.

There is, of course, a larger moral in the stories collected in *Heirloom*. It is explained in Victor Klemperer's diaries, since published, describing of his encounter with the Holocaust²⁸. It did not arrive overnight. First, there were the laws. Then the yellow stars. Then banishment to the back of the tram. Then having to walk. Then closure of the businesses. Then consignment to the ghetto. Then the brutes and cries "*Juden raus!*". Then the selective deportations. Then the "final solution". It all happened gradually. It crept up insidiously. If it could happen in one of the most civilised countries on earth, it could happen anywhere. Even in Australia. We have been warned. We must heed the warning.

Every diminution of freedom takes us in a wrong direction when it departs from fundamental human rights. Every act of discrimination by our Parliaments and governments dishonours our nation. We honour the memories recorded in this book most worthily when we resolve to respect the freedoms and dignity of all people and to be vigilant for our own.

²⁸ V Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness - War Diaries 1933-41* (Random House, 1999) (English translation).

It is a privilege for me to launch *Heirloom*. May its stories, poems and pictures remain in our memories. Always.

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