Notes for oral evidence to Holocaust Memorial Inquiry Wednesday 7 October 2020. Three pages.

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George Woodwark, my first cousin once removed, was one of the medical students at Bergen-Belsen in 1944. <https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/world-war-two/holocaust-index/bergen-belsen-concentration-camp/>

From early years I knew of the Holocaust and most of its horrors and history. Here is my personal testimony to the aims of education and research as a lasting memorial to victims. Since 2015 through the work of Philip Beddows, we know the names of over 100 of our grandfather’s extended cousins and their families who were killed or died in death camps and concentration camps.

Nearly 70 years ago I stood opposite the Victoria Tower gardens cheering The Queen at the State Opening of Parliament. Later I lived for five years hearing the chimes from the Palace of Westminster clock. For the past 45 years I have worked at Westminster. For 30 years I have turned one corner from home to see the anti-slavery Buxton memorial, the memorial I caused to be repaired decades ago.

No one accuses me of nimbyism. When transport minister, I made neither comment nor representation when the department proposed building a dual carriageway through our garden 30 feet from a side door. In my first constituency we campaigned successfully for the A2 to be rerouted through the residential streets.

My unsought national honour was for public rather than for political service.

I support strongly the proposal and the specifications issued in September 2015 by the United Kingdom Holocaust Memorial Foundation UKHMF. I oppose what is now proposed and where it is proposed.

Internet search ‘UK National Holocaust Memorial specification September 2015’<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/459046/National_Memorial_and_Learning_Centre.pdf>

National Memorial and Learning Centre Search for a Central London site

“The Commission was clear that the National Memorial and Learning Centre should be in Central London. It identified three possible sites, one at the Imperial War Museum in Lambeth, one on the South Bank next to Tower Bridge and one on the river near Tate Britain. However, it was also clear that these were not the only possible sites. So, while the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation will continue to explore these sites in greater detail, this selection process is also open to any other potential site that could fulfil the Commission’s vision.

“This Site Briefing sets out more detail on the objectives for the National Memorial and Learning Centre, the facilities that would be required and the criteria on which the UKHMF will evaluate potential sites and make its recommendation to the Prime Minister at the end of this year.

“The scope of this paper does not include the design of the National Memorial itself. This will be chosen through a separate competition, once the site for the Memorial and Learning Centre has been selected. It will, however, be important for any potential site to indicate clearly how it could provide a fitting and compelling home for an iconic new National Memorial.

“In summary, the UKHMF is seeking a prominent location in Central London with significant existing footfall so as to draw in and inspire the largest possible number of visitors. The site will support several features and activities, the number and extent of which will depend on the size of the space available. Sites capable of accommodating 5-10,000 sqm of built space for UKHMF over no more than three contiguous floors will be considered. This could include being part of a larger mixed-use development. In order to achieve the maximum benefits for the public, the UKHMF needs to allocate as much of its funds as possible to educational purposes rather than to land and construction and so the site must be highly cost effective.”

“Through the use of cutting edge technology, the Learning Centre will educate people of all ages in the context and history of the Holocaust and help them to understand how the lessons of the Holocaust apply more widely to many of the important issues faced subsequently, including to other genocides. It will include a particular focus on Britain’s own important historical connections to the Holocaust.”

Between September 2015 and later developments the following year, neither the UKHMF nor the successive sponsoring ministries nor No.10 Downing Street have agreed to release papers showing the audit trail of how proposals at the Imperial War Museum in Geraldine Mary Harmsworth Park were compared with the possibilities at Victoria Tower Gardens or elsewhere. Pre-Covid, there were nearly 1,000,000 annual visitors to the Holocaust galleries, with capacity to grow significantly.

The present application fails to meet the aims.

No one claims it matches the full September 2015 specification:

“The Learning Centre will require a number of features and facilities. These will include:

● At least 5,000 square metres and as big and ambitious as the site will allow.

● This could be a freestanding building or could occupy part of a multi-use building, but would require its own prominent entrance.

● A suitable space for a highly visible memorial with room for gatherings of at least 500 people. This must be co-located or in close proximity.

● The public space and facilities should be spread across no more than three contiguous floors.

● Entrance hall: reception, visitor orientation and circulation.

● Visitor facilities: restrooms, cloakroom, first aid room, interfaith prayer room, shop, café.

● Permanent and temporary gallery spaces.

● Loading bay area with secure transit store adjacent.

● Secure store for material including works of art, photography, and archives.

● Clean workshop space for construction activities and exhibit preparation.

● 4x Learning rooms, able to accommodate 40 people.

● Auditorium with tiered seating for at least 150 people.

● 2x meetings rooms for events and hire.

● Office space and associated facilities for members of staff from UKHMF and other Holocaust organisations.

● Infrastructure to fulfil all security considerations around the site.”

Many things have gone wrong. Many changes have been made since the architectural competition. Costs have risen, all except the free use of land in Victoria Tower Gardens. It is public knowledge that the fins design is a reworking of a design not chosen when submitted for the Canadian capital monument.

Present plans most will go to digging a hole and building the hill. It It was specified that most of the available funds should go to education.

Having heard proceeding on the first day, I suspect the applicants and their advocate will not give answers on the chronology that led the UKHMF and the government to settle on Victoria Tower Gardens. Will they put questions to witnesses like me if they know answers weaken the application?

When was it recorded that any of those involved in developing or submitting or defending this application first considered that it had been wrong to include the Imperial War Museum in the January 2015 announcement? Was the UKHMF mistaken in September 2015 to have defined acceptable central London locations as ranging from and including Regent’s Park, East London and Southwark’s Geraldine Mary Harmsworth park and the Imperial War Museum?

There has been close cooperation and plotting within government at various stages. They have withheld information; they give the appearance of fixing matters or trying to fix matters in ways that are incompatible with the required openness and consideration of evidence that should lead to a significant effective education centre and a good memorial, whether collocated or nearby.

After the public consultations on the architects’ submissions and on the developed plans, there were overwhelming and reasoned objections. The applicants responded with a dodgy public education initiative that seemed to result in unspecified support for the plan from unknown people.

Ministers at Housing and Communities made the surprising decision to take the application away from the Westminster City Council within days of the suggestion by UKHMF.

The Inspector was appointed with the instruction not to decide on the application but to make a recommendation to the Planning minister because the applicant is his colleague the Secretary of State. Few can have confidence in this arrangement.

If ministers accept a justified recommendation to refuse the application, or if in advance the application is withdrawn or suspended, it would be possible to come together to decide how better to develop education and learning, the best location and, importantly, how to choose a design for the national memorial without the constraint of taking more than a quarter of the small Victoria Tower Gardens and without having to shoe horn the education and learning centre underneath. END