My name is Janine Webber, I am a Holocaust survivor and I’m speaking in favour of the memorial.

I was born in 1932, in a city called Lvov which at the time was in Poland but is now in present day Ukraine. I lived with my parents and my younger brother and life was very happy. However, in 1939 the Soviets invaded and later, in 1941, after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, the Nazis occupied our city. Within weeks of the Nazi invasion, thousands of Jewish people were murdered by the Nazis and their Ukrainian collaborators. My happy family life changed overnight.

My family had to leave our home and we were moved to the edge of the city, in preparation for a move to the city’s ghetto. We were only able to take one suitcase and were only allocated one room in a small house. We lived with my aunt and two other families. We lived in constant fear of raids by the Gestapo and so my parents dug a hiding place for us under a wardrobe. However, this was so cramped not all of my family could fit. They took my father and my grandmother away. They shot my father and I never saw my grandmother again. Again we hid, in kennels, and the Gestapo did not find us.

After this, my family and I were sent to the Lvov ghetto. The conditions in the ghetto were indescribable. The Nazis hanged people and left them for days for us all to see. There was no food, it was dirty, and people became very sick. My mother, who was only 29 years old, became ill with typhus. I remember my uncle taking her to the basement of the building to hide her. The last time I saw my mother she was lying in the basement and I can remember being so upset and puzzled that she did not comfort me or reach out to me. She had always been so loving. I ran out of the basement in fright and I knew I had lost my mother.

People in the ghetto were being taken to Belzec extermination camp in deportations. My uncle found a hiding place for me at a nearby farm with my aunt Rouja, however, soon after the farmer attacked her and she ran away. I was locked away in isolation and after this they threw me out. My uncle found us another place to hide, this time with my seven year old brother, Tunio. This was another farm, but the Polish daughter betrayed us to an SS man. They came to the farm and although they let me go, they killed my little brother, he was just seven years old. I then had to wonder the Polish countryside and found work as a shepherdess. This family found out I was Jewish and so I had to return to Lvov.

My aunt Rouja had given me the name of a young Polish Catholic man, Edek, who was working as a night watchman in a convent. I made contact with Edek and he took me to an attick where I was amazed to discover 13 other Jews whom he was hiding. One of them was my aunt Rouja and another was my uncle, and we were reunited. We stayed together in a hole under the stable floor for a year and by that time I could hardly walk, and it was so hot and uncomfortable. My aunt knew I couldn’t stay there any longer and she arranged some false papers for me. My new identity was that of a Polish Catholic girl and I went to hide in a convent. After this, I was taken to live with a Catholic priest. Lastly, I lived with another Polish family, I lived as a Catholic and worked as their maid, until liberation in 1945. At the end of the war, my aunt Rouja came for me and we went to Paris. I stayed in a Jewish orphanage.

I came to the UK in 1956. Here, I married and had two sons. Although my experiences are difficult for me, I feel it is vital to tell others about my experiences so that we can work towards a more humane world together. For a number of years, I have been visiting schools, universities, workplaces, voluntary organisations in a bid to educate people about where antisemitism and racism can eventually lead. It is not easy to relive these experiences, remembering all who I lost, but I do it because it is the right thing to do. By now, I believe I have spoken to tens of thousands of students and in 2018 I spoke to over 40,000 at once in a live broadcast. I received a British Empire Medal from the Queen in 2018 for services to Holocaust education and remembrance. As you can see, doing my part to help educate people about the horrors of the Holocaust is so important to me.

I strongly believe that a new Holocaust memorial and learning centre will not only assist my mission of educating the next generation. But it will preserve the voices of other survivors, who all have their own stories to tell, their own families to remember. Millions of Jews did not get the chance to survive nor the chance to visit schools and share what happened. We must therefore ensure that these stories are heard. A central location such as Westminster, enables a focal point for this learning. More than this, it will facilitate the assistance of our leaders. They can more easily lend their voices to our joint cause of remembrance and raising awareness. I believe I have an obligation to honour and remember those who perished.

All of us firsthand witnesses are in our eighties and nineties. Although we are so encouraged by the young people we meet, many of whom declare that they will be our witnesses in the future, I feel more is always needed. Without education, without memorials open to the public, our stories will not be passed on. We need as many people as possible to see our firsthand documents, hear our voices and to pledge to make this society a better place. I therefore argue that a public memorial and learning centre in the prominent location of Westminster, will go so far in securing our legacies.

Thank you