

My name is Ben Barkow and I am the Chair of the Academic Advisory Group of UKHMF. I came to this after serving as Director of the Wiener Holocaust Library for 20 years where, altogether, I served for over 30 years. I hold the Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany for this work. I was recently appointed Chair of the Holocaust Survivors' Friendship Association and its exhibition and learning centre at Huddersfield University and also am a member of the Academic Advisory Group for the new permanent exhibition at the Imperial War Museum. I am the author and editor of a number of books relating to the Holocaust.

I would like to address a number of points raised in the letter sent by 42 academics to the planning inspectorate, and dated 29 September 2020. I understand that Prof Tom Lawson from Northumbria University, one of the signatories, has spoken to the Inquiry.

The letter begins by referring to another letter sent by a group of 28 academics to the Prime Minister's Holocaust Commission in 2014 in response to its call for evidence.

In the letter of 2014 the 28 signatories expressed strong support for the planned memorial and education centre, lauding it as 'a tremendous opportunity to increase public historical understanding of a complex and challenging part of our history' and 'the opportunity to correct widespread misconceptions about the Holocaust, not least with regard to Britain's role.'

Despite this, the letter of 2014 confusingly concludes by arguing that there is 'no pressing need for a further physical monument' relating to the Holocaust. The reason given is the existence of the permanent Holocaust exhibition at the Imperial War Museum, and the possibility of moving the Holocaust memorial in Hyde Park to Whitehall. On the Imperial War Museum, it is clear that an exhibition does fundamentally different work from a memorial. The latter point about Hyde park seems to me to contain two problems: firstly, the Hyde Park Holocaust Memorial is

not a national memorial but one erected by the Jewish community and largely serving that community (for example as the site of the annual Yom Hashoah ceremony over many years); and secondly, there has never been a plan to move it or in any way incorporate it into the national Holocaust memorial.

The existence of a memorial erected by and for any community does not and should not rule out the creation of national memorial. Every town and village has its war memorial, but this in no way undermines the need for the Cenotaph in Whitehall. It is evident that Britain's diverse Jewish communities stand in a somewhat different relation to the history of the Holocaust than the majority of British people and others living in the UK. The National Holocaust memorial is intended to serve all people living in Britain, which of course includes British Jews.

I may take my own position as an example. I am not a Jew, and yet members of my family were murdered in Auschwitz and elsewhere as so-called 'Geltungsjuden' ie non-Jews who chose to live as Jews, while other relatives were exploited as slaves in concentration and slave labour camps and the Terezin ghetto.

While strongly empathetic and sympathetic to Jewish communities everywhere, I do not want to participate in specifically Jewish Holocaust memorial events when remembering the sufferings of my family. For me it is more fitting and comfortable to remember them in the context of a national setting, such as Holocaust Memorial Day. The national Holocaust memorial will serve as a focal point for my own remembrance.

The letter of 29 September reiterates that 'resourcing of educational materials should be a priority' but ignores progress made in this regard since the letter of 2014. One example is the enormous development, by the Wiener Holocaust Library, of a set of online digital resources called The Holocaust Explained – originally created by the London Jewish Cultural Centre. This very significant resource was offered – when I

was Director of the Wiener – to the UKHMF as the backbone of its offering of online educational resources. The Holocaust Explained website is one of the most visited educational sites on the subject in the world. Another example is the creation by the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education, of a specialised textbook on the subject for use in schools in England and Wales, funded by the Toni Schiff Memorial Fund (Mrs Toni Schiff being an Austrian woman murdered in Auschwitz, whose daughter Hilda came to the UK with Kindertransport).

The letter of 29 September also states that funds dedicated to the memorial would be better spent supporting academic research and doctoral students. Given the profession of the signatories one might respond, well, they would say that, wouldn't they? More seriously, the signatories seem to me to be making the unwarranted assumption that funding the memorial is a kind of zero-sum game; that any money spent on the memorial must mean less for other educational purposes. I don't accept this view. I believe that the Memorial is in itself a very significant educational resource and will contribute enormously to the improvement of Holocaust education and awareness in the UK. Further, the memorial is likely to stimulate longer term educational demand as people, especially the young, begin to explore the topic as a result of their visits.

Concerning the location of the memorial, the letter of 29 September expresses concerns that other memorials in Victoria Tower Gardens will be 'overwhelmed'. I believe it is just as likely that interest in these memorials will increase as more visitors are attracted to the Gardens. It is well known that businesses cluster together (eg shoe makers in Northampton, Jewellers in Hatton Garden) because this increases footfall and profitability. A similar effect is at least possible in Victoria Tower Gardens, the Holocaust memorial attracting people who will view all the other memorials in the Gardens during their visit.

The letter argues that a location next to Parliament is 'likely to create a celebratory narrative of the British Government's responses to the Jewish catastrophe' and

‘almost certain to add to the mythology of ‘Britain alone’ as the ultimate saviour of the Jews’ rather than an account that can be supported by scholarship.

There is no precedent or rational basis for this view. Nothing in any of the planning documents for the memorial would lead one to fear this outcome. Nothing of the kind followed from locating Germany’s national memorial close to the Reichstag, or the siting of the USA Holocaust Memorial Museum near Congress.

My relatives found no refuge in Britain, and some perished, so I could hardly support the creation of a national memorial that seeks only to glorify Britain as a rescuing country, or that tries to minimise the many ways in which it might have done more to save the lives of those victimised by the Nazis and their allies.

I chair the Academic Advisory Board precisely because I am determined to do everything in my power to ensure that Britain’s memorial offers genuine reflection rather than any form of national propaganda. My colleagues on the Board are fiercely independent, represent some of the finest academic work being done in the field of Holocaust studies today and have already made a significant impact on the content of the exhibition at the memorial to ensure that it presents an account that is, in the words of Lord Pickles, ‘Warts and All’. They continually stress the need for detail, nuance, context and an emphasis on the complexity of the issues being presented. This challenges the Holocaust Memorial’s chief curator Yehudit Shendar in her work and she has embraced these imperatives in a whole-hearted way that is truly admirable. I am convinced that everyone engaged with shaping the memorial is dedicated to creating an educational experience that is not only underpinned by sound scholarship but that also profoundly challenges visitors to ask themselves, what would I do if faced with such situations?

I would suggest that it is wholly appropriate to locate Britain’s national reminder of the political and moral dangers posed by genocide, the crime of crimes, next to its

seat of political power. As we visit the memorial we also send a message to Parliament that we are alert, we are watching and we will hold our leaders to account.