VTG submission (draft)

1. I must begin by saying that I have been reluctant to offer a comment on this project. I am neither Jewish nor a local resident, and I am not a qualified expert in Holocaust Studies. I am keenly aware that any challenge to the plans under discussion is very easily represented as suspect. It may be seen - at best – as a failure to see the massive disproportion between the importance of local or environmental concerns and the commemoration of the greatest European atrocity of the modern age. At worst it can be written off as a covertly anti-semitic evasion of what most would see as a clear moral imperative. What could possibly justify making difficulties about a project that is manifestly directed to the betterment of community relations and to a bold and conspicuous acknowledgement of a unique historical horror?
2. Two things have persuaded me that it might be worth trying to formulate some worries. One is the urging of several Jewish friend and acquaintances, all of them with more experience and authority than I, who have shared their deep anxiety that this project could be not only a missed opportunity but a positively counter-productive move in terms of confronting the poisons of ant-semitism in our culture. Some of these Jewish voices have already been heard to good effect in this Enquiry. The other is my own longstanding concern – as someone who has been involved with Jewish-Christian dialogue for many years – about the effectiveness of many prevailing models of ‘Holocaust Education’. I shall come back in a moment to this latter concern.
3. There are, I think, two considerations that should influence us in assessing the quality and suitability of a building. One is its *relation to its immediate* *environment*; the other is its *fitness for a declared purpose*. A lot has already been said about the former question in this instance – about the problems of significantly reducing a green public space in the heart of the city, about the new infrastructure pressures in an already hugely overcrowded area, about the actual management of visitor flow in a somewhat complicated space. Some have raised as well the fresh concerns about security that might arise, though I do not have the expertise needed to add anything of value in that debate. The response to these worries has very frequently been to underline the immense significance of the project and to insist that this must override lesser, more ‘domestic’ concerns: how could anyone compare the needs and preferences of the local community or the desirability of preserving children’s play areas with the gravity of genocide? The argument is understandable, certainly. But it would be decisive *only* if we agreed on two assumptions – first, that it was absolutely clear that a monument of this kind and on this scale was the only or at least the vastly preferable way of appropriately commemorating the victims of the Shoah; and, second, that there was agreed to be no alternative location. On the second point, it cannot be said that there is any such universal agreement; discussion in this Enquiry has returned often to the claims of the IWM, and the least that could be said is that the reasons for abandoning possibilities on that site remain obscure.
4. The issue about whether this is the only appropriate kind of memorialising is a more complicated one and bears on the second of the considerations I mentioned a moment ago, *fitness for purpose*. The problem here is that the definition of the purpose of the planned memorial has been shifting a good deal in the years since it was first mooted. The place of the Learning Centre within the whole design has been unclear. Dr Lancaster will have some observations on the lack of discussion of this element in the Manchester consultation in which she took part three years ago; it does not seem to have figured largely in early discussions and consultations, and the question has to be asked of how far it has always been an integral aspect of the project or whether it is something of an afterthought. We can point to other Shoah-related memorials and centres where the educational component is primary and unmistakeable. Can we make a judgement on this plan without having more clarity about how important its educational provision is thought to be and how successfully the present design serves this goal? Some of the responses to this question in the course of this Enquiry have been disappointingly vague.
5. Perhaps more importantly, there has been further obscurity about the scope of what is envisaged. Are we talking about the commemoration of the Shoah in the proper sense (I recognise that the very word ‘Holocaust’ is difficult for some Jews as carrying a sense of ‘redemptive sacrifice’ )? Or about the victims of the Third Reich overall? It is absolutely *not* to deny the horror of what was done to Roma people, to those regarded by the Nazis as mentally or physically ‘subnormal’, or to people of minority sexual orientation if we say that the Shoah was an atrocity of a very distinct order because of its deep roots in the religious and imaginative life of Europe for nearly two millennia. It is not an issue about comparative levels of suffering; every murder perpetrated by the Third Reich in the death camps and elsewhere was an unforgivable outrage. But to understand just why Jewish people were singled out for extermination requires us to understand something of what made this possible, how Jews were historically identified as scapegoats and outcast. And that means – I say it with a strong sense of what Christians have to repent for – understanding the toxic history of Christian hatred and calumny, which Christians have only begun to recognise for what it is in the last couple of generations. It requires us also to have some sense of the agonisingly difficult negotiations that Jewish people were forced to undertake over the centuries in finding any kind of security in Christian Europe, and why it proved so easy – and not only in Germany – to demonise and isolate even the most ‘Europeanised’ Jewish communities.
6. To put it more simply: a memorial may be about the victims of mass murder and genocidal violence overall, or it may be about *this* specific cancer in the European mindset. Both are worthy aims, but if any monument is to do its work in changing perceptions and sentiments there needs to be clarity about the goal. A monument - or an event or an educational programme - focused on victims of intolerance and exclusion in general will not necessarily help anyone grasp why this or that particular group experienced this or that particular kind of violence. At different stages of the consultation process, it seems that rather different things have been highlighted in this regard.
7. And this brings me to a concern that is uncomfortable to express but which needs articulating. Some of the defenders of the present design have spoken of it as an affirmation of ‘democracy’ or even of ‘British values’. It has been said that visitors emerging from the memorial building will immediately be confronted with the great symbols of British democratic institutions, as if this were the proper climax to the educational experience of the building itself.
8. It has been said by one modern Jewish commentator on these subjects that the point of any memorial connected with the Shoah is not primarily to make individuals feel guilty or even to create deep empathetic feelings; it is to prompt the question of how societies, including democratic societies, can be manipulated into murder and atrocity. In other words, the last thing any memorial should seek to do is to *reassure*. Whatever comes of this Enquiry, I earnestly hope that any self-congratulatory rhetoric about democracy and British values will be reined in and recognised as deeply inappropriate. There is something of a dissonance between what we have heard in defence of the very credible idea that a memorial like this should be disruptive and jarring in its environment, and the subtext to much of the discussion - that it is really about the reaffirming of our own moral security and sanity. Many have noted that our democracy did not uniformly stand alongside the victims of Hitler’s murderousness at key points in the thirties. We should beware – here more than anywhere – of consoling myths about this. The point about the importance of a Shoah memorial for the majority population of this country, or any European country, is that it is not primarily about *us* – the us, that is, of Western Christian and post-Christian society: it is about a community that has historically been a feared and hated ‘other’ to the mainstream of European culture, democratic or otherwise.
9. This takes us back to the point about education. The questions that need answering are these. Is the educational focus of the project sufficiently clear, capable of delivering a challenging and comprehensive account of the historical hinterland of anti-semitism? Is the educational provision envisaged in the current plans fully thought through? Would a centre with a robust educational focus best be served by a building of the kind proposed? And finally, is the best use of our resources to invest in a large-scale, high-status public memorial or to pursue a dramatic expansion of training and provision for relevant education in our schools and elsewhere, as argued by Rabbi Jonathan Romain among others?
10. Some years ago, the Australian Government announced that it was investing in a large public monument to commemorate a moment in the European settlement of Australia – at around the same time that it was reducing its funding of public broadcasting with an educational slant. The irony was widely noted, and the story has some relevance here. Voices have been heard in this Enquiry arguing strongly for a thorough national overhaul of ‘Holocaust Education’ and for any public money currently earmarked for the present design to be redirected to this. The argument has its roots in the same point touched in earlier: Holocaust education as a general education in deploring intolerance is not doing its job. I recognise that some have said that we are not facing an either-or between the memorial and a proper educational campaign nationwide or an increased investment in serious historical research. I hope this is true; but there is a serious question about the effectiveness of large-scale commemorative monuments in changing attitudes and this needs addressing. Some, including Baroness Deech as part of her extremely detailed critique of the propsoals, have drawn attention to the unwelcome fact that monuments alone can attract anti-semitic vandalism. It could certainly be said that a Shoah memorial defaced with anti-semitic graffiti illustrates with dramatic clarity just why the memorial is necessary, and that to be deterred from going forward by a fear of vandalism is a counsel of despair. But these points do not in themselves answer the question of whether the memorial is fulfilling its *transformative* purpose. It is easy to think we have done our duty by erecting a sophisticated architectural structure, a tangible public ‘statement’, an undoubtedly arresting and powerful design; harder to plan for the long haul of policies that will genuinely work to reduce the prevalence of anti-semitism in a rising generation going through their education. Some contributors to the discussion have pleaded for a closer look not just at the design, location and functioning of Holocaust memorials elsewhere (matters which have figured in this debate and have been discussed on both sides) but at what can be determined about their actual effectiveness.
11. I began by saying that I entered this debate with some reluctance. I don’t question the good faith of those who have defended the proposal, but I am still preoccupied with the anxieties of friends in the Jewish community who see this as a diversion from the real challenge of contesting the resurgence of hatred and prejudice against Jews in so many European contexts, including the United Kingdom. ‘Holocaust Education’ will succeed in its aims only if the deep historical and religious roots of that hatred are understood. We all know that contemporary moral education tends to see ‘intolerance’ as the worst of iniquities: I can recall speaking with a group of intelligent and sensitive sixth formers after a visit to Auschwitz about what they thought they had learned, and being rather disappointed that even a group such as this expressed their reactions almost entirely in these general terms of the need for tolerance of difference. I don’t want to be misunderstood: there is nothing wrong with commending tolerance. But it doesn’t necessarily help in identifying the points where democratic common sense lets itself be corrupted and undermined, where national pride begins to look for outside threats in order to bolster itself, where crises are handled by looking for scapegoats. And it doesn’t help in identifying who the most readily available scapegoats are and why.
12. The proposal we are discussing is obviously well-meant; its defenders are all sincere enemies to anti-semitism, and they have included some who, as survivors, have a very distinctive authority in this context (though remember that the voices of survivors and their families can be heard on the other side also). But nothing I have so far seen or heard in this Enquiry has reassured me that the project as presented is adequately scoped, that its educational dimension has been thoroughly thought out, that it has fully taken into account what can be learned from experience elsewhere. And, as I have said, I am specially concerned about the elision of the task of effectively and transformingly memorialising the Shoah with the affirming of ‘British values’ – co-opting the remembrance of the Shoah into a celebration of who *we* are, and softening the edges of the specific character of the slaughter of Jewish people against its historical and religious background . Locating the monument close to the heart of British government and indeed to other symbols of British collective memory like the Abbey has a certain force (though the language of proximity to a ‘national Valhalla’ is gratingly inappropriate in more ways than can easily be summarised). But how far is this in effect conscripting the Shoah into our own national agenda? That, I’d say very strongly, can’t and shouldn’t be the focus of any attempt to deal with the appalling memory of the events in question. Authentic education is a slow and painstaking task, and it is not always served by the grand gesture. The hardest question for this proposal to answer, I believe, is whether we are being lured towards a grand gesture whose actual effects are so very far from clear.

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