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Registered Charity No. 1171408

The siting of the UK National Holocaust Memorial & Learning Centre in Victoria Tower Gardens

Case ref - APP/X5990/V/19/3240661

The UK National Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre - not just another Holocaust memorial

Who are “Learning from the Righteous”?

1.1 Learning from the Righteous is a charity that highlights the contemporary relevance of Holocaust Education. The projects they lead are based on the belief that students who are encouraged to consider the dilemmas faced by those who chose not to be passive bystanders both before and during The Holocaust, and explore the complex array of refugee experiences from the time, will be more motivated to act to counter racism, inequality and intolerance today.

1.2 The name of the charity is derived from the term “The Righteous Among the Nations”, coined by Yad Vashem to denote those non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during The Holocaust. Although reference is often made to some of the over 27,000 recipients of this honour in their workshops (including the 24 British recipients), it is not with the intention of purely venerating these individuals; to do so out of context runs the risk of distorting and even sanitising The Holocaust. The aim is to use the altruism of their actions, taught within their specific historical contexts, as inspiring examples of “active bystander” behaviour. They represent the main tenets of the charity’s educational approach - choice, responsibility and agency.

1.3 The organisation was founded by Antony Lishak (who is compiling this report) after a 40-year career in education as a teacher, author and educational consultant. During that time, he has worked in hundreds of schools, with many thousands of teachers and students, promoting critical thinking, self-reflection and the importance of embracing complexity when learning about the processes that allowed The Holocaust to happen.

1.4 It should be stressed that **Learning from the Righteous** does not operate in opposition to other providers of Holocaust Education. On the contrary, the quality of their work and their collaborative approach is well known throughout the sector and they regularly recommend the services and resources of other organisations. **Learning from the Righteous** operates mainly with schools and Local Education Authorities on a grass-roots level to create intensive tailor-made projects that generate behavioural change and promote meaningful commemoration.

What This Report Intends to Address

2.1 Learning from the Righteous only decided to request Rule 6 status in order to submit this report when the Government decided to call-in the application at the end of last year. The stated grounds for this decision was its “national significance”– something we recognised when the project was announced on Holocaust Memorial Day in 2015 and was precisely the description of the project we used when registering a vote for our preferred design for the scheme three years ago.

2.2 Thus, the purpose of this report is to support the “national significance” status of this project. We would not presume to comment on the views of local residents, nor would we have the audacity to either support or refute the points made by the array of environmental professionals who have contributed to the debate. But we are qualified to use our considerable experience in the field of Holocaust Education and commemoration to expand upon the indisputable national significance of The UK National Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre.

Reasons why this is a project of National Significance

3.1 As other interested parties have rightly pointed out in their submissions, there are many monuments and centres of learning pertaining to The Holocaust in the UK. The monuments are mostly memorial plaques or sculptures that commemorate the event as a whole or honour the memory of significant individuals. The UK can boast a network of high-quality centres of learning that deliver innovative Holocaust Education and support research of the topic. Some, such as the Holocaust Exhibition and Learning Centre in the University of Huddersfield, are affiliated to other educational establishments, and others, such as The Wiener Library in London, are independent centres of study. Furthermore, this country is blessed with world class museum experiences that educate about The Holocaust, such as the National Holocaust Centre and Museum in Nottingham and the ground-breaking resource at The Imperial War Museum.

3.2 While not wanting to diminish the importance of any of these monuments and centres of learning, there are *three specific criteria* we wish to expand upon here that we feel elevates the status of the proposed scheme in Victoria Tower Gardens to that of “national significance”.

a. location b. content c. timing

3.2a Location.

“Whilst I strongly support the principle of the project, this is clearly the wrong site.”

“A symbolic centre for remembrance and education at the very heart of our national life.”

These quotes (from an interested party who opposes this project and The UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation) encapsulate the tension at the heart of this issue.

3.2a.1 It is our contention that the location of this project is precisely what elevates its status to that of “national significance”. A crucial element of learning about The Holocaust is the incremental process that enabled it to take place. As survivor Marian Turski recently said,

“Auschwitz did not fall from the sky”. The policies that resulted in the murder of over two thirds of Europe’s Jews were enacted by the German State whose leadership drew legitimacy from being democratically elected. Placing this memorial and learning centre alongside the UK’s democratic institutions is a powerful symbol of how crucial, but potentially fragile, they are – we take them for granted at our peril. The ease in which Germany’s democratic structures were dismantled throughout 1933 is one of the starkest warnings of those times. Turski concluded his speech with a poignant plea which, we feel, epitomises the significance of building a permanent Holocaust memorial beside The Palace of Westminster - “After the Shoah, the 11th commandment is: thou shalt not be indifferent.”

3.2b Content.

“It is important to ensure that our examination of the past is honest and unblinking. We will properly explore aspects of the Holocaust that are less flattering to the United Kingdom.... At [its] core... is a commitment to learn from this darkest chapter in our history, to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to explore the universal lessons of the Holocaust as a reminder of where hatred, intolerance and prejudice can lead if left unchecked.”

The UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation

Robustly embracing the complexity of the UK’s responses before, during and after The Holocaust, defines the space this institution will inhabit beside other museums and exhibitions in the country that tackle this subject with a wider, more global perspective.

3.2b.1 By focusing on this particular narrative, The UK Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre will considerably raise the awareness of many crucial, but little known, aspects of this country’s history. Such as -

- How a coalition of civil and governmental agencies collaborated to overcome an array of institutional barriers, enabling schemes such as The Kindertransport and Kitchener Camp to respond to the desperate plight of pre-war Jewish refugees.
- The role and effect of the UK’s internment camps, such as those on the Isle of Man.
- Why a 1941 Government memo limited public reference to victims of Nazi atrocities to only “undisputedly innocent and ordinary harmless individuals... not Jews.”
- The five-year Nazi occupation of the Channel Islands, where many Jewish and non-Jewish Islanders were deported and murdered.
- When, and to what extent, British decision makers knew the full horrors of the Nazi regime and what was done with that knowledge.
- The impact of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp in April 1945.
- Britain’s post-war response to Jewish refugees such as “The Windermere Children”.
- The experiences of the British POWs who were imprisoned in part of the Auschwitz complex and the indifference shown to them in the immediate post-war period.
- The vast contribution made to this country by the 75,000 Jewish refugees, the post-war Holocaust survivors who found a safe haven here and, of course, their families.

3.2b.2 The precise contents of the exhibition and learning centre is the subject of ongoing discussions which are nowhere near complete. The list, above, has been compiled purely to illustrate the wide range of issues available to curators for consideration when creating a comprehensive account of Britain's responses to The Holocaust. Undoubtedly, references to similar specific aspects of the subject can be found in the display cabinets of other exhibitions and on the bookshelves of other learning centres, it is the presentation of this information in a single accessible narrative that makes it nationally significant.

3.2c Timing

During the immediate post-war period, as the full horrors of Germany's genocidal policies emerged, the world struggled to find a coherent response, and 75 years after the liberation of Auschwitz, it continues apace. Before the growth of scholarship and research into this area that struggle was essentially between *understandable abhorrence* and *blatant indifference*. Yet as our knowledge of this subject has expanded, making The Holocaust one of history's most documented events, the struggle has been joined by *wilful distortion* and *downright denial*.

3.2c.1 The UK has a proud record of Holocaust Education and commemoration. Alongside the hugely influential work of The Holocaust Educational Trust, which was established in 1988, there is a network of organisations that have collectively succeeded in educating about, and raising awareness of, the importance of this subject. The UK played a leading role in establishing Holocaust Memorial Day as an international day of commemoration in 2000 - an event that is covered extensively across the media and is marked throughout the country in annually increasing numbers.

3.2c.2 There are many reasons why this country's provision in this area is so robust – but there are two major contributory factors. Firstly, the continued support from both government and non-governmental agencies of educational and commemorative initiatives and, most crucially, the courage and commitment of Holocaust survivors who continue to bear witness to these events. These remarkable people share their testimonies across the country, both on behalf of the voiceless millions and out of the heartfelt desire that such atrocities should never be repeated.

3.2c.3 Each year, in the twilight of their lives, more survivors gain official recognition through the honours system for their contribution to education. This year's Holocaust Memorial Day, marking the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, is widely seen as being the last "landmark" commemoration that will feature first-hand eyewitness testimonies. 120 new survivor testimonies have been collected to be used in this exhibition. In the UK, and throughout the world, recorded incidences of antisemitic hate crimes are on the increase and there is evidence of expanding support for extremist political parties that align themselves with supremacist and exclusionist ideologies...

... the timing of this project is a vital part of its national significance.

Conclusion

4.1 This submission supports the proposal to establish the official UK National Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre alongside the Houses of Parliament as this project is of national significance. Thus, it is entirely appropriate that the decision to grant permission for it to progress should be taken at a national level.

4.1.a This project is nationally significant because, as well as commemorating The Holocaust, it will project a powerful statement about the type of country we purport to be – not just for today, but for generations to come. Establishing this institution on this particular site is a demonstration of the fact that the UK is a mature, reflective democracy which embraces the imperfections and complexities of its past.

4.1.b As the memory of The Holocaust fades into history, the need to confront what it can teach us about the cruelty that humanity is capable of inflicting on itself grows ever stronger. It is incumbent upon those of us who strive to promote meaningful engagement with the contemporary relevance of the subject, to recognise the incremental process of dehumanisation, hatred and racism that resulted in state-sponsored genocide.

4.1.c Strong opinions on this project are held on all sides which, irrespective of this inquiry's eventual conclusion, are unlikely to quickly vanish. But for supporters of this proposition there is a particular urgency to this matter; further delay increases the likelihood of there being no survivor representation at the opening ceremony – which would be unthinkable.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Antony Lishak". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Antony Lishak

Chief Educational Consultant

Learning from the Righteous