

Remarks for Yom Ha'Shoah
28 April 2022 Brisbane, Australia
Address by Professor Alex Bellamy

Let me begin where I should end, with profound thanks.

I want to pay particular thanks to Judy Bahar for her powerful, moving, and insightful talk; a talk that contains wisdom and memory that we can all carry forward with us in the year ahead.

Deep thanks also to Julia Sussman, whose insights will no doubt resonate with us all long after tonight.

I want to also thank our dear friends Jason Steinburg and Rabbi Levi Jaffe.

Over many years, you have worked patiently with us to help make this an important, always moving and deeply sobering event in the annual calendar not just of the Asia Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect and School of Political Science and International Studies, but for the University of Queensland as a whole.

I am grateful to the Queensland Jewish Board of Deputies and the UQ's Jewish Students Association for your ongoing support and help in supporting this event.

And I am grateful to you all for joining us.

I am the least qualified person in the room to offer some closing remarks, but since that has never stopped me before, please bear with me a few minutes more.

On September 19, 1941, German forces entered the city of Kyiv

Ukraine was a staging post on the Nazis drive to secure the oil fields in the Caucuses, but it also figured large in their twisted war aim.

The Nazis wanted to create living space – Lebensraum – in the east to house an expanded German people. Ukraine was to be its breadbasket.

They planned to exterminate 65% of Ukraine's population and leave the rest to serve it as enslaved labour.

They planned to exterminate all of Ukraine's Jews.

On 28 September, just two weeks after they arrived, the Nazis ordered all Kyiv's Jews to assemble the following day.

Dina Mironovna Pronicheva was 30 years old, married, and a mother of two young children.

She recalled:

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Hitler's troops occupied Kiev on September 19, 1941 and from the very first day started to rob and kill Jews.... We were living in terror. When I saw the posters on the city's streets and read the order: "All the Jews of Kiev must gather at Babi Yar," about which we had no idea, in my heart I sensed trouble. I understood that nothing good was awaiting us at Babi Yar.

So I dressed my little ones, the younger one [the girl] who was 3 years old and the older one [the boy] – 5, packed their belongings into a small sack, and took my daughter and son to my mother-in-law.

Afterwards, I took my sick mother and, following the order, she and I started out on the way to Babi Yar.

Hundreds, no thousands, of Jews were walking the same way. An old Jew with a long white beard walked next to me. He wore a talis [prayer shawl] and tefillin. He was murmuring quietly. He prayed the same way as my father did when I was a child.

Ahead of me a woman with two children in her arms walked along, while the third child clung to her apron-strings. The sick women and elderly people were taken by carts, on which bags and suitcases were piled up. Small children were crying.

When we neared Babi Yar, shooting and inhuman cries could be heard. I started to grasp what was going on, but said nothing to my mother.
[...]

Each time I saw a new group of men and women, elderly people, and children being forced to take off their clothes. All [of them] were being taken to an open pit where submachine-gunners shot them. Then another group was brought....

With my own eyes I saw this horror. Although I was not standing close to the pit, terrible cries of panic-stricken people and quiet children's voices calling "Mother, mother..." reached me.

I saw all this, but in no way could I understand how people were killing other human beings only because they were Jews..... I saw a young woman, completely naked, nursing her naked baby when a policeman came running up to her, tore the baby from her breast, and threw it into the pit alive. The mother rushed there after her baby. The fascist shot her and she fell down dead...

The policeman ordered me to strip and pushed me to a precipice, where another group of people was awaiting their fate. But before the shots resounded, apparently out of fear, I fell into the pit. I fell on the [bodies] of those already murdered....

Suddenly all became quiet. It was getting dark. Germans armed with submachine-guns walked around, finishing off the wounded.

I felt that something was moving behind me. At first I was afraid and decided to wait for a minute. I turned around quietly and asked: "Who are you?"

I was answered by a thin, scared child's voice: "Auntie, don't be afraid, it's me. My name is Fima. My last name is Shnaiderman. I am 11 years old. Take me with you. I am very afraid of the dark.

I moved closer to the boy, hugged him tightly, and started to weep silently. The boy said:

"Don't cry, Auntie."

We both started to move silently.

We had reached the top of the pit when a shot rang out. By instinct we both fell to the ground. We kept silent for several minutes, afraid to utter a single word.

When I calmed down, I moved close to Fimochka, took shelter at his side, and asked him quietly: "How do you feel, Fimochka?"

There was no answer. In the darkness I felt his arms and legs. He was not moving. There was no sign of life. I rose a bit and looked into his face. He was lying with closed eyes. I tried to open them until I realized that the boy was dead. "

More than 33,700 Jews were gunned down by the Nazis over two days of genocidal mass killing.

Baba Yar continued to be an execution site for the duration of the Nazi occupation of Kyiv.

Between 100,000-120,000 people were killed there. Mostly Jews, but also Ukrainians, Russians, and Roma.

The Nazis tried to exterminate all Ukraine's Jews. But they failed.

Brave families and individuals survived.

Children escaped the horror. Many people, the Righteous among the Nations, had the courage to care and risked their own lives to save Jews.

Nearly 2,700 Ukrainians have been identified as among the righteous, the fourth highest of any country.

They include Stepan and Mariya Omelyanyuk.

They were farmers living with their three young children near what is today Lukiv, in northwestern Ukraine. The Nazis conquered the area on June 25, 1941, and they immediately began pogroms against the local Jews.

The Omelyanyuks told Rubin Grosser, who had worked with Omelyanyuk as a salesman, that he could turn to them if he needed any help.

One day in August 1942, Mariya found Grosser with another Jew, Leib Neimark, in her barn. Both men had escaped from a mass grave after a slaughter similar to that at Baba Yar.

Neimark stayed with the Omelyanyuks for only a few days but Grosser hid there for almost 15 months. The Omelyanyuks kept the presence of the hidden Jew a secret from their children but one night their eldest daughter, Lidiya, noticed him and, thereafter, the children became involved with the rescue too.

They brought Grosser food and warned him when strangers approached. They provided Grosser with reading and Grosser helped the family with the household chores. In autumn 1943, Grosser left to join a group of Soviet partisans.

After the area was liberated, Grosser visited the Omelyanyuks and found them living with relatives. The farm had been totally burned down by Germans and they were left with nothing.

The Nazis tried to exterminate all the Jews, but failed.

They will always fail for as long as there are those like the Omelyanyuk's that hold fast to the idea that every human life is a precious gift; that every group has a right to survive and thrive; that our humanity is a common whole made stronger by each part.

Ukraine's Jewish community was devastated by the Holocaust. More than 1 million Ukrainian Jews were murdered.

But the battered community survived. It thrives again.

In 1978, two children of Ukrainian Holocaust survivors had their first son. They called him Volodymyr.

Like most Jews in the Soviet Union, Volodymyr did not practice his faith, but he wore his Jewish identity proudly.

Over the past decade, Volodymyr often visited the Dnipro Synagogue, where he befriended the Rabbi.

Volodymyr Zelensky, the comedian who became a president. Ukraine's first Jewish president. His prime minister, incidentally, is also Jewish.

A few months ago, Zelensky's Ukraine was attacked by Russia. Cities like Mariupol, Kharkiv, and Kyiv itself bombarded indiscriminately.

In Bucha, Russian forces systematically killed men and boys of fighting age. They raped and tortured women.

They have brought mobile crematoriums into Mariupol. One can only imagine the horrors unfolding there.

On 1 March, a Russian missile hit the Holocaust memorial at Baba Yar. Five people were killed. More death at this most sacred site.

I say all this to remind us that history has not ended.

That we are part of an ongoing struggle.

A struggle against the ideas and ideologies of hate that were so perfected by the Nazis but that persist today, not just out there in the world but in our communities too.

The labels and the targets sometimes change but are sometimes also chillingly familiar.

The underlying logics never change: some peoples are not worthy, they say, some lives are expendable. We get to decide which is which.

“Ukraine is a cancer” the Russian president and foreign minister have both said in the past few weeks. That is a direct translation.

Genocide starts with dehumanization. And that is where it must be resisted first.

The everyday racism of the person who says that anti-Semitism is not really racism, who says that the Jews don’t count.

The Hollywood star who claims that the Holocaust wasn’t racially motivated because the victims weren’t black.

These ideas must be confronted and challenged everywhere, for allowed to fester they make the next steps – the steps towards genocide – all the easier.

Unless resisted, these logics of hate end with bloodshed. With massacre. With Baba Yar.

Sadly, this is a struggle that every generation must confront.

What matters is that we hold firm in our commitment to the rights of individuals and groups and in our determination to confront, challenge, and resist the politics of hate at every level.

To build resistance into government policy and into challenging the everyday racism where it all begins.

That is why this event is so important to us.

“Never Again” must not be a silent prayer; it must be our call to action. We owe that much at least to Judy Bahar’s heroic mother.

Thank you again to our speakers and guests. I wish you all health and happiness. Good night.