

Leo Baeck Centre for Progressive Judaism – Holocaust Memorial Dedication Service
Keynote Speech – 14th November 2010

Pauline Rockman OAM, President, Jewish Holocaust Centre, Melbourne

Good afternoon, dear survivors, Rabbi Keren Black, Board and congregants of the Leo Baeck Centre, distinguished guests, friends,

I would like to acknowledge the Wurrundjeri nation as the traditional owners of the land we are on and to pay our respects to their elders past and present.

I would like to dedicate this talk in memory of Michael Adi and Freda Hammerman.....my father and mother.

Thank you for giving me the honour of delivering the keynote address on this important occasion in the life of the Leo Baeck Centre. As president of the Jewish Holocaust Centre I feel very honoured to be here today. As a second generation... and as a member of the Australian community I am honoured and proud to be here.....

On reading your organisation's history and about the life of Leo Baeck from whom you take your name, it stands to reason that as a congregation you would seek to create and erect a monument such as this in 2010, the 60th anniversary year of your congregation. An important aspect of Rabbi Baeck's teaching is the striving for universal good and maintaining the survival of Jews throughout history. This Holocaust Memorial will honour the memory of the millions of people who were victims of the Holocaust. As your Rabbi, Jonathan Keren-Black has said, "*As the Holocaust moves from personal memory to recorded history, evocative memorials have an increasingly important role in evoking and recalling the tragedy for future generations to reinforce the message to all humanity: 'Never Again'.*"

We are here today to mark a special event, the dedication of a memorial to the holocaust in the form of a magnificent work by the artist Konstantin Dimopoulos.

This is truly in keeping with the last wishes of the murdered victims of the holocaust, not to forget!!! We have not forgotten, we cannot forget, we dare not forget, for us all and for future generations we must remain vigilant in defence of the precious gift of liberty and against any form of tyranny,

The Holocaust is considered by many to be a defining moment of the 20th-century from which the world is still learning about what we are as individuals, about the human capacity for good and evil, and about the power of states and institutions to shape the world. Holocaust awareness and consciousness has spread far beyond the Jewish community. It is evident as nations have been dealing with Holocaust-related issues and apologising for the past. Churches have made theological and liturgical changes to reflect Holocaust sensitivities. Almost every city has a Holocaust museum. There is a plethora of books and films on the subject. Throughout the world there is hardly a day that goes by without a mention of the holocaust in the media, in the arts.

And, as it enters the larger domain, it ceases to be the particular inheritance of the Jewish People. It is a tragedy that befell the Jewish people that belongs to the whole world. We may say we don't know what is good or what is bad. But we do know that the Holocaust was evil, absolute evil.

As Jews, as members of the human race, we have and must continue to respond to the Holocaust by remembering the survivors and those who were murdered, by recognition of their suffering and by transmitting that memory as a means of a commitment to human

dignity. The mission and message of the Jewish Holocaust Centre in Melbourne remains as relevant today as when it was first established by the founding survivor group in 1984 - to remember the Holocaust and to teach its vital lessons with the important aim of preventing occurrences in Australia and the world from happening again.

Memorials are among the earliest artistic creations of humankind. The oldest and most common form is the gravestone. Its purpose is to remind one of the dead person. *The sad fact is that almost none of the murdered Jews of Europe have their own grave.* Willie Lerner, survivor guide at the Jewish Holocaust Centre says of the Centre, “*it is the cemetery or sanctuary for my murdered family as they have no other resting place*”

The words of survivors capture our imagination in a dimension we hardly comprehend. On-site memorialisation, travelling to the Nazi death camps located in Poland and other now historic sites in Europe has greatly increased as a phenomenon over the last 20 years. It serves to reinforce our conceptualisation in a tangible, authentic sense. The Holocaust happened there, in that very place. The largest and best-preserved is Auschwitz-Birkenau, a symbol of the cruelty of the 20th century.

Programs like *The March of the Living* commenced in 1988 as an annual journey for thousands of Jewish secondary students from around the world. In an act of international commemoration on Yom Hashoah, thousands gather in Auschwitz 1, behind that infamous sign “*Arbeit Macht Frei*”. They march the three kilometres from Auschwitz 1 to Birkenau. Over the years the program has expanded to include people of varied backgrounds, religions and ages.

I have been to the Nazi death camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau, Treblinka and Chelmo and Majdanek. I was at Babi Yar. I have walked the paths. I have participated in the March of the Living. I have been to Magdeburg in Germany, former home of my great grandfather and his children and grandchildren who were murdered in Theresienstadt and Auschwitz, where at a ceremony in September 09 the stolperstein (stumbling blocks) of German artist Gunter Demnig were placed in the footpath outside his last place of abode, reminders of people from the neighbourhood who were deported and murdered.

Throughout history, collective and public memorialisation has most commonly taken place with the distance of time. After wars have been declared over, towns, cities, and nations have built memorials to name the dead and those sacrificed. The most successful memorials are those that allow visitors a wide range of potential interactions and rituals and, most importantly, allow them to create a space for dialogue or reflection. The memorials that resonate within a culture are those that allow those debates to continue, that don't try to contain history and memory but create a space where they are generated in all their conflict.

When we contemplate this sculpture I believe it will encourage reflection and hopefully dialogue.

The Leo Baeck Centre has I believe thrown out a challenge to the community, about the dangers of hatred and taken their mission and transformed it into this memorial. As we move further away from the events of the Shoah how we memorialise it is significant and this act of the LBC is indeed a Mitzvah, serving not only to commemorate the murdered victims but to continue to let their voices be heard as a testament and warning to the future *Remember Zachor, Gedenkt,.... Keeping the memory of the Holocaust is of utmost importance.* The word "zachor" - an injunction 'to remember' - appears 169 times in the Torah.

This memorial helps the world to fulfil this sacred injunction and to honour the victims of the Shoah.

In today's uncertain times, we must be more diligent than ever to use the lessons of the Shoah and apply them to contemporary society – we must not look away. Over seventy years ago, a movement in Germany sought to eradicate an entire people.

Today, sadly, the Holocaust survivors are dying out and we stand beside the few who remain. They are people who belong to two worlds: one that no longer exists and ours, the postwar world. Soon, only the words of the survivors will remain, and the memorials that have been established in their honour and in the memory of the murdered, like this memorial at the Leo Baeck Centre, continue as the enduring symbol of the Holocaust.

The generation of Germans that were complicit in the mass execution of six million Jews is also succumbing to old age. The generation that has replaced them had no role in the iniquities of their ancestors. Within decades, the living reminders of the horror of the Holocaust will be no more. Soon, no one on the planet will have been complicit, responsible or directly victimised by the Holocaust.

Many of the lessons of the Holocaust appear to be lost on the world, as evidenced by recent genocide and human rights abuses. We no longer need to place blame, but instead need to work together to protect the Holocaust's memory and ensure that injustice never occurs again. We must not ignore the iniquities of the past but address them and learn from them. It is a concept that upholds the highest ideals of cohesion, honour, peace, and justice.

New generations must embrace the intangible pall of the Holocaust as a driving force to do good. This notion of global responsibility is not new or unique. Over twenty years ago, Chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee Egil Aarvik commended Elie Weisel in his Nobel Prize Presentation Speech for charging the world with a notion of responsibility: *Wiesel's mission is not to gain the world's sympathy for the victims or the survivors. His aim is to awaken our conscience. Our indifference to evil makes us partners in the crime. We know that the unimaginable has happened. What are we doing now to prevent it happening again? Do not forget, do not sink into a new blind indifference, but involve yourselves in truth and justice, in human dignity, freedom, and atonement. That was and still is Wiesel's message to us.*

Today more than 65 years have passed since the end of the war, less than a modern lifetime. The Holocaust will remain in human memory for some time to come. Remembering will continue to be necessary in the future, remembering the Nazi era, remembering the Shoah, as we approach a time when there will no longer be any eye witnesses, any survivors to give testimony. For this and the implications of 'never again' which is continuously recurring we need to have memorials, we need to endorse the work of organisations such as the Leo Baeck Centre for their recognition of this need. Memorials are necessary but they cannot exist in a vacuum. They have to be interwoven with the everyday work of remembrance, they must be places of dialogue and they need the support and commitment of the community and society. They, as the LBC has done, can provide us with issues to contemplate, to learn from. They are key places of reflection on history.

Take some time, at this memorial sculpture, it is a time for us to pause and ponder how even more relevant today the Holocaust's message is in our uncertain world, and to consider its vital lessons for the future if we are to live together in peace and harmony.

As Jews when we celebrate the festival of Pesach, we sit together at our tables with our families and relate the story of the exodus from Egypt of the Jewish people over 2000 years ago. Its importance and relevance today is immense, how a group who lived successfully among the Egyptians was transformed so quickly into slaves. Xenophobia, the fear of foreigners, is a common historic phenomenon, illustrated throughout the ages and so relevant

to us today. The message being – one must be vigilant and not accept even the first official discrimination.

The lessons of the Holocaust are so timely. The ramifications permeate the very fabric of who we are as human beings and the links that on the one hand preserve the past and on the other hand join it to the present and the future.

Let us build memories in our children lest they drag out joyless lives, lest they allow treasures to be lost because they have not been given the keys. We live not by things, but by the meanings of things. It is needful to transmit the passwords from generation to generation.

As Antoine de Saint-Exupery said, in the language of many of the murdered of the holocaust: "Mir zaynen di yortzayt likht, doyres opshtamike funem khurbn. Mir muzn ibergebn dem zikorn fun der Shoah far di kedoyshim..." ("We are the memorial candles...the link to the generations of the Shoah. We are the transmitters of memory for the survivors of the Shoah.")