

22nd May 2018

The Board of Deputies of British Jews
1 Torriano Mews
Kentish Town
London NW5 2RZ

For the attention of Marie van der Zyl, Deputies President

Dear Marie,

You have not got off to a good start. Your imprudent statement about the violence in Gaza (May 15 2018), issued in the name of the Board, immediately caused widespread anger and division. The reckless slaughter of unarmed Palestinians by Israeli soldiers is indefensible and raises the spectre of other times. Blindly supporting the Jewish cause, whether right or wrong, is hardly a message for peace. You will have to learn to seek wiser counsel, and listen and learn, if you wish to make a success of your term as President.

In the various public promotions for your candidacy, which appeared in the media leading up to the Board of Deputies election, you made much of your 'battle' against cancer as a young mother. When any of us have life-threatening health issues, the empathy and support from families, friends and the community is vital. Compassion for your mother-in-law Nikki van der Zyl was conspicuously absent when, in January 2013, she was suffering from blood clots as a result of an accident. At a time when I was receiving daily radiotherapy treatment for my own cancer, and whilst my wife languished in hospital close to death, you instructed solicitors who threatened her with a Court injunction because she had mentioned her two grandchildren in her autobiography *For Your Ears Only*. The outcome was that thousands of the newly printed books were destroyed, evoking distressing images of when Nazis had made bonfires of books in cities throughout Germany, including Berlin where Nikki was born.

Her book tells the uplifting story of a four year old refugee who was forced to flee from Hitler with her parents, leaving behind relatives who would soon perish in terrible circumstances. Landing in England, a foreign country where she could not speak the language, she was soon separated from her mother and rabbi father when they were transferred to internment camps. Sent to boarding schools she had to quickly learn to fend for herself and stand up against bullies. Overcoming all the hardships she became a successful actress, acclaimed world-wide for her revoicing skills in numerous major film productions. After

enduring a stressful divorce from her first Jewish husband, who callously made an application to have her committed to prison, and then years of legal battles in the High Court to retain care and control of her children, she determined to become a lawyer. Enrolling at college to first acquire A-levels, she studied hard and went on to obtain a law degree at Middlesex Polytechnic. Not content with that she later sat for the bar exams and became a barrister and a member of Middle Temple. Subsequently she embarked on a new career when she was appointed a lobby correspondent at the Houses of Parliament.

The Board's Jewish Manifesto notes that with each passing year there are fewer survivors able to tell their stories and, therefore, it is important for schools across Europe to teach students about the Holocaust. Nikki's narrative is an inspiring tale of survival for today's Jewish youngsters - especially girls - who suffer no comparable hardships and mostly live untroubled, pampered and protected lives. As part of the Board's aim to promote awareness of Jewish history through the personal accounts and testimony of survivors, the book should be adopted as a standard reference work in schools as a component of the National Curriculum.

Next year 2019 will be the 80th anniversary of the van der Zyl family's arrival in Britain, shortly before the start of World War II. What better way to commemorate this than for Nikki's autobiography to be reprinted under the auspices of the Board of Deputies? With the *van der Zyl* name prominent on the cover it would attract wide interest and may well help to overcome lingering antagonisms. It could be a worthy and fitting legacy of your Presidency and I trust you will give this proposal your full support.

In closing I commend this passage from the Board's Manifesto for your attention and hope it gives you pause for thought:

Judaism interprets the core Biblical commandment to 'honour and respect one's parents' (Exodus 20:12), and the instruction to "Stand up for an older person and show honour to the elderly" (Leviticus 19:32) as general standards for the treatment of older people.

Yours sincerely,

George Rooker
Historian