

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

4th February 2019

For the attention of Marie van der Zyl, Deputies President

Dear Marie,

A recent survey commissioned by the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust concluded there was a lot of ignorance about the Holocaust and some people think it did not happen. Hopefully the many recent events associated with the Memorial Day will help to dispel the ignorance, but they also revealed familiar parallels with the lives of many victims.

The JC (1st Feb. 2019) reported on the conversation between Robert Rinder and Holocaust survivor Harry Spiro, organised by the Holocaust Educational Trust. The interview was streamed live to schools and other organisations, allowing many thousands of people, but especially children, to hear his recollections. Inevitably there were parts of Mr Spiro's history which crossed with aspects of my wife's family. He, mercifully, was saved through the intervention of the Soviet army when they liberated the Theresienstadt death camp where he was being held. Not so fortunate was my wife Nikki's grandmother, who had been deported to the same camp in September 1942. Later she was transported to Auschwitz where the predictable final atrocity occurred when she was 60 years old.

The last time 4 year old Nikki would see her grandparents - Omi and Opa as she knew them - was shortly before leaving Germany with her mother. This heart-wrenching experience of total family separation, which she briefly alludes to in her autobiography *For Your Ears Only*, has stayed with Nikki all her life. It is beyond understanding why, years later and with the full knowledge of the family Holocaust history, her own son and his wife would think it acceptable to hinder her having a natural relationship with her own grandchildren. Just six years ago a solicitor and barrister were instructed to vehemently oppose the application for a contact order which was made to the Family Court. What justification can there be for a Holocaust survivor to be treated with such contempt by her own *mischpachah*? Where was the humanity?

It is reported that amongst the children of the 500 schools receiving the Spiro link, lots of youngsters were moved to respond to Mr Spiro's horrifying testimony. It was described as a poignant lesson for pupils. Given the frequent reminders that we must listen and learn from the past, how is that Nikki's grandchildren - when they had the opportunity at ages 12 and 14 - did not ask about her first-hand testimony? Perhaps they hadn't been told about it, which would beg the question: why not? They might have learnt that, like Harry Spiro, she had to learn English in order to make her way in a foreign land. More challenges befell her when, in turn, she was separated from the comfort and support of her parents and had to stand up for herself. Ultimately she was so successful in speaking English without a trace of a

German accent that her clear, expressive tones were used to replace those of English born actresses in many cinema films.

Olivia Marks-Woldman, Chief Executive. of the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust has said that it is a moral obligation to pass on the legacy of the Holocaust survivors to future generations. It is not just an obligation; it is a parental duty where the survivors are family members. A reading of Nikki's book would be a suitable starting point for many children's Holocaust education. (Two copies have been reserved for your daughters.)

Despite all that Mr Spiro had experienced, he said that hating will not solve anything. This is something your father Barry Kaye, the author of hate letters to me, obviously did not comprehend.

Tragically the passing of another survivor Harry Bibring has been announced. He arrived in England through the Kindertransport scheme in 1939. He may have been one of the many children under the care of Rabbi Werner van der Zyl, who accompanied a group at that time. My father-in-law was an outspoken opponent of the Nazi regime and had been arrested in his Oranienburger Strasse synagogue. Having witnessed the burning of synagogues in Berlin, when he had the chance to leave Germany he was urged to take it - not knowing if he would ever see his wife and daughter again. When the miniscule family were eventually reunited he continued to be a *Seelsorger* or *Roey-Tson* (shepherd of the flock) for the Post-War Refugees Committee. Always optimistic for the future, rather than looking back, he would go on to face more challenges as he set about surmounting the many difficulties in establishing the Jewish Theological College which was named after his mentor Leo Baeck. Writing in *Werner van der Zyl - Master Builder*, Raymond Goldman (Gen.Sec. of RSGB for 29 years) said: "The eternal optimism of the Jew can seldom have been more clearly manifested in one man's life. ... Having been delivered literally from the clutches of the Gestapo and survived, he repaid the country which gave him shelter by the role he played in laying the foundations upon which the second largest synagogue grouping in British Jewry has been built."

Few survivors of the Nazi tyranny can match the accomplishments of Rabbi van der Zyl, and the **true** van der Zyl story must be re-told to each generation - and with added respect, pride and especially gratitude by those who bear his name.

Yours sincerely,

George Rooker,
Historian