2009 Address
Stand Up To Hatred

Holocaust Memorial Day is an occasion to grieve, to commemorate and remember, to contemplate and to reflect. The theme of this year, Stand Up to Hatred, also reminds us that it is a time to remember the need to act. Abraham Lincoln famously said "to sin by silence when they should protest makes cowards of men". The consequences of failing to heed these words can no more tragically be demonstrated than with respect to the Holocaust and to other cases of genocide.

The exhibition here today offers, I hope, many things to its audience. A reminder of the long-standing nature of particular forms of discrimination and prejudice – antisemitism, of course, but also Islamophobia and antiziganism (racism towards Roma people). A demonstration of how such discrimination is disturbingly alive, thriving and topical. However, I have also tried to reflect the decency, morality and humanity of those who stood up to the Nazi regime during the period of its existence, how the backgrounds of these people varied considerably and how many ultimately paid for their actions with their lives. I do so with the message that their memory, what they did and what they stood for, by contrast, didn't die. It will last for all time whenever people reflect on what human beings can do to each other and what lessons we can gleam for our future prosperity and indeed, survival.

Sophie Scholl is a perfect embodiment of this, one of the most evocative examples of standing up to hatred that the world has known. A University student in Munich, Sophie joined her brother Hans and others in an active resistance movement to the Nazis called 'die Weisse Rose' (the White Rose). Principled and strong, they sought to draw attention to atrocities at home and abroad and encourage passive resistance from their compatriots. They did so through the printing of newsletters and leaflets and distributing them to random addresses chosen from the phone book. One fateful day, 18th February 1943, they were spotted leafletting the main University building by a caretaker who stopped them as they were leaving the scene. The authorities called in the Gestapo and within a matter of days, which included an infamous show trial presided over by Hitler's chief judge, Roland Freisler, they were all condemned to death, dying savagely and swiftly at the hands of the guillotine. Sophie Scholl was just 21 years old when she died. Her last words were recorded as being:

> *"How can we expect righteousness to prevail when there is hardly anyone willing to give himself up individually to a righteous cause. Such a fine, sunny day, and I have to go. But what does my death matter, if through us thousands of people are awakened and stirred to action?"*

The white rose itself is symbolic. The example set by Sophie Scholl, her brother and their friends has inspired many. As an example, the white rose is the emblem of the Aegis Students, an important part of the Trust's preventative and awareness-raising work with regard to genocide. By a curious and totally coincidental twist of fate, the white rose also features on the badge of the small village of Lidice in the Czech Republic, scene of one of the most brutal incidents of the Holocaust period.

In retaliation for the assassination of Reinhold Heydrich, Reichsprotektor of Bohemia and Moravia, in June 1942, Lidice was condemned – through a spurious and completely false alleged

connection between the assassins and the village – to suffer the ruthless vengeance of the Nazi authorities. Less than a week after Heydrich's death, German troops surrounded the village, collected together all males of 15 years of age and over in the courtyard of one of the village farms, and dispatched all the remaining women and children to the local secondary school in the nearby town of Kladno. From there, the majority of the women were sent to concentration and extermination camps and the majority of the children to the Lodz ghetto in Poland. From Lodz they were murdered in gas vans taking them to the extermination centre of Chelmno. The menfolk were systematically shot dead where they had gathered in the farm courtyard. By all accounts, they met their end with extraordinary dignity and bravery, looking their executors squarely in the face. Lidice stands as an illustration of resistance not just because of the brave demeanour of its inhabitants in June 1942, but because of its resurrection as a village. After the executions, the Nazis worked hard to obliterate all traces of Lidice's existence. They even removed trees and desecrated the graveyard. However, the Czech authorities, helped by an international campaign, were determined to stand up to this heinous crime and re-built the village next door to its previous location. Countries all over the world then made conscious decisions to name towns or sites after the Czech village. There is, for example, a Lidice in Mexico and Venezuela, and a number of them in Brazil. There is also a Lidice square in Coventry.

The demeanour of the Lidice men also made me think of the words of a little Jewish girl, facing death in a Nazi camp. She stood up to a guard who had seized her little one year old brother in the undressing room prior to extermination. Literally minutes from death, she apparently said:

> *"Don't you dare lay your hands, dripping with blood, upon my lovely brother. I am his good mother now and he will die in my arms, with me!"*

She herself, was five years old.

In addition to those documented in the exhibition, there are, of course, copious examples of people standing up to Nazi hatred, situations of extraordinary resistance and courage. To give some examples.

In Terezín, the painter Friedl Dicker-Brandeis (a prisoner herself) devoted her time and her own scarce possessions to teaching and inspiring young girls in her care within the ghetto town to express themselves through painting; Petr Ginz, a teenager from Prague, organised other boys in his ghetto block into producing their own newsletter. These were acts that in previous years would have been quite normal, but under the circumstances of Nazi captivity, took on a new significance. They were illicit and deliberate forms of resistance, in that they were an extension of normal life before captivity. A prior existence, not a conformity to prison routine.

Jewish resistance to the Nazis took many forms. The example of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising features in the exhibition. Armed resistance was also exemplified by Jewish partisan movements operating in rural areas – the Bielski brothers in what is now Belarus, the subject of Daniel Craig's new film 'Defiance', being an example. On some occasions, such physical resistance occurred within the concentration and extermination camps themselves. At Auschwitz in October 1944, members of the 12th Sonderkommando (a specific group of Jewish prisoners who helped the workings of the extermination facilities in exchange for certain privileges, including the privilege of life) openly revolted, blowing up one of the cremetoria on the way. They were ultimately unsuccessful in their bid for freedom. Those captured alive were executed one by one as they lay face down on the floor. Nevertheless, the crematorium they destroyed was never replaced, slowing down the production of death and saving the lives of many.

Sophie Scholl and the White Rose were also not the only active opponents of the Nazis within Germany itself. The Catholic Bishop of Münster, August von Galen, openly gave sermons highlighting the horrors of the Nazi euthanasia programmes and the murder of concentration camp prisoners. Even those close to the Nazi leadership were not silenced. Hermann Göring's wife, the

former actress Emmy Sonnemann, interceded with Hitler directly on behalf of the Jewish people, braving the wrath of both the Führer and her husband. So too did the wife of Hitler Youth leader Baldur von Schirach, who reported her observations of Jews being rounded up for transportation at Amsterdam's main railway station.

Standing up to hatred did not always involve the use of words. There is a famous story of a German guard in a concentration camp work facility who, every day, would leave one of his lunch sandwiches at the work station of a particular Jewish prisoner. If discovered, he would most likely have faced charges of treason, and yet this simple act of sharing and compassion provided both the physical and mental sustenance and stimulus for the prisoner to enable her to survive. This act, is mirrored in the book and film 'Boy in the Striped Pyjamas', though Bruno, the camp commandant's son, is, of course, largely oblivious to how he is supposed to behave towards Jewish prisoners. He acts out of innocent, pure and unsoiled love, commerarderie and human kindness. Nevertheless, his actions are a form of resistance and an important one at that, and reflect his fundamental understanding and appreciation of what is right and what is wrong.

Despite concerted attempts to cover up their crimes, photographs were taken within Auschwitz that record the procedures and operation of death. Jewish prisoners bravely and surreptitiously took pictures of the burning of bodies on a mammoth pyre. In spite of unimagined feelings of horror, revolsion and terror, they were determined that history would have a visual record of what had happened to their families, friends and community members. Prisoners, of course, also wrote down what they had seen, many of them burying their observations in the ground within the camp confines to be discovered by future generations. We owe them an enormous gratitude for helping us to piece together what happened and come a little way towards understanding and visualising human experience and feelings at such a time.

In reflecting on these examples, it strikes me that sometimes the simplest physical act can carry the greatest symbolic significance. A clergyman preaching in a pulpit, the sharing of a sandwich, the adding of a name to a list, the playing of a piano, the writing of a letter or a diary, the singing of a song, the drawing of a picture, the taking of a photograph, the saying of some words. The saying of a single word – 'no'.

The exhibition relating to those standing up to hatred features many examples of people from outside particular communities standing alongside those suffering discrimination at its must brutal. Of non-Jews standing up to the Nazis and to antisemitism.

It is arguably true and a reflection of the world in which we live that what carries more weight and significance is the opposition of a non-Muslim to Islamophobia, of a non-Jew to antisemitism, of a non-Gypsy to antiziganism, of a faith member to discrimination carried out in the name of that faith, and in the context of the Holocaust – of a German citizen or soldier to the Nazis.

The people that you see in the exhibition today stood up to Nazi hatred knowing the potential consequences of their actions, knowing that in all likelihood they would have to face the ultimate punishment, removal from their loved ones, removal from this earth. There are, of course, many more recent examples from other genocides and also in the context of opposition to totalitarian and other brutal regimes throughout the world.

We are fortunate in a society such as ours that we don't have to face such draconian consequences from our actions, that we have the relative freedom to act in such a way, that such a freedom is protected by law. Doesn't that therefore further obligate us to stand up to hatred? Don't we have to take advantage of our relative freedom to protest, to demonstrate, to stand up for what is right and to condemn what is wrong, not just in our town, our city, our county, our country, but throughout the world? Don't we have a humanitarian duty to those not so fortunate, to act in such a manner?

I believe we do. We must stand up to hatred wherever we witness it, wherever we know about it, wherever we suspect it. That means acting locally, acting nationally and acting globally. We must have faith and trust that standing up can make a difference. Those who paid the ultimate sacrifice during the Holocaust and other genocides for their protest certainly felt that way. We must feel the same, that no matter how small an act of protest and of support to the disadvantaged, we must have belief that it will have an impact. However, we mustn't be content and satisfied in the simple act of protest. We must make it have an impact. If that means standing up continuously and repititively over one issue, then so be it. If that means taking a variety of actions, of making a stand in different ways, of hammering home a point, then so be it.

We also have a duty to help others to stand up to protest, particularly those so disadvantaged and subject to perpetual and long-standing discrimination that they do have little faith in the possibility of change, people who feel protest is futile and have almost resigned themselves to accepting persecution. We can help them in so many ways. By protesting and standing up for them. By talking to them and encouraging them. By showing solidarity with them in their plight. By giving them a reason to have faith and optimism, so that they themselves – with our help – can start to make standing up to hatred a possible, purposeful and meaningful act for them.

The Holocaust was arguaby one of the lowest periods in human history and one of its greatest catastrophes. Mankind plummetted to depths previously unimagined or at least unremembered. And yet, as we have seen, within this desolate era of brutality and despair, human endeavour did shine, and perhaps given the context, it shone ever so more brightly. It shone because people – though too few in number – did stand up to hatred and acted on their thoughts, their inclinations, their feelings and the sound, positive essence of their humanity. Had more people done the same – at governmental, societal, community and individual levels – that slippery slope to potential Armageddon may well have been halted and, who knows, maybe even avoided entirely.

And therein lies the lesson, surely, of the Holocaust and other genocides. Whenever we ignore discrimination and persecution, turn a blind eye to suffering and prejudice, close our minds to universal human rights, choose ignorance and avoidance to compassionate action, we run the risk of starting a juggernaut ride that does become increasingly difficult to stop. A collective failure to act can tip mankind over the edge of a precipice, a precipice that can ever so quickly become another Shoah, Cambodia, Rwanda, Darfur or Kosovo.

Count Helmut von Moltke, a German aristocrat and soldier during the period of the Third Reich and an active member of the military resistance to Hitler and the Nazi regime, made clear one of the fundamental reasons for his active defiance. In referring to his knowledge of the treatment of Jewish and other communities and groups in Germany, in Poland and elsewhere, he stated:

> *"Since I know this, don't I therefore become guilty too for seeming to condone it, for knowing and yet doing nothing to stop it?"*

These are significant words. Don't think of ignoring a racist comment, a homophobic act, a discriminatory letter in a newspaper, news of a human rights abuse in a far-away area of the world. People can quite easily think that their action doesn't or can't make a difference. What does it matter? What can I do?

Standing up to hatred and doing so in a way that both confronts and addresses the issue, but also elicits a desired reaction of thought, contemplation, awareness and reasoning in the instigator, is not necessarily an easy thing to do. But we need to recognise that it is the right thing to do. History tells us that and provides a powerful message across all historical eras. If we want to avoid a continual repeitition of the horrors of genocide, we ignore that message at our peril.

As I mentioned at the outset, the exhibition features a historical glance at antisemitism, Islamophobia and antiziganism. Long-standing discrimination of communities who have every reason to feel powerless, resentful, futile and cynical of change. However, that is why it is incumbant upon all of us to fight these injustices, for all to stand up and be counted, to show that discrimination and prejudice can be eradicated and that those proposing, encouraging and acting in such a way can be defeated. To show that change is possible.

Surely the primary purpose of a study of the past is that we learn from what happened. If more people act – and importantly pro-act – then the chances of a repeat are diminished. If human beings have more faith in humanity, more belief in community cohesion and togetherness and show solidarity to others less fortunate than themselves, then not only would the Holocaust and other genocides be less likely to happen as they did, but the world would be a much better place.

In moving towards such a world, defending someone from another community, opposing hatred against another faith, highlighting the apparently exceptional circumstances whereby non-Jews fought the Nazis and their antisemitism. These things wouldn't be a rarity. They would simply be the norm. Should we reach such a world, such orchestrated, pre-meditated and pervasive antagonism and hatred would be less likely to gain a foothold. That world is within our reach should we choose collectively to stand up to hatred.

Shalom aleichem. Asalaamu alaikum. Peace be upon you and upon all the victims of the Holocaust and other genocides.