

Forum on Holocaust Memorial and Genocide Prevention

David Wills

February 15, 2011



London, UK - Hosted by Lord Tarsem King, the Universal Peace Federation-UK held the annual 'Holocaust Memorial and Genocide Prevention' in a heart-moving event in the House of Lords on February 15. This featured Daniel Finkelstein sharing his family's tragic Holocaust experience, Alex Ntung and Prudencienne Seward spoke of their horrific experiences in the Rwandan and Great Lakes region, and Ruth Barnett spoke about genocide in general and the Armenian genocide in particular as a forerunner of the Holocaust. Jonathan Fryer emphasised the role of the individual to take on the 'Responsibility to Protect.'

Daniel Finkelstein's family suffered greatly during the Holocaust. Most of his family were in Holland in the same community as Anne Frank. On the day they received visas to go to the UK, Holland was invaded and they were trapped. With three young children it was impossible to go into hiding like Anne Frank. His grandfather, who was in London at the time, is famous for founding the Wiener Library in London for the collection of evidence and artefacts of Fascism. The collection was used during the Nuremberg Trials. The Wiener Library is the world's oldest institution devoted to the study of the Holocaust, its causes and legacies. It was founded in 1933 as an information bureau that informed Jewish communities and governments worldwide about the persecution of the Jews under the Nazis.



Finkelstein's family experience of the Holocaust has coloured his political views. Big ideas are threatening because it was the big ideas that killed many of his family as well as many other tragedies. The small ideas are

less threatening. The passionate desire for the truth pursued by his grandfather has also influenced his political and journalistic career.

His mother and her sisters survived due to an 'outrageous stroke of luck' because there was a prisoner swap which only happened one time. He described the torment of 'survivor's guilt' suffered by his aunts adding that his mother dealt with this through her strong mind and keen reasoning. (For a full account please see here.)

Two testimonies about the Rwandan genocide were very powerful. Alex Ntung shared that he had been saved because of his nose! His nose does not look like a typical Tutsi nose. He sadly has been in three genocides: Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda. Somehow he survived all three. Another time he escaped because the killers at a checkpoint had killed so many people that they were tired and hungry and he was able to pass through without being attacked. He suffered the survivor's guilt that was experienced by Holocaust survivors.



Prudentienne Seward, a Rwandan Tutsi, testified to her work with the healing process after so much tragic loss in her family during the genocide in 1994. She has been involved in 'Highly Inclusive Inter-Rwandan Dialogue.' She is the Chair of PAX, which is seeking to promote justice, forgiveness and reconciliation among Rwandans and people of the Great Lakes Region by involving them in reconciliation activities. They hold regular conferences to attempt to deal with the repeated human rights violations of the Great Lakes region in a way that heals and brings closure for as many people as possible. In the view of the activists there has been little progress since the Edenbridge declaration in 2001 to bring reconciliation in the Great Lakes region.

Her family suffered many deaths and her husband was also killed in the massacres. It has been so traumatic but she felt the only way to go forward was to seek to promote reconciliation, justice and forgiveness through PAX. This justice should deal with the massacres of 1994 but should also deal with the other bouts of killing that preceded this.

Ruth Barnett, a Holocaust educator and Kinder transport child, shared that the pursuit of truth that was so important for Daniel Finkelstein's grandfather was also important for her and for the resolution of genocide. Denial of genocide is the final stage in the Gregory Stanton's 'Eight Stages of Genocide' (For more info: Genocide Watch). The first six stages do not include murder. There are many opportunities to prevent genocide before it gets to violence. The seventh stage is extermination of the victimised group, and the eighth stage is denial of the genocide. That is why she said she is so hot on challenging genocide denial.



Barnett emphasised that the Armenian genocide was the model for the Holocaust in that the Turkish leaders were allowed to evade responsibility for 96 years. There are archives in the Houses of Parliament that demonstrate the truth of the Armenian genocide. There is no closure without acknowledgement. After World War I there was a conspiracy to cover up the truth of the genocide that included the UK government. This was not a healthy development and encouraged other genocides because conspirators believed they could commit mass murder with impunity.



Marilyn Brummer, President of the League of Jewish Women, asked if the 'Responsibility to Protect' initiative could be effective when dealing with sovereign nations that were engaging in persecution of a minority community?

Jonathan Fryer emphasised that nations are composed of people who need to take responsibility to stand up for what they believe. In the Holocaust there were a number of individuals who took incredible risks to save Jews even though they were not Jewish themselves. The 'responsibility to protect' can of course be promoted and implemented by nations and armies, but they are often part of the problem. Individuals must stand up to take their own responsibility to protect by being courageous. Once the people stand up, the government cannot hold them back for long.

Robin Marsh explained that the Universal Peace Federation (UPF) perceives humanity as being one family under God. This means that all human life has sacred value. Thus, the human value and rights of all people are equal. This also means that our moral concern should be to protect all members of the human family and support the poorest and most disadvantaged. Tim Miller, Vice President of UPF-Europe, added that the interreligious council proposal for the United Nations composing the spiritual and religious wisdom of all faith communities in conjunction with political leadership could promote the dialogue that has the possibility to prevent these tragedies.