



Ben Kepes: Remembering the resistance of those who came before me

UN International Holocaust Remembrance Day
27 January 2022

Today is the United Nations Holocaust Remembrance Day, the day the UN-designated on which to commemorate the 11 million human beings murdered in the Holocaust. While my opinion pieces are generally around business, as the son of Holocaust survivors I thought it important to acknowledge this day.

I was given the honour of addressing the UNHRD service on Thursday evening, on this year's topic, Resistance. The UNHRD commemorates the 11 million people, of which roughly six million were Jews, who perished in the Nazi's obscene attempt to rid the world of what they classified as Untermenschen or sub-humans: Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, the disabled and others.

The theme of this year's commemoration is resistance - shining a spotlight on the actions - big and small, armed, and unarmed, by Jew and Gentile alike, that attempted to reduce the impact of the Holocaust.

To be honest, when the invitation to speak arrived, I felt a little bit of a fraud. I'm simply the offspring of Holocaust survivors and hence my only qualification for speaking is the random series of events that went to creating me. As for my parents, they were children during the Holocaust and hence their resistance was also second-hand - they weren't part of heroics such as the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and didn't play a part in an active resistance movement during the war.

But then I got thinking - My grandmother, Savta Miriam, showed many acts of resistance which saved her and her two daughters. In Szolnok, Hungary, she showed foresight to argue the toss when lists were being made and secured the three of them a position at an agricultural camp. Once they were transported to the Bergen Belsen concentration camp, she secured herself work in the kitchen where she could steal the odd potato to provide some desperately needed sustenance to her daughters. And then, the train they were on, which was destined to be blown up over the River Elbe, was liberated by the American army. The GIs, not knowing what to do, gave the hundreds of survivors from the train food and drink. My staunch grandmother ensured that her daughters only took tiny bites and small sips as, all around them, people died who had failed to resist the temptation to binge on the first decent sustenance they'd seen for years. Avoiding a primal instinct in a malnourished and emaciated body is also an act of resistance.

My paternal grandfather, by pushing my father out the skylight of a train, undoubtedly saved his life. And for his own part, my father at the tender age of 13, showed great perspicacity that was in its own way an act of resistance. Upon seeing a Nazi patrol performing random checks of peoples' identification papers, he came

to realise that this was literally a life or death moment for him. He befriended the commanding officer in attendance and got talking to him about The Third Reich and Hitler's master plan. He even went so far, he proudly told me some 40 years later, to give an A-Grade Heil Hitler as he left his newfound friend. My father's quick thinking and resistance to fight or flight very likely saved his life.

You see resistance is not only the big acts that make the news - it's the small acts that also make a change. This works both for good and for evil. A single solitary protestor wearing a gold star at an anti-vaccination rally is, in a small way, helping to fuel global Holocaust revisionism. The political spokesperson who makes an off-the-cuff remark equating Zionism with Naziism perpetuates the evil that resulted in the Holocaust.

The Talmud, the primary source of Jewish, law states that if someone saves a single life, they save the entire world. The individual who advocates for someone being bullied because of their gender, race, sexual orientation or whatever is making an act of resistance and, in their own little way, resisting all oppression.

But, on this Holocaust Remembrance Day, how do we here in New Zealand contextualise the slaughter of 11 million human beings, a sum far greater than twice our entire population? The truth is that we can't fathom numbers such as these. That is a total that far exceed double our entire nation's population - the human brain simply cannot process that. But in the same way that the Auschwitz memorial honours individual victims every day to give those people a voice and a face, we too can focus on individuals and their life stories. The Talmud also tells us that he who is remembered never truly dies. Therefore, what greater act of resistance can there be than to confirm that the Nazis failed both in their attempt to extinguish all Jewish life but all memory of Jewish life also.

And so, as my personal act of resistance this year, I would like to take the time to do just that. I wish to acknowledge and memorialize Tibor Kepes, born in 1900 in Hungary. Tibor was the son of Ignacz Nandor Kepes and Karolin Leonora Hochmann. Tibor was murdered by the Nazis in the Bergen Belsen concentration camp in 1945 ironically not long before the camp was liberated.

And while the Nazis succeeded in snuffing out his life, they failed miserably in snuffing out the memory of his name. Tibor Kepes was my Grandfather and he lives on through his name, given to his oldest Grandson, my brother. He also lives on through his name inscribed on a commemorative statue outside the Dohany Street Synagogue in Budapest.

Tibor Kepes, Zichron Livracha. May his name be a blessing.