

**United Nations International Holocaust Remembrance Day Speech
27 January 2021**

Carol Ratnam

**“E ngā mana, e ngā reo, e ngā karanga maha o te wā,
tēnā koutou katoa”**

1. Ko Har Sinai tōku maunga (My mountain is Mt Sinai)
 2. Ko Jerusalem tōku ūkaipo (My spiritual home is Jerusalem)
 3. Ko Goldstein-Fischer tōku iwi (My tribe is Goldstein -Fischer)
 4. Ko Kelvin Ratnam tōku tane (My husband is Kelvin Ratnam)
 5. Nō Te Whanganui-a-tara ahau (I am from Wellington)
 6. Ko Chaya Frandl bat Dov menachem vi Rachel tōku ing/oa (My name is Carol Ratnam)
 7. Kei te whakapiri ahau, tōku whakapapa, ki te tāhuhu o Aotearoa (I bring my whakapapa to join with the backbone of the meeting house of NZ)
- ”No reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa**

On the 27 January 1945, 76 years ago, Auschwitz was liberated by Soviet forces. 12 years ago, on 27 January 2009 the UN Holocaust Day commemoration was held in the Tahara house behind us. We all fitted into the Tahara House to shelter from the rain. Sitting in front of me was Tamara Green, Hanka Pressburg, Clare Galumbus-Winter, and of course my mother Ilse Goldstein. They were listening expectantly. I can still see them now, as we honour them, and many others.

On a beautiful summer’s day like today it is hard to imagine Auschwitz, or Bergen Belsen ever happened – but they did. At all those places and many many more civilisation sank to its lowest depth – “hell on earth”.

My mother Ilse Fischer was taken from a holding apartment in Vienna to Teresienstadt on 29 September 1942. The Fischer family were moved from their real home in the Ringstrasse district years before.

The family did not willingly go like “lambs to the slaughter”. When gangs of people come in the middle of the night with guns, dogs, and knives, what choice do you have? You survive for another day. As my mother always said, “When there is life, there is hope.” Three weeks before she died, my mother spoke of that moment when they were taken from their home. She said she felt as if her insides were ripped out. She said she never felt whole again.

Although my grandparents were gassed at Auschwitz-Birkenau shortly after they arrived in October 1942 –my mother Ilse and her sister Herta survived to have children of their own. My grandparents were wise and brave mensches.

At Auschwitz Mum was tattooed with the number A4748 and went to the Arbeitlager (work camp). Mum used to tell us of a little girl living in Wellington who once asked her what these numbers were on her arm. “Have you forgotten your phone number?”, she innocently asked.

In March 1943 Mum was shifted to arbeitslager in Hamburg Freihafen, then Hamburg Wedel and Hamburg Eidelstadt. The work included clearing rubble by hand, repairing submarines in underground caves whilst allied bombing made the water rise dangerously close, and clearing landmines with no protection.

The miracle of her survival continued when in April 1945 my mother went on a forced “death march” from Eidelstadt to Bergen Belsen. Thousands died. Today you can travel by bus, train or car between the two towns. It takes 1 hour and 9 minutes to travel the 99.1 kms by car, costing \$14-\$21 in petrol. In April 1945 it cost thousands their life. The average temperature for that region in April is a high of 9 degrees and a low of 1 degree. My mother wore a thin cotton dress, and a pair of shoes that were different sizes. If you fell, you were either shot or beaten to death or left to die in the snow. They left Eidelstadt on 7 April 1945. There are no official records of when they arrived at Bergen Belsen.

My mother said they were given one cup of Ersatz coffee (made from roasted grains) when they arrived in Bergen Belsen. This coffee was to last 2 weeks. Then most of the Nazis fled the camps. The people who made it to Bergen Belsen just died where they fell. The living had no energy to move away from the dead.

On 15 April 1945 the 63rd Anti-tank Regiment and the 11th Armoured Division of the British army liberated the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. It took days of intense fighting for the British to reach the camp.

“When the British entered the camp, its soldiers were totally unprepared for what they found. Inside were more than 60,000 emaciated and ill prisoners in desperate need of medical attention. More than 13,000 corpses in various stages of decomposition lay littered around the camp.”

My mother said battle hardened troops vomited at the smell and the sight.

People think of liberation as a joyful celebration – people jumping for joy, Hollywood style. Bergen Belsen was not like that. After 7 years of starvation, hard labour, humiliation my mother was on her last legs. Mum could only crawl.

After liberation more than 14,000 people died because they were too malnourished to recover.

There are disturbing newsreels of bulldozers moving mounds of bodies piled 10-14 bodies high. The bodies are of people recently deceased – soft, where rigor mortis has not set in. After years of survival – they had just died – most likely after liberation.

Even more disturbing are the questions that the death marches raise – after all Auschwitz had been liberated a few months earlier in January. What was the point of these forced marches in April deeper into German territory if not to kill more! The war in Europe was virtually over, yet the Allies did not bomb the railways to the camps whilst they bombed the historic city of Dresden, full of civilians, until it was flattened.

Liberation brought many in the camp to the realisation that loved ones had perished and that they were alone. For many this realisation was the worst period in their lives. My mothers' sister Herta had lost her first husband, and my fathers' sister Manya had lost hers. My father Berek Goldstein was at another “hell on earth” site of WWII – Stalingrad. He was only 22 in command of a Soviet tank unit. Street to street fighting made every moment uncertain. Sometimes the danger was from the enemy but not always. Antony Beevor in his book “Stalingrad” mentions a documented incident where a drunk Soviet commander furious at his own troops lifted the hatch of a Soviet tank and shot dead his own men. As a child I remember Dad having nightmares. After the war Dad went looking for his family, he escaped a pogrom in Kielce in 1946, and eventually found his two sisters Hanka and Manya in Bergen Belsen. He also met my mother there and they were married in August 1947. Their wedding photos show two skinny youngsters from very different backgrounds – in love and getting married, but looking pensive and sad in some photos because their parents and wider family could never be with them.

Recently I took a visitor through the Holocaust Centre and she asked me how ordinary decent people could let the Holocaust happen. Without hesitation I pointed to a May 1933 photograph of a book burning rally of books considered unacceptable to Nazi thought. 25,000 books were burnt at that event to censor thought considered anti -Nazi. A line from Herman Heine's 1821 play *Almansor, A Tragedy* is quoted – it says, “*Where they burn books, they will in the end also burn*

people." ("Dort, wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man am Ende auch Menschen")

Destruction of free speech and critical thinking, trying to control thought through propaganda is the most dangerous thing. The Holocaust started with words, propaganda and limiting free speech. It ended in death camps, death marches and Bergen Belsen.

Because of their experiences my mother and father's home was open to people of every race and nation. I have never met a German I didn't like, as a rule they are thoughtful and kind— yet one of the most evil movements the world has ever known took root in Germany before spreading to other European countries. Nazism took over very quickly and suffocated free thought and society everywhere. People who valued freedom then became powerless to stop Nazism.

It is all very well to distance the Holocaust as something that happened over in Europe, not here; a long time ago. What does it have to do with us living in NZ today?

In NZ freedom of speech is fundamental to our way of life. You can't say anything you like but in order to live in peace and harmony the aim is to respect others who are different, or think differently. To preserve that freedom we need to think critically and freely access diverse sources of information – the press, television and books. The danger is in accepting the 7-second soundbites on social media as the 'truth'. It is up to each one of us to make sure we are well-informed and educated. Yet, even here in our free society some investigative journalists have received death threats.

Information and education are key to not repeating the Holocaust, yet only 30% of NZ adults 18 years and over know about the Holocaust. That is concerning, if we wish to keep our multicultural society free of hatred, we need to be mindful of the lessons from the Holocaust. If you, or your children, or your children's school have not visited the Holocaust Centre of New Zealand – please do so. The Centre here in Wellington is open every day (except Saturday) to the public from 10am – 1.00pm and runs a visitor's programme for groups by appointment.

Finally- is NZ safe? We are sitting at the cemetery where in 2004 most of the headstones we can see now were knocked over and damaged. The perpetrators are still out there circulating with their hate-filled philosophy. They were never brought to justice.

This time last year someone drew a swastika outside my synagogue, 82 years ago they drew a swastika outside my grandparents shop in Vienna. 6 years later my grandparents were murdered.

To keep New Zealand safe and free, it is incumbent on each one of us here to be educated and informed. If anything is to be learnt from the Holocaust we should not wait for **acts of hatred, violence, and terror. We should act whenever words of hatred and prejudice are levelled at any group.**

The price of freedom is eternal vigilance. Each one of us can play a part by being responsible for checking information **before** we share it - to make sure the information is factual, not propaganda or half-truths. To me this is one of the enduring lessons of Bergen Belsen.

Thank you for taking the time to attend this commemoration.