

The United Nations International Holocaust Remembrance Day
Auckland War Memorial Museum
27 January 2021
Governor-General the Rt Hon Dame Patsy Reddy

Shalom

Ngā mihi maioha ki a koutou

Tēnā tatou katoa

Warm Greetings to you all

I acknowledge Members of the Diplomatic Corps, Members of Parliament, the Mayor of Auckland His Worship Phil Goff and councillors, survivors of the Holocaust and their extended families.

I am honoured to join you in observing this day of deepest sorrow and remembrance for Jewish communities around the world.

Today, we all express our solidarity with people whose families lost a generation of loved ones to the Holocaust.

We honour the survivors of the genocidal policies of the Nazi regime.
Their life-stories are testimony to the strength of the human spirit.

We support their commitment to keep alive the memory of the millions of people who perished in the Holocaust.

Our best course to honour that memory is

- To affirm the humanity and dignity of all peoples, wherever they come from, whatever their cultural background.
- To find the courage to stand up for what is right, to confront evil and call out racism.
- And to maintain our nation's commitment to the rule of law, and our international commitments to refugee populations.

With the passage of time, knowledge of the Nazi regime and the extermination camps is fading from public memory.

I wholeheartedly endorse the Holocaust Centre's commitment to halting this trend, by offering professional development opportunities for teachers and encouraging schools to use its resources.

I wish the Centre every success in its goal to make sure that all New Zealand students study the Holocaust before they leave school.

There is a whakatauki that speaks of the importance of knowing our history:

Haere whakamua, titiro whakamuri.

We must walk into the future with our eyes wide open to the past.

In addition to learning about the horror and tragedy of the Holocaust in Europe, we should all acknowledge and learn from our own country's shameful history with Jewish refugees.

Between 1936 and 1938, when European Jews were frantically searching for sanctuary from Nazi persecution, New Zealand rejected some 1,731 formal applications from them to immigrate here. That was over 70% of the applications we received. We also actively discouraged thousands more from even applying.

European Jews were not recognised as refugees, and our immigration policies of that era favoured British applicants. The cards were stacked against them.

Government Ministers, professional groups and trade unions openly expressed reluctance to provide a haven for more Jewish refugees.

That reluctance is a stain on our history.¹

Only 727 Jewish refugees were allowed into New Zealand in those years. They often encountered hostility in our communities, particularly if they were German or Austrian, and were thwarted in their efforts to bring family members into New Zealand.

Yet they persevered and rebuilt their lives. They had families here and became valuable members of our communities.

New Zealand has benefited immeasurably from their talents, resilience and contributions to the economic and cultural life of our nation.

In the 21st century, we do not have to look far to see what happens when prejudices are allowed to go unchecked.

We have seen how disaffected people can become susceptible to populism and propaganda machines that mobilise them with conspiracy theories, lies, twisted logic and hate.

We have witnessed the internet becoming a potent tool in the recruitment of aggrieved people, who then contribute to the further circulation of online misinformation and disinformation.

We have seen how a community of believers, seemingly impervious to facts, logic and reason, can commit malicious and unlawful acts.

All the more reason to educate young New Zealanders to evaluate information critically, to know their history, to stand up for humanity, decency and fairness.

Our nation will be a better place for all our diverse communities when racist slurs and jokes are unacceptable, when refugee communities are welcomed, and when cultural and religious differences are accepted and embraced.

Our national response to Covid-19 has demanded that we all step up and do the right thing by each other.

By harnessing that sense of social responsibility, we have an opportunity to create a more compassionate, inclusive society, where everyone, no matter where they come from, is treated with respect and humanity.

Kia ora huihui tatou katoa.

¹ https://www.holocaustcentre.org.nz/uploads/1/2/2/4/122437058/response_of_nz_govt_-_a_beaglehole.pdf