

Yom HaShoah 2017 Key Note Address

At Temple Sinai, Wellington, Sunday 23 April (27 Nisan) 2017

by Rick Sahar

After getting back from Israel, I crossed paths with an acquaintance who asked, had I been away, to which I answered, yes, I'd been to Israel with a group of NZ High School Teachers at a 17-day Seminar to study at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem the lessons learnt from the Holocaust, to which he looked me straight in the eye, and startled me by saying... "It never happened".

A couple of days later, I was at a fund-raising concert, and introduced to a couple attending. When someone else there asked me what I've been up to, I mentioned recently returning from Israel, you know the rest; but I was surprised by what was said by one of the couple, "now the Israelis are doing to the Palestinians exactly what the Nazis did during WW2 to the Jews".

Oh, and then there was someone else, who after I mentioned The Yad Vashem Seminar informed me, "it wasn't just the Jews' Holocaust; there were a lot of the Litvaks also killed" and when challenged about his revisionist view, told me that I'm the one "out of touch"...

Perfect timing... all this was "perfect timing" as I was preparing a presentation to take with me down to the South Island as part of the HCNZ's Educational Outreach Programme, traveling along with Chris Harris the National Education Director, to support several secondary schools that were studying the Holocaust. My contribution to these school visits was to share my Parents' Holocaust Journey, and their survival stories, as "personal testimonies". That's why these "chance" encounters I have told you about, that were aimed at minimizing or totally negating my Parents' truth, actually happened at the most perfect time for me in my preparation.

Though the approach I was taking was also based on what I had learned at Yad Vashem that "personal stories provide better learning opportunities for most students compared to stating numbers or statistics, or by displaying graphic images and photos", I now realised that I will be competing with "alternative facts" and "fake news" and the increasing number of Holocaust Denial web pages these students can find online! I now knew I had to be better prepared to face any Holocaust denial challenge, blatant or subtle.

I changed my PowerPoint presentation to include more "source documentation", files that I have collected while researching my Parents' Holocaust journey, the specific details of life-changing events they never shared with me. The South Island students expressed real interest in the maps, documents and lists I showed them, from ITS at Bad Arolsen, The Red Cross, HIAS (formerly Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) and several other aid agencies and archives, as these documents further proved the nightmare endured by my Parents was no dream or made-up fantasy.

I also learned so much from these students; in their pursuit to better understand my Parents' personal stories, they asked questions that I had yet to ask... so I continue my research into my Parents' Holocaust survival, both to answer those new questions and to further counter the lies, both on the streets and in the digital world, that deniers would want me, and you, to believe...

Dear Friends, I hope the HCNZ will continue Educational Outreach throughout NZ. It is important to reach those young minds that are still forming their thoughts and beliefs. That studying the Holocaust is relevant today and into the future. Every life is important. That it is our collective responsibility to be the messengers for those who are unable to speak for themselves. More Holocaust testimonies need to be told in NZ schools, especially about survivors who came to NZ as refugees ... believe me, their stories have great impact when told by their descendants.

I invite you to join me in becoming better informed, more knowledgeable of "true facts", to even become an activist in a righteous cause of your own choosing...

As expressed so well in the words attributed to Anne Frank;

Look at how a single candle can both defy and define the darkness.