

## **Shaping memory: the Shoah, a universal warning**

A Lecture for Holocaust Memorial Day

delivered by Canon Chris Chivers

at the Cape Town Holocaust Centre

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It's the summer of 1993 and I'm on holiday in Prague, when I feel impelled to take a train to Cracow in Poland. My focus isn't of course Cracow but a small town a few kilometres, forty minutes away which Poles call Oswiecim and which I reach on a rickety old bus.

The journey ends at a place better known to us by its German name, Auschwitz.

Ever since I'd met the Auschwitz survivor and sculptor, Naomi Blake – when, as an eleven year old chorister I had shown her round Bristol Cathedral – I had begun to ask questions about the place that haunted her to the end of her life and shaped much of her work. Each day on the way to school I'd walked past the statue she'd subsequently given to the cathedral – a mother and child with the title *The Refugee* – and I knew that one day I must stand – however briefly – where she'd for so long been incarcerated.

As my studies of Judaism deepened – and I began in particular to focus on Jewish-Christian relations – I'd felt compelled to make a pilgrimage to what is undoubtedly the site of one of the most appalling series of atrocities known in human history – the place where one and a half million of the eleven million exterminated in the Shoah – six million of them Jews – were annihilated.

The bus stops where the train stopped for those one and a half million Jews: before a watch tower whose image has become iconic of all that was worst and most bestial about the last century.

Stretching far into the distance from this tower I can see a railway track which I know signalled the end of the line – in all senses – for those who had been herded into the cattle trucks which arrived there.

I have been told that the birds never sing in Auschwitz and I discover that this is indeed true.

As I wander confusedly around this part of the camp – called Birkenau – passing, with the other visitors, through barrack-blocks which contain the poignant, crumbling pictures of camp life painted by the prisoners themselves there's an eerie, oppressive silence.

The next stop is the main camp of Auschwitz itself where any visitor's arrival is heralded by the sight of large wrought-iron gates over which stands perhaps the sickest joke in history, the simple German phrase, "Arbeit macht frei" – "work makes you free."

Passing through the gates our group is greeted by an Auschwitz survivor who soon reveals the number branded just beneath her left shoulder. She then begins to escort us around perhaps the most harrowing exhibition of human depravity and evil to be viewed anywhere in the world.

Rooms filled with shoes lead into rooms of human hair, teeth, spectacles and suitcases – one pathetically small one bearing the name of Maria Frank, Anne's sister.

The tour ends with a visit to a gas chamber, rebuilt, following the attempts of the retreating Nazis to destroy the evidence.

Afterwards we are allowed to roam around the camp for ourselves. But I am feeling so sick that all I can do is to stumble towards a pile of rubble and sit down for a few moments. A Chinese-American, whom I've never met before, also stumbles out from the gas chamber and sits next to me.

When we seem to be regaining our composure, quite by chance we both turn towards the pile of rubble behind us and begin to read the sign placed next to it.

This informs us that we are in fact sitting right next to one of the ovens in which bodies were burnt. It also lies in ruins because of an attempt to destroy evidence of murderous activity.

But the Russian advance was too swift, and so we're now sitting amidst the evidence which remains. And the realisation that we're surrounded by stones from those once blazing ovens is simply too much for both of us, as we break down in floods of tears hugging one another.

*Music setting words from Anne Frank's diary:*

*One day this terrible war will be over,  
and we'll be people again,  
and not just Jews.*

*11 April 1944*

People again and not just Jews. This telling assertion from the diary of Annelies Marie, better known to us as Anne Frank, which we've just heard set to music by James Whitbourn in his oratorio *Annelies* – a piece from which we shall hear more in the course of this lecture – is hammered home to me again and again late one January afternoon in 1996 when I'm sitting in a very humid lecture theatre at Jerusalem's Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Centre.

As a three-hour lecture on the Christian roots of the Holocaust is drawing to a close, I'm drained by the heat and by the terrifying content of the lecture. This has disturbingly revealed to me what I'd always feared to be the case, namely, that across history many of my fellow disciples of Jesus have used his Gospel as a means of sanctioning persecution of the Jewish people.

I need some space in which to reflect on all this and some shade from the heat. So I hurry out of the hall and head towards some nearby trees. I sit on a rock beneath one of the trees and look out towards Ein Karem, where I'm staying with the Sisters of Sion, an order of nuns set up specifically to champion Christian-Jewish relations.

As I look out, however, I'm transfixed by something that I haven't noticed before. For there, on the end of a piece of railway track which overhangs the edge of the rock-face, stands a cattle truck of the sort I previously encountered in Auschwitz.

I venture towards the truck and read the inscription beneath it. This informs me that it's a memorial – given by the Polish Government – to all those deported to the death camps. In fact, it's one of the very trucks once used to transport Jewish people to the ovens of Auschwitz.

As I stare at the truck, which seems to be about to plunge into the valley below, I cannot help picturing the many, many people who must once have been crammed inside its clay-coloured structure – like sardines in a tin – facing their torturous journey to death.

As I continue to stare at the truck, and to picture these people, I realise that tears are cascading down my cheeks; and I realise that I've been joined by two people who had sat near me during the lecture – Shimon, a young Israeli Jew, and Abdul, a Palestinian Muslim.

Aware that I'm beside myself with emotion, the two of them stand either side of me and without a word each puts an arm around me.

We stand in silence for some minutes. As the three of us stand silently together, absolute despair and incomprehension on my part – a despair which my Jewish and Muslim colleagues seem intuitively to have sensed – gives way, inexplicably, to a shared feeling of solidarity and hope. So great is this feeling I know we share that after a while we move off, arm in arm, and inexplicably are able to enjoy a wonderful meal full of conversation and laughter.

*Music setting words from Anne Frank's diary:*

*You no doubt want to hear  
what I think of life in hiding?*

*11 July 1942*

*The blue sky, the bare chestnut tree,  
glistening with dew,  
the seagulls, glinting with silver  
swooping through the air.  
As long as this exists,  
this sunshine and this cloudless sky,  
how can I be sad?*

*23 February 1944*

The blue sky, the sunshine, the chestnut tree glistening with dew. Anne Frank referred often to them in her diary. As long as she was connected to nature by the things she could glimpse through the attic window of the secret annex she could be hopeful.

It's certainly hopeful connections that we desperately need when, early in December 2007, I am visiting Yad Vashem again, this time with my Muslim colleague Anjum Anwar, who's the only Muslim working on the staff of a cathedral anywhere in the world.

We're playing a small part in the Middle East Peace Process but have been given the rather grand title, Peace Ambassadors. What this actually means is that we are to experience and encourage in whatever we can any grass-roots initiatives that seek to promote dialogue across the fractured communities of Israel-Palestine. We're to notice and champion the hopeful connections that people are making.

We encounter amazing people. Parents who've lost children on both sides of the conflict and who've initiated a Bereaved Relatives' Forum. Young people who are members of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra based in Seville in Spain and bringing together exceptional musical talent across the divides of faith and nationality. Together with citizens of all ages who are running a free telephone line enabling people to talk across the security barrier-wall which now divides the land most of us still dare to call holy.

But the concerns of our own context in post-industrial Blackburn are never far away. And what we see and hear in the Holy Land prompts us to talk about our work back home. So we take an afternoon to reflect on all of this at Yad Vashem.

We're over-awed by the Children's Memorial and the length of time that it takes to recite the more than one million names commemorated there. Indeed, we make little head-way in walking around other sites of memory such is the depth with which this one affects both of us.

Children are very much on our minds because we're months away from bringing the Anne Frank exhibition to Blackburn, which is thirty per cent Muslim – one of the higher

concentrations of Muslims in the UK – and a place where far-right extremism is also commonplace. If we're honest, one of the truths that our trip to Jerusalem has exposed is the struggle to understand some of our own actions and impulses in relation to the Anne Frank exhibition. How on earth did we come to make the decision to bring such an exhibition to a town with just two Jews, forty-thousand Muslims, and more than a few thousand working-class whites whose attitude to 'the other' is not what you might exactly call 'advanced'?

An exhibition telling a Jewish story in a Christian place of worship, the exhibition committee headed up by a Muslim sounded so idealistic at the time but now seems madness when we enunciate what we've set out to do that straight-forwardly to each another.

But things are never quite so straight-forward of course. And as we chat away so we become a little less fearful. We realise that much of the work we've done to foster conversation across communities will just about get the working-class white community – especially its schools – on board. But what on earth can we do to ensure that the Muslims engage with this story of universal significance when the very mention of the Holocaust lights the touch-paper of a Middle-East discourse that is always a partisan monologue seemingly without much nuance? To have the exhibition and not to have the Muslims buy into it will see the credibility of our work destroyed in an instant.

With quarter of an hour to go to closing time this challenge hovers over us as we make our way thoughtfully back towards the visitor centre which is the gateway to Yad Vashem.

We'd obviously been talking very intensely with one another when we'd arrived several hours before since only now do we notice an exhibit that hits us between the eyes.

"Aren't those Muslims?" Anjum says to me somewhat incredulously. Indeed they are, I think to myself, as we practically run towards the photographs.

"We close in five minutes, sir," one of the security staff says to me. But I'm already engrossed in the exhibit which is entitled BESA – which I discover is the Albanian word for 'code of honour' – an exhibit which tells the story of how some 63 Albanian Muslims followed this code of honour and rescued Albanian Jews in the Shoah. They had lived side by side for generations and – in a country where the principle of 'giving shelter' was immensely strong historically – they were not about to let their neighbours down.

As I read the stories that accompany the first few photographs of the rescuers or their children – Lime Balla explaining how she divided 17 Jews amongst the homes of her village to shelter them when they fled the Nazis during Ramadan in 1943 and King Leka I, the son of King Zog, the only Muslim King in Europe, who in 1938, following Kristallnacht, issued 400 Albanian passports to Viennese Jews – I beg the official for more time, which –

somehow sensing how important our visit is – he generously gives us. “I’ll do my rounds and lock-up later,” he says.

The photographs have been taken by a Jewish-American photographer, Norman Gershman, and we can’t believe our eyes as we move from one image to the next. For here’s a story about which neither of us has ever heard. What we do know straight away is that this narrative of Muslims who saved Jews in the Shoah will literally be gold-dust in our context: the hook that will enable the Muslims of Blackburn to identify with Anne Frank’s story and make it truly their own.

We contact Norman Gershman and ask his permission to use some of the material, and he’s delighted to know that it will make such a difference. He sends a DVD of some of the Albanian Muslims whom he’d interviewed over a five year period almost sixty years after the events the interviews describe.

When the exhibition opens a few months later, the local Muslim training college for clerics sends a cohort of moulanas- and imams-to-be to ‘check it out’ and, we suspect, to ‘check us out’ too.

They listen politely but with little enthusiasm as I introduce the occasion. But their ears prick up at the mention of Albanian Muslims as rescuers and when I tell them more about BESA I can see that they’re on the edge of their seats.

As hundreds of visitors then move to look at the exhibition I’m transfixed by the sight of these twenty nineteen- and twenty-year-old Muslims running to read the BESA story and to watch Norman Gershman’s interviews with the rescuers before they move off again to stand with their fellow citizens in a replica of Anne Frank’s bedroom and hear a story which clearly affects them very deeply.

*Music setting words from Anne Frank’s diary and the Christian liturgy:*

*Kyrie eleison [Lord, have mercy]*

*Greek liturgical*

*Help us. Rescue us from this hell.*

*27 November 1943*

*We must be brave and trust in God.*

*11 April 1944*

It's 27 January 2005 and I'm sitting in Westminster Hall, London at the UK National Holocaust Memorial Day Commemoration, which falls on the sixtieth anniversary of the Auschwitz liberation. Unlike the many state occasions that I plan and stage-manage across the road at Westminster Abbey I've had only a small consultant-role in this one. So I'm not on my feet directing but am able to sit and appreciate the skill and thoughtfulness of others. Not least I'm able to listen to music from the oratorio called *Annelies* – portions of which we have heard already and which was composed by a friend of mine, James Whitbourn.

Whitbourn's music underpins the occasion in a way that acts as a counterpoint to the young British Jews who, throughout the ceremony, softly recite the names of over 3000 Shoah victims who are the slain relatives of the 600 Shoah survivors in the Hall.

The whole score is incredibly multi-layered and moving: overwhelming in fact. "If you become part of the suffering you'll be entirely lost." James Whitbourn sets these bold and courageous words of Anne's, as evocatively as he sets the picture of one of Anne's old friends dressed in rags that haunts her when she sleeps.

But when his setting of the simple Greek text, Kyrie eleison – Lord, have mercy – begins, I am reduced – as are many others in the Hall – helplessly to tears. For at this moment Her Majesty The Queen stands and leads sixty Shoah survivors through the Hall to light memorial candles on a central candelabrum.

The deep significance of this moment touches the hearts of the nation watching on television and many, way beyond the United Kingdom. Here is the head of state identifying herself completely with the suffering of her Jewish citizens. But here also is the supreme governor of the Church of England and Defender of The Faith – upper case T and F – the Christian Faith in her realms and territories, the very faith whose sorry record of degrading teaching about the Jewish people has led so often to their persecution: here is this iconic representative of so-called Christian civilisation actually leading the solemn act of remembrance and retelling of the Shoah.

As she does so, my mind locates what at first seems an irrelevant, perhaps in the context even irreverent, parallel. For I'm actually picturing Ellis Park in 1995, a smiling Nelson Mandela in Springbok jersey enthusiastically waving a Springbok cap as the mostly Afrikaner crowd sing Shoshalosa and chant Nel-son, Nel-son.

At first, I'm irritated with myself for making such a parallel. But then I realise that I've actually stumbled on a connection which needs more puzzling out.

In Ellis Park, of course, the person many white South Africans used most to fear, the black African formerly regarded by many as a dangerous revolutionary, donned their mantle, redeemed its symbolism, identified himself with their story and was greeted with the singing of his own community in response.

This mutuality reconnected communities in a spectacular way perhaps never to be replicated.

But the reinforcing of the connection – so historically fractured – of Christian monarch with her Jewish citizens was in its way no less spectacular and in fact as mutually important. A transfiguring, atoning, redemptive and utterly transforming moment for everyone, one in which the deep pain of Jewish suffering and the part Christians played in this was acknowledged, as the desire of both communities to find a new relationship for the mending of the world was articulated.

*Music setting words from Anne Frank's diary:*

*Ich danke dir für all das Gute und Liebe und Schöne.*

*7 March 1944*

Ich danke dir für al das Gute und Liebe und Schöne. I thank you God for all that's good, and lovely and beautiful.

I'll always remember standing with a group of 8 to 13 year old choristers from King's College, Cambridge in the middle of the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam trying to do just that. They'd been rehearsing for a concert and during a break, we visited the House. A noisy group of choirboys, letting off steam, soon became as wide-eyed and reflective a group as you could imagine.

Through the bookcase door and up the stairs we went, to find ourselves in Anne Frank's bedroom.

The boys looked at the newspaper cuttings and photographs on the wall – there were several of The Queen and her sister Princess Margaret as children, almost direct contemporaries in age of Anne Frank's of course. We looked at these and we gazed out of the window. And then suddenly it happened: a group of us were helplessly in tears. We didn't need to say why – and we didn't say why – we just knew why.

I met one of those boys a while back, and one of the first things he said to me was "D'you remember when we went to the Anne Frank House?" And of course I did. "For me," he said, "it was one of the most important moments in my life. Anne Frank wanted to be the best writer she could be. She wanted the best from life, the best for other people. She got the worst in return. She was hated for who she was. But she beat them all and became the best ever ... the most successful diarist the world's ever known. I decided I'd do the same and be the best I could be." Today that boy is one of the world's finest musicians.

A man who said to Rabbi Hillel that he would become a Jew if he could be taught the Torah while standing on one foot is alleged to have received the reply: “What is hateful to you, do not unto your neighbour: this is the entire Torah. The rest is commentary.”

In this sense, I feel that the variations on the shaping of memory that I’ve sought to offer this evening – all of which in different ways weave around Rabbi Hillel’s Torah truth – do not need much in the way of commentary. But let me simply add this.

To shape memory, to heed the universal warning of the Shoah, to build a better world you have first to be shaped by the memory of those who suffered. I had to stand in Auschwitz and make this story my own, my concern, my responsibility in some way.

But I learnt when I hugged my Chinese-American acquaintance that I wasn’t strong enough to do this alone. I needed to do it with others.

From facing the fact that this story was indeed my responsibility – so much of it caused by the anti-Judaism that seemed to be at the centre of my Christian tradition – from being shaped by this memory and its consequences came a strong sense of the need to shape more positive memories for future generations communally – and needing to do this with those whom my forbears or even my contemporaries saw as enemies.

Through the photographs taken by Norman Gershman I discovered that you can only make this move from ‘being shaped by memory’ to ‘shaping memory’ – and to that elusive but necessary business of building a better world – when you include everyone in your retelling and reshaping of that memory. This means that the most disconnected, the least likely, the very group who seem so often to challenge your version of history, the veracity of the memory itself, they must find a place in a new *ubuntu* vision.

But I also learnt that this shaping of memory in such a way that the universal significance of a horror like the Shoah is actually – as it must be – universally acknowledged – and can in some sense therefore be transcended – needs the kind of iconic leadership of a Mandela or a monarch able not just to put different traditions of memory in touch or in dialogue with one another, but able to embody them in a totally new way.

You have to put yourself in someone else’s shoes. You have to reach the point where you are able to respect and handle your neighbour’s most precious memories in such a way that when you tell their story they recognise it as their own story. And – most taxingly – you have to allow them to appropriate and narrate your story as well.

You cannot hold on to your own story, fence-off your memory in such a way as to assert ownership which simply prevents others from making it theirs. For then the universal is dangerously narrowed: it becomes mine and mine alone.

Wherever we are in this journey, as we honour tonight the memory of all victims and survivors of the Shoah, let's take courage for the next steps each of us must take. Let's do so as we hear words that Anne Frank wrote in some of the final entries in her diary:

*Reading and musical setting from Anne Frank's diary:*

*I see the world being slowly  
turned into wilderness.  
I hear the approaching thunder,  
that one day will destroy us too.  
And yet, when I look at the sky,  
I feel that everything  
will change for the better.*

*15 July 1944*

*Whenever you feel lonely or sad,  
try going to the loft  
on a beautiful day and looking  
at the sky.  
As long as you can look  
fearlessly at the sky,  
you'll know you're pure within.*

*23 February 1944*

I see the world being slowly turned into a wilderness. I hear the approaching thunder that one day will destroy us too. And yet, when I look at the sky, I feel everything will change for the better. Whenever you feel lonely or sad, try going to the loft on a beautiful day and looking at the sky. As long as you can look fearlessly you'll know you're pure within.

*Following the lecture memorial candles were lit by six Shoah survivors: Ella Blumenthal (Auschwitz-Birkenau; Bergen-Belsen and Majdanek), Frida Farkas (Shargorod Ghetto and Mogilev), Helene Joffe (Fréjus transit camp), Israel Ketellapper (Westerbork transit camp and Bergen-Belsen), Miriam Lichetrman (Majdanek, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Ravensbrück and Malhof) and Jack Schmukler (who hid in a forest for two years with his father having escaped the ghetto). A final candle was lit by Doris Karemera (survivor of the Rwandan Genocide).*