

Friendship Forever: Bonds forged in adversity

Exhibition Opening at the Jewish Holocaust Centre

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Anzac Day

Friendships Enduring

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Thank you.

I am honoured to be invited to launch the exhibition ***Friendship Forever: Bonds forged in adversity***. How appropriate for this special exhibition to be launched on Anzac Day, a day of memory, commemoration and celebration of that special brand of friendship called 'mate ship'. Anzac Day recalls the sacrifices of Australian servicemen and women to preserve values of freedom and democracy for which they fought on our behalf, even if it meant paying the highest cost. We must express our gratitude for their sacrifice which left us with the legacy of the freedom we currently enjoy, they fought, many paid with the sacrifice of their lives. We honour them today.

It is fitting therefore to turn to the launch of this moving exhibition and realize the special qualities of friendship that are forged in adversity, both in the ANZAC spirit and the unique Holocaust friendship that this exhibition will privilege us to share for the first time publicly.

In the last few weeks and weeks ahead, with Yom Hashoa, Yom Hazikaron, March of the Living and many other Holocaust related commemorative events, some people may wonder how it is possible to justify adding another commemorative event? Why should we revisit, why probe, and why expose ourselves, yet again, to those difficult truths, the anguish uncovered as we pick up fragments, thread of family and friendships, shredded? Precisely because so much *was* lost, we are morally bound to preserve, record, track back to their source – as in this unique exhibition – as many fragments to lives, personal stories, new

aspects of the experiences in the Holocaust What benefits can we hope for? What can we learn?

In her recent book *After Such Knowledge Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust*, Eva Hoffman writes: “In the aftermath of atrocity, the weight of history places tremendous pressure on personal history.” As our direct link with survivors is shifting from living relationships to memory, personal and cultural, that ‘tremendous pressure on personal history’ compels us to act. This exhibition is an expression of such action.

The exhibition engages us directly with a neglected aspect of Holocaust experience, adding a critical new dimension to survivor’s stories of survival. That new dimension celebrates an invisible thread made visible by virtue of time passing. After 60 years, this exhibition presents us an extraordinary chance, a blessing to become living witnesses to images, stories and the living testimony of friends who care to share something we ought to pay great attention to – timely themes in our world shaken by rising anti-Semitism, pervasive terrorism, social upheavals, insecurity and gloom. Their message is timely and timeless.

Friends Forever: bonds forged in adversity is an exhibition of inspiration and hope.

Based on the universal need for friendship, the unique experiences of 8 groups of friends penetrate our limited horizons, horizons we know of from our post-Holocaust friendships we made in schools, summer camps, local or overseas holidays. In contrast, theirs were forged in the heat and heart of darkness. The black hole. Only those who were there will know.

This exhibition, if we allow it, will draw us out of our comfort zones. We may be upset. It can be upsetting try to fathom, to try to relate ourselves across a gulf, to try to understand how these amazing, enduring friendships were forged. These stories detail, examine and document a neglected aspect of survival, survival despite being at the centre of catastrophic moments in personal and community destruction. Their friendships endured.

These stories of 8 groups of friendship invite us to ask ‘How was it possible?’ ‘How do these life-long friendships endure despite the haunting memories?’

These questions have a profound poignancy in a world that is returning to the ideology of Jew haters; a world that tolerates and supports the resurgence of anti-Semitism, especially in Europe; a world that endorses attacks on Jews in Israel and the Diaspora. Why? The answer has a familiar echo - for being Jews.

Our contemporary world is at war yet again. This time at war with terrorists. The exhibition is an antidote against despair and a sense of futility. It brings us face to face with enduring friendship, of children, teenagers, young adults, who lived in the wrong place at the wrong time...yet, despite the odds, forged and nurtured a precious experience - friendships enduring. It lifted their hearts out of the black hole. It helped them to survive, it was life-saving. Dimensions of friendship we are challenged to empathize with.

Yes, we have a great deal to learn from these friendships.

Let us open ourselves to some lessons they can teach us about life then, and now. How can their stories of friendship, the survivor generation, inform us, the post-Holocaust generation, Jew and non-Jew? If we dare to engage with these stories, we gain insight and understanding of how personal intimate friendships shape life. If we engage we can emerge enriched, with a new range of responses to adversity, maybe more complex to understand what being human in conditions that were dehumanizing, can mean.

How can friendships expose new truths about our most basic qualities, dare we risk such trust, trust that sometimes can be betrayed; dare we reach new depths of friendships beyond those of mere pleasure, and usefulness, dare we plummet to the essence, to life-death struggles with friends. Or do we shy away? They did not. They endured to tell us their stories. The least we can do is to pay attention to their message. To engage.

As we engage with the details of these amazing friendships we discover intimately how these friends coped, what these friends did, and did not do, and why. In short how they endured being 'down and out' and still sustained a spirit of friendship that endured, dared to sustain hope. What was their secret - to sustain hope, to surviving with friendship intact?

From their harrowing experiences we can glean many take home messages. We can begin to discover deep secrets, to uncover the mystery of their friendships, if we are prepared to read between the lines. Let us

take a look, close-up an intimate, personal look. Let's look at their faces, and beyond, into their eyes, and beyond. Let us develop a sense of their private lives, inner, intimate thoughts which they generously made public for this exhibition. Let us dare to sense their ordeals.

We know that while their testimonies reveal, at the same time they conceal. By their generosity they have given us permission to probe, to seek, to find new understanding and to learn the layered messages from their testimonies, to which I briefly turn:

1 From Kitia and Cesia we have first hand accounts of what it is like for a person's name and identity to be reduced to a number A 25440, A 25441. But we learn that the number is just an external mark, being 'reduced' to a number externally, at the same time found channels to express the essence of their humanity - friendship.

On example, a matter of fact conversation between two friends went like this: When Cesia alerts Kitia that she has seen a group of women going out of Auschwitz, Kitia questions her 'how do you know that they did not go directly to the gas chamber? Cesia's reply was not negotiable: 'each one got a loaf of bread and a portion of jam'. They wouldn't waste food on somebody who was going directly to the gas chamber.

2 Adolek and David: who 'stood by each other in times of hardship and sorrow, for better or worse.' What ordeals elicit such depth of commitment, commitment that in ordinary circumstances is reserved for marriage vows? Are these friendships perhaps in some sense based on even more profound bonds of affection than marriage vows? Are bonds forged in times of life-and-death struggles for survival more profound perhaps than those were life is never threatened?

3 Helen and Pola become camp sisters (*Lager Schwestern*). How do bonding, caring and nurturing flourish under such severe conditions of deprivation? In what ways were their 'sisterhoods' different in character from everyday friendships? Is it possible that such 'sibling' bonds were more intense than blood bonds if they remained to each other as 'the only one each would confide in'?

4 Abram and Bono's levels of trust and determination is one that 'looks on the positive side of life. Even in those darkest days. We had a bond of trust and even love. It was unbroken until the day he died' speaks equally of sibling type devotion. Is there a gender difference between 'camp

sisters' and 'camp brothers'? Are familial relationships, social bonds more readily made and accepted by women?

5 What is so 'precious' in Pesia's and Sonia's friendship? Sonia recovered from typhus, helped by Pesia's father. For such starving and frail inmates becoming ill meant there was little chance of survival, often it signaled the beginning of the end. Without acts of care and kindness illness meant almost certain death. A chance of survival here resulted in inseparable friendships lasting for 53 years.

6 Philip and Isidor also developed a friendship sharing bread when one found some. But Phillip notes the pain when such friendships change course: 'He developed a friendship with someone else...Naturally I thought, "why did he select someone else instead of me?" Yet he did not hold a grudge...after his friend's premature death in 1981 in Boston he becomes the missing link to his war-time friend's children telling them things about their father 'which, while he was alive, didn't seem important. When he was gone I was the only one who could provide [the information]. I tried to repay the things Zys did for me. Such is one expression enduring gratitude to friend.

7 Amelia and Helena developed an extraordinary friendship – transformed into a developing kinship. After Amelia's parents were killed, Helena, the family maid, saved young Amelia at risk to her own life, by hiding her. After the war, Amelia marries and immigrates to Australia. '...we took Helena with us. She was always with us. Helena is like my mother. She didn't legally adopt me, she just took on the mother role.'

8 The group of 900 or so boys of whom 40 settled in Australia, created the unique Buchenwald Boys friendship who celebrate the anniversary of their liberation on the 11th April each year. They celebrate, commemorate and when the need arises, the comradeship means a closeness more intimate than 'real brothers and sisters', as John Chaskiel's story highlights when one of their members' son went missing – one phone call triggered their immediate response to raise money for a search and rescue helicopter. The boy was found.

What message do these 8 sets of friendship communicate?

This valuable exhibition allows for the much needed, timely reflection on both the intimacy and the distance of enduring friendships. But also there is an even deeper issue.

In an age when there is much criticism about the use of Holocaust testimonies, where the risk that their testimonial value may be recruited in the service of political agendas or gratuitous debate; or where unscrupulous use is made as another addition to the 'Shoah Business' thereby aiding or supporting the Holocaust denial movement, with this exhibition we are adding to the authenticity and historical value of a new and much neglected dimension of testimonies. In fact I was surprised to find that the landmark 3-volume Holocaust publication, *Remembering for the Future*, based on the international conference held in London and Oxford in 2000, contained no reference at all to friendship in its index. A sign of a neglected area which this exhibition attends to with originality and authenticity.

But beyond the exhibition encouraging our encounter with the 'friends', getting to know them, we are also opening the door on furthering Holocaust education especially how to manage key – life-and-death-conflicts, key *ethical conflicts*.

As John K Roth, the distinguished author noted: ' Building on the awareness that the Holocaust was morally wrong – or nothing ever could be – the right kind of post-Holocaust encounters with the Holocaust can sensitize the conscience of individuals and help to make them more humanely conscientious than they would otherwise be. ...it should mean ...that questions otherwise not asked will be raised, that silence otherwise unbroken will be lifted, that indifference otherwise unchallenged will be disputed, that protest, resistance, and compassion otherwise unexpressed will find expression.

I think these sentiments are most fitting to keep in mind as we engage and encounter the friends. I hope these sentiments will be fulfilled by the visitors who are privileged to meet the true friendships, these living friends as models for us of what it means to reach out, to help another, to share experiences. They have the power to transform our limited vision, to enlarge our experiences, and as the passage of time transforms their message to future generation, enabling us to learn from their teaching us one of life's great eternal lesson, the value and virtue of an enduring friendship. I conclude with Elie Wiesel's words, 'If we stop remembering, we stop being.'

It gives me great pleasure to declare the exhibition open and invite you to share your thoughts and response with those who made it possible, the generous survivors.

