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## Common Experiences

A Dialogue Between Two Exceptional Women  
Who have Found They Can Learn from Each Other

### **From the Holocaust to Rwanda:**

Mary Kayitesi-Blewitt is the Founder and Director of Survivors Fund (SURF), an organisation she set up in the wake of the Rwandan genocide to give a voice to survivors and raise funds to support them. Mary lost more than 50 members of her own family and her tireless work to raise awareness of the genocide and the plight of survivors was recognised with a Woman of the Year Award.

Karen Pollock is Chief Executive of the Holocaust Educational Trust (HET), an organisation set up to raise awareness and understanding of the Holocaust and its relevance today.

Mary and Karen met at the Home Office in the course of preparations for the Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) 2004 – the theme for which was *From the Holocaust to Rwanda: Lessons learned, lessons still to learn*. The meeting developed not only into a professional relationship but a personal friendship too.

### **Karen**

I was fortunate in joining the Holocaust Educational Trust (HET) when Holocaust education had been established as part of the curriculum, there were many resources and survivors were willing to speak openly about their experiences. When I met Mary, SURF was still in its infancy – the Rwandan genocide was a subject that few knew or wanted to know much about. From that first meeting I developed a great respect for the job that she was doing, work that in the Jewish community is undertaken by a whole array of organisations. I thought that there must be ways that we could help.

### **Mary**

At that first meeting at the Home Office, I felt drawn to Karen because I found myself agreeing with so much of what she said: the reasons why a memorial is so important, the role that survivors must play in that. What is most important is that we portray the messages of the survivors, who we both represent, sensitively yet impactfully. There is no more direct and meaningful means of educating about an experience than at first hand.

### **Karen**

It would be short sighted for those of us in Holocaust education just to teach about the Holocaust and stop there. What both Mary and I do is to show and tell that these things happened, and that they are still happening – like in Darfur. But the role of HET is to do more, by demonstrating that people can make a difference. But sometimes it is hard to know how much difference we actually do make. What is so remarkable about the survivors we both work with, and it is encapsulated in the term ‘survivor’ itself, is not that they just made it through the event and happened to live but that there is something inside of them – may be not at the time, as many put their survival down to luck, but afterwards, some inner strength – that enables them to get on with their lives and deal with what happened. And that is something that is shared with both Rwandan and Holocaust survivors.

### **Mary**

And that is what we saw in Belfast (at HMD 2004) where Jeanette (a Rwandan survivor) shared a platform with Gina (a Holocaust survivor). Jeanette had never spoken about her experiences in public before, but meeting Gina enabled her to do so. Not only that, but she learnt from Gina that its normal to feel angry, its normal to feel sad and that you don't get rid of it easily even 60 years after the experience. Jeanette is a different person as a result. She is now a Trustee of the Survivors Fund, and actively engages in debate – whereas in the past she would have just sat quietly in the background letting her anger simmer.

You ask, Karen, how do we know whether what we do ever makes any real difference.

I know wholeheartedly it does. When people read the stories of those survivors we represent in the papers, or hear them on TV or in person, people feel moved to tell us their own stories. Though what happened to them bears no comparison, they take strength from the survivor's strength and feel they too can withstand the bad things that life throws. It might be just one soul that is effected, one mind that is changed, but survivors do make a difference by being living examples of how the individual can triumph in the face of adversity – whatever form that victory takes, even if it is just survival itself.

### **Karen**

The trouble you sometimes experience in finding survivors to speak reflects exactly the history of the many Holocaust survivors who decided they weren't ever going to look back and talk about what happened to them. They may have written down what they felt – but they put that away – and they rebuilt their lives and put distance between them and their experiences. But as they have grown older, in some cases the survivors have developed almost a compulsion to talk about their experiences.

There are those too that always wanted to talk, but no one wanted to listen. And those that are so traumatised that they have never been able to talk about their experiences, and still cannot today – even 60 years later. But I only liaise with those happy to speak about their experiences. And that is where my work so greatly differs from yours.

### **Mary**

I am so unfortunate, or fortunate, sometimes I don't know which, that I have survivors who are happy not to speak and those that desperately do want their testimonies to be heard and are constantly asking me what more I have done with them. And there are those that prefer to live in another world entirely, but when they are stuck they come to you and I only know them when they are sad.

I sometimes question what I have become because I feel that over the past 10 years all I have done each day, every day is deal with the problems of survivors and take on, and share, the terrible burdens and memories they carry with them. Sometimes even I think 'genocide' is my middle name.

### **Karen**

Exactly, the problem and the great thing about the job is that it is not about 9 to 5. If someone wants to tell you their story, you need to be there to listen whatever time it is. Sometimes you do think this is the strangest job in the world, as you are carrying at times such pain and responsibility. You have to be committed to the cause. You need incredible patience and strength and resilience.

### **Mary**

Not forgetting how strange it is telling people what you do when they ask at a wedding or a party! Seriously, it is not a job that is easy. We are both fighting a battle against indifference, and ignorance too. That is why attending that meeting is one of the best things I did. It was amazing to know that there are others out there working for the same end as me, and that gave me strength that I was doing the right thing, that I was on the right track. Whether that be you or the Chief Rabbi, who has been so supportive of all our work – even writing a memorial prayer for our 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary commemoration – or the array of Holocaust survivors who I have learnt, and am still learning, so much from.

### **Karen**

It has been an incredible learning experience for me too and has opened my eyes to so much that I took for granted before.

The difficulties Mary talked about that survivors experienced integrating into the Rwandan community in the UK, was exactly what many Holocaust survivors had to go through when they first settled here. There is much that we can teach by that experience to others.

### **Mary**

When people trust you with their pain, you do appreciate it – and you know that they value it too. Though it is difficult and testing, at the same time you get this incredible feeling of honour too.

### **Karen**

The work really affects you, when people tell you they are moved by the experience that you have facilitated – when a student you take to Auschwitz tells you that they want to do something to prevent it ever happening again.

**Mary**

In fact a student that I met on the visit to Auschwitz, which Karen and HET facilitated, was so touched by the experience that she came to me to arrange a trip to Rwanda. And that is one of the great similarities, in terms of only being able to get a real sense, however small, of the degradation and dehumanisation that those caught up in both the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide experienced by visiting in person the place where the atrocities took place. You can read as much as you want, but you can never get the same insight as you do from a visit.

Seeing Auschwitz showed me the importance of a living memorial, a place that people can visit, pay their respects and get some sense of the reality of the events. I never really appreciated that before. Anyone who visits, and isn't touched and moved in some way is just not human.

**Karen**

Our whole theory is that 'seeing really is believing'. It has to be experiential in order to appreciate the full impact of the Holocaust.

**Mary**

That is something I want to work towards, to offer people the opportunity to visit Rwanda to see for themselves where the atrocities happened. Today's world is increasingly more individualistic and selfish. People forever question why they should have to share others' pain.

**Karen**

And amazingly there are those who question why the Holocaust should have not only a special place, but any place, in the curriculum. They ask why the genocide studied couldn't change each year, so one year the Holocaust, the next the Rwandan genocide and on. But you can't do that – just swap a tragedy for another tragedy. Close one chapter, and open the next, just like that. The point is that each tragedy is unique. All are equally significant. They are not interchangeable.

**Mary**

There are so many people who just want it to go away – who put such systematic killing down to just another conflict. But it is not just another conflict. The Holocaust is unique. Rwanda is unique. The Rwandan genocide is not just another African war. The Holocaust is not just a part of the Second World War. Neither were just about conflicts over land or power, they were about more than that and it is our job to educate people so that they not only can appreciate the lessons, but understand them and act on them to ensure that never again truly does mean never again.

To learn more about the work of SURF visit [www.survivors-fund.org.uk](http://www.survivors-fund.org.uk)

To learn more about the work of HET visit [www.het.org.uk](http://www.het.org.uk)