Holocaust Awareness Week

From 24 to 27 October, the Stanley Burton Centre for Holocaust and Genocide Studies organised the Holocaust Awareness Week at the University of Leicester. Large numbers of students and members of the public accepted the Centre’s invitation to listen to Holocaust survivors Ruth David, Imre Rochlitz and his son, film director Joseph Rochlitz and Holocaust scholar Professor David Cesarani.

The Week’s first event was a talk by Ruth David from Leicester who, as a child, came to England with the Kindertransporte. After being introduced by Dr Alex Korb and Professor Aubrey Newman, she read excerpts from her book A child of our time (2002). She recounted how the situation in Germany became increasingly dangerous, particularly after ‘Reichskristallnacht’, and eventually forced her to leave the country without her parents at the age of nine. The Kindertransporte provided one of the few routes to safety and survival for many children who would later lose their parents during the Holocaust. Over 60 people attended the event, with many asking Ruth David questions in the Q+A session, but also during the wine reception afterwards.

The second event of Holocaust Awareness Week on 25 October was a talk by Imre Rochlitz, (London) who as a young man had survived the Holocaust in the Italian-occupied territories. Imre Rochlitz read from his recently published book An accident of Fate (2011) to an audience of 55 people of all ages. He talked about how he survived the death camp of Jasenovac and how he was later able to join the partisans. Imre Rochlitz fled from Austria to Yugoslavia when the Nazis annexed the country in 1938. But Yugoslavia was no safer place. When the German and Italian armies invaded the country in 1941, local fascists assumed power in Croatia and Imre Rochlitz’s struggle to survive began. Within a matter of years, Austrian and German Nazis, and Croatian and Bosnian Fascists had tried to take his life. However, he found those who willing to help; Croats and Serbs, fellow Jews, soldiers of Fascist Italy, and even a Nazi general. Imre Rochlitz answered a range of audience questions, including how he maintained his humanity during these horrific experiences.
The second part of the evening, saw Stefanie Rauch, one of the Stanley Burton Centre’s PhD students discuss the film *Righteous Enemies* (1987) with Imre Rochlitz’s son: opera and film director Joseph Rochlitz. The objective of his documentary was to find out more about the circumstances surrounding his father’s survival, and the assistance given by the Italians. Also on the panel were Imre Rochlitz and Alex Korb who joined the discussion. One of the central topics of the discussion was the ambivalent behaviour of Italian soldiers and officials. Whilst the Italian army committed war crimes during the Second World War, it should not be forgotten that they helped to prevent the deportation of Jews in the Italian-occupied territories of Croatia, Greece and southern France.

The Holocaust Awareness Week was closed with the 19th Annual Elchanan and Miriam Elkes Memorial Lecture held by leading Holocaust scholar Professor David Cesarani (Royal Holloway, University of London) on ‘Challenging the ‘myth of silence’: The impact of survivor writers and historians on early post war responses to the destruction of European Jewry’. Around 80 students and members of the public listened to Sara Elkes open the evening, and to Professor Cesarani who challenged the myth that immediately after the end of the Second World War Holocaust survivors remained silent. Professor Cesarani argued that in the years after the war there was in fact a plethora of memoirs and attempts at a historical reconstruction of what has become known as the Holocaust. This event, and the Holocaust Awareness Week, was closed with a book sale organised by Christians Aware. Additional thanks are given to the University Book Shop for offering a special discount on a number of publications.

Special thanks go to Ms Sara Elkes for her generous support of the Holocaust Awareness Week and the 19th Annual Elchanan and Miriam Elkes Memorial Lecture, and Christians Aware for their assistance organising the event.

For more information on the Holocaust Awareness Week and upcoming talks affiliated with the Stanley Burton Centre for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, contact Dr Alexander Korb (ak368@le.ac.uk) or Dr Olaf Jensen (oj6@le.ac.uk).