Holocaust Awareness Week 2013

From 11 to 14 March 2013, the Stanley Burton Centre for Holocaust and Genocide Studies and the History Society jointly organised the second Holocaust Awareness Week at the University of Leicester. Many students and members of the public followed the invitation to listen to two Hungarian Holocaust survivors, John Dobai and George Pogány, and Senior Lecturer in Criminology, Dr Sarah Hodgkinson.

The Holocaust Awareness Week was opened on Monday, 11 March 2013 by Professor Douglas Tallack, Pro-Vice Chancellor and Head of College of Arts, Humanities and Law. Professor Douglas highlighted the importance of raising awareness about the Holocaust in light of mass violence, genocide, and crimes against humanity in the past and present. Dr Fransiska Louwagie, Lecturer in French Studies and acting Deputy Director of the Stanley Burton Centre for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, introduced the week’s first speaker, John Dobai from London.

John told around 90 students, staff and members of the public, about his family life in Budapest, Hungary, before the Second World War, recounting how his family, which was not really religious, converted to Catholicism after the National Socialists’ rise to power, in the hope of protecting their son. John sketched the historical context of the war in Hungary, highlighting the impact of the territorial losses for Hungary following the defeat in the First World War, and their connection with the anti-Semitic laws voted in 1920, the Jews being blaming for the country’s defeat. While Hungary initially remained neutral in the Second World War, it joined Germany in 1941 when the Soviet Union was attacked. Following new anti-Semitic laws, John’s father was sent to a forced labour camp in Siberia and only returned in 1944. John described the anti-Jewish measures and their effects on
his family following Hungary’s occupation by the Germans in March 1944. His family was saved thanks to documents obtained from a Swedish diplomat, Raoul Wallenberg, which enabled them to stay in a safe house in Budapest. The safe houses were by no means ‘safe’, however. He remembered how Hungarian Jews in other houses were killed until the city was liberated by the Russians. John has been working with the Holocaust Educational Trust for many years and gives around ten talks a year, generally to sixth form students. After his talk, John answered many questions from the audience, discussing the future of Holocaust memory as well as Holocaust films and literature.

The second event of the Holocaust Awareness Week on Wednesday, 13 March 2013 was a talk by George Pogány, a Jewish survivor from Hungary who now lives in the Netherlands. After his introduction by Professor Aubrey Newman, Emeritus Professor of History and founder of Stanley Burton Centre, George told an audience of over 80 people that he was both honoured and lucky to be here.

George talked about pre-war life in Hungary, when his family felt part of the nation rather than seeing themselves as a minority. They were moderately religious, and his father worked as a teacher. Their life changed fundamentally when Germany occupied Hungary in March 1944. George and his family were deported in cattle cars to another ghetto in Hungary from where they were transported to Vienna. Despite the terrible conditions in the cattle wagon – there was no water, food or sanitation – they were lucky to be on this transport, as the one on the following day went to Auschwitz. George’s family was able to stay together in a forced labour camp in Vienna together with around 80 others, repairing railway lines hit by Allied air raids. The treatment there was better than in Hungary and George remembered how some Austrians slipped food into his pockets in the tram on the way to work. In the work camp, the forced labourers suffered from the cold winter and
their insufficient clothing, and the lack and bad quality of the food. George told the audience that the worst were the Allied air raids which they were both glad about and afraid of. His family was able to escape the camp shortly before being transported to the concentration camp of Mauthausen, where even in the last days of the war many were killed. After the war, George and his family returned to Hungary. George later escaped Communism to the UK, becoming a British citizen before moving to the Netherlands. Based on his experience in Hungary, George explained that one lesson to be learned from the Holocaust is not to look away when harm is inflicted on others. During the discussion, George added that he did not feel any resentment towards his Hungarian neighbours who did not help his family, as he accepts that they were not in a position to put their own lives in danger. He also explained how at the time, he did not realise how lucky he was, as there was no awareness of Auschwitz until after the war. The talk was followed by questions from the audience and a wine reception. George Pogány is the author of When Even the Poets Were Silent: The Life of a Hungarian Holocaust Survivor under Nazism and Communism.

The Holocaust Awareness Week was closed on Thursday, 14 March 2013 with an academic lecture by Dr Sarah Hodgkinson from the University of Leicester’s Department of Criminology. After being introduced by Dr Fransiska Louwagie, Dr Hodgkinson gave a presentation to around 70 students and members of the public on the topic of ‘Dark Tourism - The concentration camp as a site of Holocaust Tourism?’ Using excerpts from Rex Bloomstein’s documentary KZ (2006), she raised questions about the motivations and expectations of visitors to former concentration and death camps. The central questions are: Why do we go? What do we feel? How does it help us understand? What do we gain? Dr Hodgkinson explored different motivations, including using these sites of atrocities as educational resources, or as places to help us gain an emotional connection, or a sense of authenticity. People visit these places for different reasons, including remembrance, historical understanding, personal connections, but also curiosity and sometimes recreation. In her talk, Dr Hodgkinson asks whether
everyone is a ‘dark tourist’ and how useful this term is. Approaching the subject from the perspective of psychology, she argues that reasons for visiting former sites of atrocities include the desire to know the ‘unknowable’, to confront the worst of humanity, to experience mortality vicariously, or for Cathartic value. Atrocities are important to our human identity. In this sense, a better way of describing the phenomenon may be as ‘modern-day pilgrimage’ with the seeking of meaning. The term ‘Holocaust tourism’ or ‘dark tourism’ may be too judgemental and presuppose that every visitor is a spectator of the grief of others. While there are certain dangers – such as the ‘repackaging’ of the concentration camp as a tourist site – the tourist could also be seen as a tertiary witness, coming away with a greater understanding of human nature. In the discussion following her talk, Dr Hodgkinson highlighted how there is very little psychological research into visitors’ expectations. The talk also stimulated discussion about the necessary inter-disciplinary approaches to the study of the Holocaust.

The series was free of charge and open to the public. Special thanks go to the History Society for co-organising the second Holocaust Awareness Week, and to the Holocaust Educational Trust, the Jewish Society and the Department of Criminology for their assistance organising the events. The Stanley Burton Centre and the History Society particularly thank the speakers for their participation.

For more information on the Holocaust Awareness Week and upcoming talks affiliated with the Stanley Burton Centre for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, contact Dr Fransiska Louwagie (fl47@le.ac.uk) or Stefanie Rauch (sr189@le.ac.uk). The next event is the annual Aubrey Newman Lecture, which will take place on Wednesday, 8 May 2013: Professor Robert Gordon from the University of Cambridge will give a talk entitled ‘Grey Zones and Good Italians: The Holocaust and National Character’ at 5.30 pm in the Ken Edwards Building (School of Management), Lecture Theatre 3 (KE LT3). The event is jointly organised by the Stanley Burton Centre and the School of Modern Languages and will be followed by a wine reception.