

Special Report

Holocaust Memorial Day 2023



AEGIS
PREVENTING CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY



Kigali Genocide Memorial
Remembrance and Learning

Time to make 'Never Again' a reality



Freddy Mutanguha
Executive Director, Aegis Trust



At the Kigali Genocide Memorial on International Holocaust Memorial Day 2023 we were honoured to hear from UN Resident Coordinator Dr Ozonnia Ojielo; German Ambassador Dr Thomas Kurz; Chief Prosecutor for the UN International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT), Dr Serge Brammertz; Israeli Ambassador Dr Ron Adam, and the Minister of National Unity & Civic Engagement, Dr Jean Damascène Bizimana.

We were especially honoured to be joined by Holocaust survivor Emil Fish, one of the last witnesses of the Shoah. On the eve of Holocaust Memorial Day he took time for conversation with students at the Memorial, along with Dr Shay Pilnik, Director of the Emil A. and Jenny Fish Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Yeshiva University, Marc Cave, CEO of the UK National Holocaust Centre, and my colleague Dr James Smith, CEO and founder of the Aegis Trust.

As Emil Fish reminded us, 'Never Again' is yet still a dream. From the Holocaust to the Genocide against the Tutsi and beyond, remembrance renews the determination in our hearts that 'Never Again' will no longer be a dream, but will be a reality through the generational of work of education on which we have embarked together with you, our friends and partners.

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Image: students at the Kigali Genocide Memorial listen to Holocaust survivor Emil Fish give his testimony on the eve of Holocaust Memorial Day 2023.


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A photograph of Emil Fish, an elderly man with glasses and a blue suit, speaking into a microphone. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera. The background is a dark red wall with white text and a logo.

Genocide Memorial
Memorance and Learning

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A Conversation with Emil Fish

A summary report of the event

On the eve of International Holocaust Memorial Day, Rwandan students gathered at the Kigali Genocide Memorial to take part in a conversation with Holocaust survivor Emil Fish, listening to his testimony and asking questions about his experience.

Emil was welcomed by Dr James Smith, founder and Chief Executive of the Aegis Trust, which manages the Kigali Genocide Memorial on behalf of the Ministry of National Unity & Civic Engagement. "I can't tell you how indebted we are that you've travelled from New York to be with us today to share the story of what happened to you and your family and to millions of other people, Jewish people, under the horrors of the Nazi regime in the 1930s and 40s," he said.

“Never Again is a dream ... education is the key”

Emil was also joined on the platform by Marc Cave, CEO of the UK National Holocaust Centre (the birthplace of Aegis) and by Dr Shay Pilnik, Director of the Emil A. and Jenny Fish Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Yeshiva University, New York.

Marc Cave unpacked the longstanding relationship between the Kigali Genocide Memorial and the UK Holocaust Centre, which was founded by James and Stephen Smith in 1995 – just a year after the Genocide against the Tutsi. “Here in Rwanda it’s the same ethos, the same approach, although of course the circumstances are very different,” he said.

Shay Pilnik introduced Emil Fish, and explained how their visit to Rwanda for Holocaust Memorial Day had come about. A meeting with the Aegis Trust’s Executive Director Freddy Mutanguha, a survivor of the Genocide against the Tutsi, “changed the way I look at Holocaust education and changed my life,” he said. “What I learned from Freddy is that the story of the Holocaust can be incredibly meaningful in a different context. Every story is unique ... but when you want to learn how genocide evolves and what process brings genocide from A to Z, the patterns are the same.”

79 years ago, Emil was a nine-year-old boy living with his family in Slovakia when they were detained by the Gestapo.

His father was sent to Buchenwald Concentration Camp. He, his mother and sister were sent to Bergen Belsen Concentration Camp. Remarkably, all four survived. Nine out of every ten Jews in Slovakia did not, including all of Emil’s extended family on his father’s side.

“There were thousands of people lying dead. And the Germans didn’t know what to do with us dead people,” Emil recalled from the last days of Belsen. “On April 15 we were liberated by the English, and the English had no idea what to do with us. They fed us water and food. Ten thousand of us died immediately, because we were so skinny.”

Emil and his family built a new life in the United States. “I’m a businessman,” he said. “I lived the American Dream ... and one day, I visited my home town and realised I’m going to give up my business and concentrate on teaching about the Holocaust, that it shouldn’t happen again. That’s my purpose in life.”

One of the first questions was what the biggest takeaway of his visit to Rwanda would be. “The thing I learned from my whole trip is two words – ‘Never Again’ – is a dream,” he said. “That’s all it is. It happened here. It’s going to happen again and again and again, until education. Education is the key. It’s something you invest in and nobody can take it away from you.”

The conversation:

highlights

James Smith: We have some wonderful esteemed speakers today. We will be hearing most importantly from Emil Fish, who is a survivor of the Holocaust, and I can't tell you how indebted we are that you've travelled from New York to be with us today to share your stories of what happened to you and your family and to millions of other Jewish people under the horrors of the Nazi regime in the 1930s and 40s.

With him is Dr Shay Pilnik, Director of the Emil A. and Jenny Fish Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Yeshiva University.

But first, I will hand over to Marc Cave, who is Chief Executive of the National Holocaust Centre in the UK. Thank you, Marc.



Marc Cave: Mwaramutse. Hello everybody. Thank you, James. I'm going to just give some introduction to a relationship that you may not know about between this amazing place and a place in England. The common factor is James and his family. The Smith family, in 1995, as all the terrible things were happening here, were busy devoting all their energies to Britain's first and still only permanent Holocaust memorial site and museum.



They're not Jewish. And what that says about good citizenship and neighbourliness and empathy and respect for someone else's identity is incredible. Here in Rwanda, it's the same ethos, the same approach. Although of course the circumstances are very different. And I really want to pay tribute to James and to Freddy [Mutanguha] and all their colleagues for the amazing work they do here. It's especially hard when we have social media every second of every hour of every day feeding us with misinformation and disinformation. So being able to think critically about not just the what of a genocide, but the why, is really important.

So I'll leave it there, but what I thought I might do is show you a film. It explains the origins of the National Holocaust Centre that James and his family set up, and its connection to the Kigali Memorial. Thank you.

Film: UK Holocaust National Centre

<https://www.holocaust.org.uk/news/natasha-kaplinsky-narrates-new-film-for-national-holocaust-centre-visitors> - Narrated by broadcaster Natasha Kaplinsky, this film outlines the story of the Centre's creation – and how it inspired development of the Kigali Genocide Memorial in Rwanda.



"Meeting Freddy changed the way I look at Holocaust education and changed my life."



Shay Pilnik: I will share with you quickly the story of what brought us here. When I became the director of our centre, I started to see people in America were forgetting the Holocaust. So I came up with an idea; let's look for the people who are our allies in the field of Holocaust education. This was during COVID, and I decided to launch a series of Zoom programmes called 'Holocaust Remembrance Around the World'.

We started to speak with people in South Africa, Australia, Poland, Germany, the Dominican Republic, and then Rwanda. I was told there is a person named Freddy Mutanguha I have to meet. I recommend you watch our 50 minute conversation. [<https://youtu.be/D8d2IzmFO8k>]

I have to say that this meeting changed the way I look at Holocaust education and changed my life. What I learned from Freddy is that the story of the Holocaust can be incredibly meaningful in a different context. I have to say that this meeting changed the way I look at Holocaust education and changed my life.

What I learned from Freddy is that the story of the Holocaust can be incredibly meaningful in a different context.

The context is different; every story is unique. We have an obligation to learn the story of the Genocide against the Tutsi. It's a unique story. The story of the Jewish people is also a unique story. But when you want to learn how genocide evolves and what process brings genocide from A to Z, the patterns are the same, the process is the same, the circumstances are different.

Emil Fish is the founder of our centre. I am the director of a centre named after Emil and his late wife. Emil survived the Holocaust as a child. I have to say, the story of Emil's survival is a miracle. But Emil is a miraculous man. I don't know where he takes his energies from. We came from New York City on Sunday, me and his two grandchildren. And I'm in my mid 40s, his grandchildren are in their 20s and we're all exhausted. The only one who's not exhausted is this 87 year old man whose life can be summarised in two words: "What's next?"

When I talked to Emil about Freddy and told him that for International Holocaust Remembrance Day, we have an invitation from Kigali, Emil's immediate response, not even thinking, was, "We're going there. We are going to Kigali. We're going to Rwanda."

"How do we prevent genocide? The cheapest, most cost effective, most durable and most powerful investment is in education ... pre-emptive care is always cheaper than to care for sick patients."

Dr Shay Pilnik

Image: Dr Shay Pilnik tours the Kigali Genocide Memorial with Emil Fish ahead of events in Kigali to mark International Holocaust Memorial Day 2023.





Shay Pilnik (cont'd): After the Holocaust, Jews came from the camps and exclaimed, "Never again. We will dedicate our lives that something so terrible will never happen to us and never happen to any human being." If you think about it, the whole infrastructure of the international community is based on that concept. The UN. Human Rights organisations. Peacekeeping. Even the term genocide was coined by a Holocaust survivor, Raphael Lemkin, a Jewish lawyer who came up with a new definition for a crime that remained nameless.

We, as humanity, had done anything we could to ensure it doesn't happen again. And then it did; in 1994, close to one million people were killed in 100 days, a very sad proof that in a way, 'Never Again' is a theory, but it's not a practice. The question is, what do we do about it? We have to respond on many levels. I like the name Aegis Trust. James shared with me that Aegis in ancient Greek means to protect. So when we think about protection, how do we prevent genocide?

We need to fund institutions that would help protect people. But when all is said and done, if you think about it, the cheapest, most cost effective, most durable and most powerful investment is in education.

It's to educate young people. And as you know, in medicine, pre-emptive care is always cheaper than to care for sick patients. It all begins with education, especially education of young people whose brains are still shapable.

The only way we can build a better world is if we build a diverse society in which people of different cultures, races, ethnic groups live alongside each other, celebrate their difference. Some would say the multicultural society doesn't really work. But the news I'd like to share with you is that we have no choice. If we do not get used to the idea of living together and respecting each other, what we are going to get instead is the dead bodies of hundreds of thousands of people.

In a way, our friendship between Jews and Rwandans, between the Emil Fish Centre for Holocaust and Genocide Studies and you, it's really about the best and worst experiences in the human condition. It's about memories of what human beings can be at the worst, and also at their best when they interact with each other, learn about each other, and show towards each other tremendous respect. So thank you. Now let's move on to the more interesting part of the programme. Emil, share with us a few details about the story of your survival.



Emil Fish

It's really a story of a Jewish family...

Thank you very much. First of all, I want to thank James and Freddy for inviting me. I'm going to try to make this story as short as possible. It's really a story of a Jewish family. We were running away ahead of the Nazis because their intent was to kill every Jew. It wasn't a question how you

looked or how religious you were. If you were a Jew, they were going to kill you. There were about eleven million Jews and they were going to kill every one of them. And they succeeded in six million. And the rest of it, they killed gypsies, black people, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses...

A childhood facing daily discrimination

In order to survive you basically had to have luck, money, physical strength, faith in God, and so on. I'm not going to go through all the attributes that you had to have in order to survive, but every Holocaust survivor has a story. My story is unique to me. It's not unique to Holocaust survival. In order to survive, you had to have your own story.

I was born in a very orthodox religious home in a town of 10,000 people in Slovakia, of which 3,000 were Jews. And they lived together for maybe 150, 200 years. And the Germans killed 80% of us. And 20% stayed alive.

We were always discriminated. I grew up being discriminated. It was nothing new to me. We would not go alone in the street because the Gentiles would beat us up. And we tried to avoid alleys and we tried to go in two guys together; one guy is not going to fight two. I had a wild cousin from another town. He was really wild, strong and big.

And when he came to town, the kids never fought with us. They were afraid that he's going to retaliate.

We had to attend Jewish school in the afternoon. In the morning, the law said you had to attend public school. Raised as an Orthodox Jew, I couldn't write on the Sabbath, so the teacher made us sit in the back. So discrimination was just part of my life.

The reason that we were not deported is because they had exemptions for people who they needed for the economy. My father was a very smart businessman and he manufactured rail ties, and the Germans needed railroads and they needed ties. So he got exemption from being deported in the first transport, which was in 1942. In 42 they took away 80% of the population, including all my relatives except my father, my sister and my mother. 10% of the people got exemption because they were needed in the economy.

"We would not go alone in the street because the Gentiles would beat us up."

Confronting a Nazi officer

Nobody came back from my father's side except him. If you think it's unusual, it's very unusual. Nobody; no cousins, no grandfathers, no aunts except him. He was the only survivor from my father's side. From my mother's side, we were luckier. Most of them did survive.

After, 44, two years later, the Germans decided to kill every Jew and take all the exemptions. In 42 they send out 80%; in 44 they took the rest of us. So everybody went into hiding, ran to another country, had their own plan how to survive. Some lived in forests far away from the Nazis. We decided to go to a big city under false papers. And many times they caught us and we talked ourselves out of it.

I will tell you something I don't even have in my speech. My father went to Germany to school. He spoke German perfectly. We came in a train to the capital and we had to have breakfast. We walked in a restaurant in 44 and there was only one table available, and a German officer was there. And we looked Jewish, but my father had no way how to get out of this thing. So just to give you an example that you had to do everything you possibly can to survive, my father told us quietly in Yiddish, please do not talk when we sit down.

My father sat down. He didn't look German. He didn't even look Slovakian. He raised his hand and he told the German officer sitting at the table by himself, "Heil Hitler!". This German officer jumped up, gave him back, "Heil Hitler!" Oh, I couldn't figure out that one. I said, this is the end of it. And my father said to him, "You know what? I don't like you. You are occupying Slovakia now, you've been occupying for many years. And we don't like occupation. We know what to do with the Jews. We need to kill them. That's what we need to do. We don't need your Germans' help. We know what to do. They are bad people and we're going to kill them all. And you are occupying us. And we don't like you. We don't like occupation. We know what to do."

The poor German officer was angry with my father. He didn't know what to tell him. He got up. He said, "Heil Hitler!". My father got up, said, "Heil Hitler!". The German left the table and we had breakfast. That's how people survived. Everybody had to figure that out on his own.



Surviving Bergen-Belsen

We finally were hiding. To make a long story short, in 44, they gave an order that every Gentile who hides Jews is going to get killed. All the Gentiles were afraid, so in two days they arrested like 2,000 people. Our family was among them.

My father was sent to Buchenwald. We were supposed to be sent to Auschwitz, but the trains didn't work and we were sent to Bergen-Belsen. Typhus, diseases, overpopulation; there were no gas chambers, just dying from health reasons and starvation. There were thousands of people lying dead. And the Germans didn't know what to do with us dead people. And that's how we grew up.

It just happens that my neighbour was Anne Frank. I don't remember her, so don't ask me questions about her. She became famous after. She did not survive typhus. Her sister Margot did not survive. My sister got typhus. She did survive.

On April 15 we were liberated by the English. And they had no idea what to do with us. They saw all these dead bodies. They had no idea. So finally, of course, they fed us water and food. 10,000 of us died immediately. Most of the people were skinny and they died from too much eating. The English recognised this is not going to work. They sent experts and figured out, no food. They had to give us water slowly and take us to hospital. My sister was taken to hospital and they fed us little by little, and she survived.

They started burying the people. They had no solution what to do with the camp because of typhus. They burned the whole camp to prevent typhus spreading. So Bergen-Belsen has no buildings. I don't know if you realise that. All it is is a field.

General Eisenhower was persuaded to come to Bergen-Belsen. He came in, he vomited. Can you believe the general who won the war vomited because he couldn't handle it? He couldn't believe what was going on.

So that's how we survived, and we came back to Slovakia. And my father survived, thank God. And my mother and sister and me. We continued having a normal life until 48. The communists came. Then we left. Every Jew left wherever somebody would accept him. Even then they would not accept Jews. After the war, they had a quota, including America. A lot of people went to Canada, South America. And I went to Israel to study as a teenager and my parents went to Canada. Canada was more liberal. So that's how we survived.

The rest of it is just a typical American story. I studied engineering, went in business. I'm a businessman; I'm not a speaker. I don't talk philosophy. I leave it up to Shay. And I lived the American dream. And one day I visited my hometown and I realised that I'm going to give up my business and I'm going to concentrate on teaching Holocaust, that it shouldn't happen again. And that's what I've been doing the last twenty years, and that's my purpose in life. Thank you for listening.



"On April 15 we were liberated by the English. They had no idea what to do with us. They fed us water and food. Ten thousand of us died immediately."

Emil Fish

Image: Emil Fish visiting the Holocaust section of the Kigali Genocide Memorial with (L-R) Manager Dieudonné Nagiriwubu, Aegis CEO Dr James Smith, and Aegis Executive Director Freddy Mutanguha.

Questions and dialogue

Shay Pilnik: Emil, what is your biggest takeaway from this visit to Rwanda?

Emil Fish: When I was told that we were invited to Rwanda, I said, I don't care what the story is, I'm going. Because of the similarity. And so I expected to meet nice people like you are. And we're going to learn from each other, and we're going to do things together. But that's not what I learned. The only thing I learned from my whole trip is two words, 'Never Again', is a dream. That's all it is. It's going to happen again. It happened here. It's going to happen again and again and again. Until education, until we live together and it makes absolutely no difference how you look, what you do. Because everybody has the same dream. Every mother has the same dream. Shelter for the kids, clothes and food. And that's what we need. Everything else is superfluous. Just live together. So: 'Never Again' is a dream.



What it takes to survive a concentration camp

James Smith: Emil, we saw on the short film some images of the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen. We saw piles of bodies of Jewish people being pushed into a big hole with a bulldozer. And Emil, I think you were probably nine or ten years old when you were taken to that camp. Did you witness those particular scenes? And if so, how does that memory affect you? How do you recover from that?

Emil Fish: This is a very good question. We lived in barracks. When I got out of the door, there was about a ten-acre land full of corpses. Three feet high. When I opened the door, I saw it. Our barrack was across that field. There were many fields like this. A human being has an instinct, and I don't want to talk the philosophy of survival. You'd be surprised what people can take as far as hunger, and still survive.

Survival takes over and you stop thinking. But I'll tell you one thing that you don't hear very often. Most people who survived had a friend with them. You almost had to have a friend to survive. If you lost your cup, you couldn't buy another cup, you had to share a cup. And if you didn't have a spoon, you didn't go to a store and say, let me have another spoon. People who survived had one or two friends. They suffered together and they were there for each other. It's very interesting. You would think that being selfish works. It doesn't. It doesn't. It doesn't work. So, survival became the most important thing. And a lot of things you do that you wouldn't think normal people do, but we had to do.

"People who survived had one or two friends. They suffered together and they were there for each other."

Refusing to let Hitler win the heritage war



The synagogue was intact and luckily the community buildings were there, more or less intact. But they were used as warehouses. And so I realised that Hitler killed the Jews, and he's winning the war of heritage. I can't do anything about my grandparents, but I can do something about the heritage. So I wouldn't let him win the war. That's what drove me. No philosophy, no thinking much. I just told myself, he killed the Jews, but he's not going to kill my religion.

Female audience member: Thank you for being strong enough to tell us your story. What is the force that pushes you to keep on going through all the history that you passed through without having any problem? Committing yourself to teach young people about the Holocaust, it's like you are reliving your history.

Emil Fish: I have a few problems in life that I'm not going to share with you. One of them, I'm a sour loser. I hate to lose. And it was true when I was playing tennis, when I was playing soccer. I'm a terrible loser. So when I came to my hometown, out of the 3,000 Jews, there were no Jews left, but there were buildings.

So I start restoring the town. And everybody was against me. For years. But I didn't give up. There was no interest restoring heritage in a town where there were no Jews. But now it's in style because people realise heritage is just as important as money. So I committed myself to restore the heritage of that town. I realised the Jews who died didn't have a grave. So I built a monument there, against a lot of people's wishes, with everybody's name and their birthday. And I said, that's their grave. And that's what it is. So there's no big philosophy about it. It's just I'm a bad loser. I wouldn't let Hitler win the whole war. And he's losing it obviously.

"I start restoring the town and everybody was against me. But I didn't give up."



Sharing the past with the next generation

Christian Intwari (Our Past Initiative):

When did you talk about your history with your kids; at what age? I'm asking because we have a huge gap between our parents and the young generation. Parents don't want their kids to go through the trauma they went through, and the kids don't know how to ask. So what advice would you give to Rwandan survivors?

Emil Fish: The survivors of the Holocaust did not talk about the Holocaust. My father never talked about the Holocaust, but I did catch him once in a while, crying. By himself. A lot of Jewish people know it happened and their parents disappeared; the family, they go on with their life. And so did I. But 2004, my three kids said, you know what? Everybody's going on a heritage tour to Europe and you never take us. So finally, they convinced me, it's not fair. You've got to take us. So I took them for a Holocaust heritage tour. You take your kids to the hometown where you came from. You show them where your parents lived, and there are no more Jews most of the time there.

And you show them the synagogue, and the school where you went to school, and you leave. That's exactly what I had planned. Except it didn't work out this way, because the minute I came, the taxi driver says, "the Mayor wants to see you." So I said, "How did he know I'm coming?" He said, "I have no idea. I have an order to bring you to the Mayor's office." We had a nice conversation, and then I went to see the places, right? That's what I came for. One place was a building supplies store and it was closed. Another synagogue was an office building; couldn't get in. The only thing I could get in was the cemetery, and that was overgrown. So my first visit, I did nothing. I saw nothing. I came back half a year later, and of course I made sure that all the buildings are open. They opened the synagogue – a beautiful synagogue – and there were used toilets stored there, where I prayed as a child. It drove me crazy, you know? So I said, that isn't going to happen anymore. It took me years to change it, because nobody would cooperate. Twenty years ago, nobody cared.



When and how to give testimony

Shay Pilnik: Sometimes in order to share stories with the younger generation, you need to wait for the right climate. Today in America, and in Israel too, young people are actually eager to come to their grandparents and ask them, “tell me what happened”. It was only in the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 that the first stories started to come out. I can even tell you that growing up in Israel, being a grandson of survivors, I felt comfortable asking them about what happened only when they were already in their nineties, if they were alive.

James Smith: I would add that having spoken with hundreds of Holocaust survivors at the UK's National Holocaust Centre over the years and seen how some also struggle to talk to their children or grandchildren, part of it was about just rebuilding their lives and having to pay for their rent and food and get a job and all learn new language. And so, what I would add is that if as a survivor you feel it's not the right time for your children or for your community, do try to record your stories. Try to make a note, whether it's a handwritten note, whether it's typed on a laptop or whether it's recorded into an audio recorder or a video or some other documentation. Do your best to record that because later, your children, your grandchildren, your great-grandchildren will really appreciate that. I've seen, over and over again, that there will be a hunger to know. Even if it's hard, try to do that.

“If as a survivor you feel it’s not the right time, do your best to record because later, there will be a hunger to know.”

Dr James Smith

Can education help make "Never Again" a reality?



Parfine Mizero (Peace & Love Proclaimers): What are the gaps you've identified so far that make 'never again' just a theory for now?

Emil Fish: The key is education. It's all about education. Why education? Because when you have money, you can lose it, and when you're good-looking, you can become ugly; but you can't take away your education. It's something that you invest in and nobody can take it away from you. So that's the answer.

Marc Cave: To pick up on your answer, Emil; you said before the Holocaust, as a child, non-Jewish Slovaks would want to beat you up.

And after the Holocaust, back in Slovakia, no one wanted to collaborate with you to revive the Jewish heritage because there were no Jews there. Should Holocaust education, should all genocide education, be more about the why, not just the what of the atrocity?

Emil Fish: When I came to that little town, I had the same question. What are we going to do with this? So we created content in the high school. We have a celebration every year. Somewhere it's televised every year. We have a commemoration. When I bring people from all over the world, they pay their way. And we have a ceremony, just like now. We do that and we have the content of the high school kids. And we give them prizes, and you should see what they wrote. These are non-Jews. You wouldn't believe it, you know. And then I was so happy. They created content in pictures, in drawings, how they imagined the Jews lived before they were born. The book is going to be published in a few months, I hope. So I started education of the non-Jews in the town, so they should know. They're very active, and they surprise me every time I come there.

"The high school kids ... you wouldn't believe it. They surprise me every time."

How does remembrance change over generations?



Gisèle Sandrine Irakoze (Ndabaga Impact): I have two questions I would like to ask. My first question is, because it's been 80 years since the Holocaust, how do generation after generation understand, or maybe define, the identity of commemoration after all these years? And my second question is from the intergenerational trauma perspective; what are the effects of the Holocaust from generation to generation that keep prevailing as years go by? From the survivor and educator perspective, how do you see it?

Emil Fish: Education goes two ways. So we do have all kinds of programmes with non-Jews in the town. And most people don't understand, don't realise, that there are a lot of Christians who helped Jews during the war to survive. At their own risk. I didn't tell you the whole story because of time, but we were hiding in a Christian attic for three months.

And they gave us food and clothing at the risk of losing their lives every day. So what do we do now? Yad Vashem does it better than we do. We give recognition of the community who helped the Jews and the mayor talks and gets the city involved, the city hall. And they get involved.

Shay Pilnik: I will add that as the years go by, the subject doesn't really go away. We do see that my children know about the Holocaust much less than me, and I know less than my parents. At the same time, in public memory, the longer we draw away from the Holocaust, the larger actually it looms in our culture. In 1961, the first major historical work on the Holocaust was published. It took – imagine – 15 years for the first study to come. Today, books about the Holocaust can fill any library. So to some degree there's also hope that there is more and more public interest in the subject.

You also asked a question about intergenerational trauma. There are studies that show that sometimes children of Holocaust survivors have more side effects of the Holocaust compared to their parents who've experienced it. There is even a study that showed that grandchildren of survivors tend to deal with anxiety, with depression, at rates that are higher, much higher, than the rest of the of the population.



Shay Pilnik (cont'd): I once met a child of a Holocaust survivor who shared with me the following statement, which I found to be very powerful. He said, “The most important moment of my life happened five years before I was born.” In other words, the Holocaust was for him such a powerful experience in his life, even though it all happened before he was even conceived.

I can share with you as a professional who works in the field that I deal with a lot of volunteers and donors and teachers and educators who have been scarred by the experience. Sometimes it's not easy necessarily to deal with them. But I remember that working with a population that's been traumatised – and maybe I understand it because my own family has gone through the same trauma – is a part of my mission. It's not just to offer education.

It's also to be able to engage a population of people who suffered such severe trauma. You have to recognise the fact that the trauma doesn't go away.

Emil Fish: I'll make it very short. I have three kids; whenever I tell them, “you're doing something wrong, don't do it,” and I criticise, they tell me the same thing. “Don't blame me; I'm a child of a Holocaust survivor.” That's it. And they walk away. Now my grandchildren are starting to say that, if they misbehave. They say, “don't blame me; I'm a grandchild of a Holocaust survivor.”

Marc Cave: What if you're a friend of a Holocaust survivor?

Emil Fish: Well. Whenever I do something wrong and my friends complain, I say, “don't blame me, I'm a Holocaust survivor.” [Laughter.]

“You have to recognise the fact that the trauma doesn't go away.”

Dealing with Denial

Ally Radjab Musema (AERG): First of all, it was my wish to meet with a survivor of the Holocaust. I'm so pleased and I'm so privileged to have met you and to hear from you. My question is, how did you deal with deniers during your youth, and how now, because even currently there are people who still deny the Holocaust – the same as here in Rwanda, there are deniers who spread hate speech. How would you deal with those people?



James Smith: I'll just say very briefly, the phenomenon of denial, I think we all know here. During genocide, the denial happens because the perpetrators are finding a way to confuse and distort what they're doing. Gregory Stanton from Genocide Watch described denial as the final stage of genocide. I think he's adapted that slightly now, but it's a pattern after every genocide and more so after the Holocaust; it was a huge issue, as you mentioned.

What's happening now, it's somehow easier to rebut the idea that the Holocaust didn't happen or the Genocide against the Tutsi didn't happen. What's so much more difficult is the confusion, the distortion that happens, especially on social media. And all I can say is that we have to learn from each other how we combat this. I know that it's going to come back down to rigorous research, documentation, telling your story, ensuring memorials happen, ensuring it's in the curriculum. But we have to be not just vigilant, but every time we see it, try and call it out. It's hard to do that. You call it out on social media and all the trolls come after you, but we have to do everything we can, unfortunately, in relation to the Holocaust. It's becoming a growing problem really, across Europe and across the world. Final word to you, Shay or Emil on the matter.

Shay Pilnik: The design of any genocide is meant to make people not be able to believe that such a thing happened. It's meant to look unimaginable. One of our students, whose parents survived Auschwitz, said, you know, my father used to tell me, "Son, sometimes even I believe that it didn't happen. I who survived Auschwitz." Holocaust deniers thrive on that, but the danger doesn't lie with deniers; rather, with those who believe them. It's a small group of people that becomes very dangerous when they win the hearts, the minds, the ears of the majority. So in education, we always prefer to talk to what could be the silent majority, what could be the bystanders.

"Genocide is meant to look unimaginable. Deniers thrive on that."

Shay Pilnik (cont'd): One more comment. The mission of the Nazis, and James mentioned it before, was to forget about the Holocaust. Right? The last stage of the Holocaust was destroying the evidence. So when we engage in education, what we really do is we undo the work of the Nazis. It's our obligation. And if we don't engage in education, we in a way double down on what they've done. We help them. And that's why the response to Holocaust denial is so important.

Marc Cave: I have a suggestion to offer. I think there is too much emphasis placed in Holocaust education on the simple facts of what happened, with not enough understanding of the motives of the perpetrators. Amazingly successful movies, books, some even fictitious, are now unhelpful because they position the facts of the Holocaust as being so fantastical, it's almost like watching a horror movie. Learn from that when you're dealing with your own story here. Try and help everybody that needs to understand why, because then they have a context to learn from.

Otherwise, you're inviting the natural human fascination with morbid. It's important to understand motivations of the perpetrators, as vital as it is to hear the first person witness testimony of the victim who survived. We need to spend more time, in my view, not judging, necessarily; understanding. I come from an advertising background. Rule number one: understand your audience. If you want to change attitudes, understand which buttons to press. Otherwise you will never, ever change behaviour.

Emil Fish: I have a question. How many people think there should be no novels written about the Holocaust? Some people think – I'm not going to tell you what I think – it's such a terrible crime that with novels, you're confusing people. That if you want to write about the Holocaust, state the facts, no novels. I didn't say I agree or disagree.

Shay Pilnik: It was actually Elie Wiesel who said that a novel about Auschwitz is either not about Auschwitz or not a novel, but it can't be both.





James Smith: I want to draw this session to a close by thanking you all for coming, for your engagement, for taking time to listen; most of all, for your fantastic questions.

For the contribution of Marc Cave, who has come from the UK National Holocaust Centre to continue to build relations between the two institutions.

For Dr Shay Pilnik, who has shared with us great experience from the Emil Fish Centre for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the Yeshiva University.

And most of all Emil, we can't thank you enough for coming all the way from New York, not just to tell your story, but to share with us and inform us and take something back to New York as well, which we hope will be a lasting relationship between Rwanda and the Yeshiva University. Thank you once again.

"Emil, we can't thank you enough for coming all the way from New York, not just to tell your story, but to take something back as well...."

Dr James Smith



Holocaust Memorial Day 2023 at the Kigali Genocide Memorial

A summary report of the event

78 years after the liberation of Auschwitz, dignitaries and survivors of the Genocide against the Tutsi gathered at the Kigali Genocide Memorial to commemorate the six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust, to honour all victims of Nazi persecution, and to remember all whose lives have been destroyed in genocide and identity-based violence.

MCed by Freddy Mutanguha, Executive Director of the Aegis Trust, the event was opened with a prayer delivered by Rabbi Haim Bar Sela-Habad, followed by a minute of silence.

Speeches were delivered by UN Resident Coordinator Dr Ozonnia Ojielo; German Ambassador Dr Thomas Kurz; Holocaust survivor Emil Fish; Chief Prosecutor for the UN International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT), Dr Serge Brammertz; Israeli Ambassador Dr Ron Adam, and the Minister of National Unity & Civic Engagement, Dr Jean Damascène Bizimana. Poetry was delivered by Dr Deborah Hagit Adler and Fred Mfuranzima, while a moving piece of theatre, choreographed by Hope Azeda, was delivered by Mashirika.

The commemoration closed with an invitation to all to view 'SHOAH – How Was it Humanly Possible', a temporary exhibition from Yad Vashem.



*“O G-d, full of
compassion, who dwells
on high, grant perfect
rest in Thy Divine
Presence to all the souls
whose blood was spilled
by the murderers...”*

El Malei Rachamim

Image, top: dignitaries observe Holocaust Memorial Day with wreaths at the mass graves. Top left: Freddy Mutanguha introduces the day. Centre left: Rabbi Haim Bar Sela-Habad recites the prayer El Malei Rachamim. Bottom left: all stand to observe a minute of silence.

Dr Ozonnia Ojielo

United Nations Resident Coordinator



Text edited from speech.
View in full: bit.ly/HMD2023-Ojielo

This year, the theme guiding the United Nations Holocaust remembrance and commemoration is home and belonging. It highlights the humanity of the Holocaust victims and the survivors who had their homes and their sense of belonging ripped from them by the perpetrators of the Holocaust.

This theme reminds us of our responsibility to respond with humanity to the victims of atrocity crimes, to counter hate speech, antisemitism, Holocaust distortion, denial and prejudice. In sum, to do all we can to prevent genocide. We mourn the loss of so many and so much. But we also recognise that the Holocaust was not inevitable, and no genocide ever is.

The remembrance of the Holocaust here at the Kigali Genocide Memorial is a reminder that despite the commitment of the global community to never experience genocide again, only fifty years after the Holocaust, Humanity witnessed the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, where a million people were brutally killed because of who they were as Tutsi. As was the case with the Jews during the Second World War. We must never forget the Holocaust and the Genocide against the Tutsi so that we can use these lessons to create a better future.

Mr. Emil Fish, you are our hero. Your experience, your legacy, your knowledge inspires all of us, and all survivors are our heroes and heroines. Thank you for your presence today. When young people know the history of such atrocities, they are better able to stand on the shoulders of the older generation to nurture their role in educating others, fight ideologies and confront genocide deniers. So thank you, Aegis Trust and Kigali Genocide Memorial, for the work you do. Today and every day, let us recommit ourselves to the prevention of and fight against genocide and other atrocity crimes and to never be silent in the face of hatred.

"This year the theme guiding UN Holocaust remembrance is home and belonging."

H.E. Dr Thomas Kurz

Ambassador of Germany



Text edited from speech.
View in full: bit.ly/HMD2023-Kurz

The Holocaust today is an essential part of mankind's collective memory. It will always be a decisive element for German identity. In 2022, hardly a week passed where we did not have very engaged, vivid public debates on what exactly the Holocaust means for our society today, especially for our handling of the various forms of antisemitism which occur in our country and in other parts of the world.

I think it's for the 12th time, today, that the ambassadors of the State of Israel and Germany jointly host this commemoration here in Kigali. It does remain a miracle. It seems rather unlikely that the heir of the Jewish victims, the Ambassador of the State of Israel, and in the case of my friend Ron Adam, a child

of two Holocaust survivors, and myself, as the official representative of the country of the perpetrators, of Germany, jointly host this event. As far as I know, this is a unique event in the world, and it is no coincidence that this is happening here in Rwanda. Where else?

Over the last couple of years, a tradition was established where Israeli and German leaders jointly commemorate. I can only be most thankful that this is possible today. It's a gift which is hardly deserved. We have to keep the memory alive beyond any routine rituals of commemorating. We must never forget. The memory becomes especially painful when we bring individual fates to our minds. And of course, we're looking forward to the testimony of Mr Emil Fish here today.

Never again. This imperative has become even more urgent at a time when an unjustified, brutal war of aggression is being waged against the very territories where a large part of the genocide against the Jews in Europe has been committed. Some of the victims killed by this aggression were Holocaust survivors. Never forget.

"This is a unique event in the world, and it is no coincidence this is in Rwanda."

*"I do not know
the words from
which a prayer
is born. For all
the words were
lost in my voice
and were like
dark silence."*

Avraham Halfi

Image: Dr Deborah Hagit Adler
recites the poem 'A Prayer' by
Israeli writer Avraham Halfi.



Emil Fish

Holocaust survivor



Text edited from speech.
View in full: bit.ly/HMD2023-Fish

History repeats itself for those who refuse to learn from it. It's as simple as that. We have to remember, we are all human beings and it can happen to each one of us.

I was born in 1935, in a small town in Slovakia which was antisemitic for no reason. If I saw a Christian, I'd cross the street or go back because I know I'm going to be beaten up. In 1942, out of the 10,000 people, 3,000 were Jews. And Hitler decided with Tiso to deport the Jews. He deported 80% of us and made exemptions for 20%, for people he needed for the economy. Luckily my father was a very smart businessman. He got exemption.

Eight thousand people disappeared in 1942 from my hometown in cattle cars. Nobody came back from my father's side except him. From my mother's side, many, thanks to God, came back, but nobody from my father's.

In 1944, Tiso decided to kill the other 20% of the Jews. He demanded they should move west, basically to Bratislava, so he can have an easy job putting us all together and send us to concentration camps. We moved to Nitra, not far from Bratislava. My father decided to rent a house at the end of town, knowing one day he's going to have to run.

One day a German officer looked at my mother and said, "You're Jewish." She says, "I'm not." He says, "Well, you're obviously Jewish. And I want your family so I can arrest them." This Christian guy told the German, "Listen, I'm telling you, this woman is not Jewish." She ran to our house and said, "We've got to pack." We packed in two minutes and went, not knowing where we're going. It was pouring rain. After three days my father decided to knock on the door of this big farm and he said, "I'd like you to hide us."

"History repeats itself for those who refuse to learn from it. It's as simple as that."

“I was nine years old. They take your father away. You know you may never see him.”

He took us in. It was a Baptist. Baptists were known to help Jews during the war.

We were there a few months in a barn on a main street. And the Germans used to march alongside. He said, “I think it's very dangerous for you to stay, because sooner or later they're going to hear some noise.” So we hired a guy to take us to Bratislava by train at night.

It was a family arrangement: everybody is on his own. You don't go in groups. The idea was to see how many can survive. So we came to Bratislava, and as we're getting out of the station, they didn't stop my father. They stopped my mother, checking. And my father told us in Yiddish, “Keep walking. She'll make it.” She did.

We ended up in a beautiful apartment, hidden for money. And we thought we made it. Except in November, there came an order to every Slovakian Christian in Bratislava: ‘If you hide the Jews and we catch you, you will be killed. You have to turn in all the Jews.’ So that day, a lot of Jews were caught.

We came to the apartment. It was 11:00 at night, and the owner finally said, “I've got to go out.” And my father told us, “OK, that's it. He's going to turn us in.” Soon enough, about midnight, two Gestapo officers came and arrested us.

They didn't have enough provisions to keep all the arrested people, so they used to kill a lot of Jews and throw them in the Dunai river. We thought we going to the same thing, but they took us to Sered', a collection camp to send Jews to concentration camps. They separated my father from my mother and my sister and me, which was the hardest part, if you can imagine. I was nine years old. They take your father away. You know you may never see him again. So my mother, my sister and I were sent to Bergen-Belsen in a cattle car. He was sent the same day to Buchenwald.

We were supposed to go to Auschwitz but they couldn't get us to Auschwitz. So they sent us to Bergen-Belsen. Bergen-Belsen was hell; lice, typhus, diseases, starvation. We were dying. The English liberated Bergen-Belsen, April 15, 1945. There were thousands of bodies lying in the open. It was hell.

My father made a deal with my mother that if they survived, they go back to Slovakia. The Communists took over in 48. Most of the Jews knew there's no future under Communism, so they left between 48 and 49. I went to Israel, to school by myself. Little by little, European Jews dispersed to whoever wanted to take them. Everybody has a story. But that's my story of how we survived.



"We can have a world of peace. A world without genocide where people can simply coexist, where love and understanding can flower. A place where children can be safe and grow without fear."

Fred Mfuranzima

Image: Poet Fred Mfuranzima recites his work 'Yom Ha Shoah: a song to remember the Holocaust'.

Dr Serge Brammertz

Chief Prosecutor for the IRMCT



Text edited from speech.
View in full: bit.ly/HMD2023-Brammertz

Dear Mr Fish, I really want to start by thanking you for your testimony. Nothing can replace the story of survivors. I admire your strength, your dedication, and I really hope generations will be able to listen to you and your story.

As international prosecutors we are coming in when it's too late, when humanity has failed the victims. But all prosecutors in this room will tell you your stories remind us why it is so important to fight for accountability. Remembering the victims of the Holocaust is crucial as it reminds us of the world's commitment that never again should we allow such horrors. And so it is apt to assemble here at the memorial of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi.

When we witness the warning signs of genocide, commemorating the victims is not enough. We have an obligation to secure justice on their behalf.

The critical bodies we created to maintain peace and secure justice often do not live up to our expectations of them. The reality is that mass atrocities continue to be committed today, with impunity being the rule, and accountability, the exception. Public figures and officials continue to make public statements denying the Holocaust and even share pro-Nazi ideologies. Similarly, over the last ten years, I have briefed the United Nations Security Council about ongoing denial of the genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda.

Today, genocide ideology presents clear risks to international peace and security. Modern communication technologies allow denial and hate speech to spread at alarming rates. Resisting the denial of crimes and glorification of criminals is our individual and collective responsibility. We need to recognise that the truth is contested and we must actively defend and promote it.

*"Nothing can replace the story of survivors.
I admire your strength, your dedication."*

H.E. Dr Ron Adam

Ambassador of Israel



Text edited from speech.
View in full: bit.ly/HMD2023-Adam

I have a special connection to this day. My mother was nine years old, a girl from Budapest, Hungary, when she was taken from her warm house in the middle of the night to Bergen-Belsen in Germany in June 1944. My father was 17 when the Luftwaffe bombed his city, Belgrade, and destroyed his house. He started a four-year run from Nazi soldiers in Yugoslavia and Italy, along with his father and sister.

Another connection to this day is being a government official at the right time in the right place. It was 2005 when I functioned as director of the UN Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Jerusalem. Realising the Holocaust was not on the agenda of the UN, I drafted a new resolution, that the United Nations will

designate the 27 of January as an annual International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust. The General Assembly adopted it in consensus, with the presence of all 193 member states, which showed the commitment of all nations of the world to the remembrance of the Holocaust.

I grew up in a family where both parents preferred not to share their stories. My brother and I are probably affected by that decision. However, today many books are written on individual memories. It is crucial due to deniers out there. I would like to thank you, Emil Avraham Fish, for your testimony and courage to come to Kigali to share your story. As time passes and survivors are leaving us, like my parents, it becomes more important to share testimonies. So it is here in Rwanda.

In this context, I find it imperative to bring to justice war criminals wherever they are. Lastly, we cannot tolerate antisemitism or any other act of racial hatred or discrimination, dehumanisation, hate speech. They might lead to another genocide. May the souls of six million Jews and one million Tutsi rest in peace. May we never again witness genocide.

"Realising the Holocaust was not on the UN agenda, I drafted a new resolution."



“Bitter fruits of humanity choke the life out of innocent children. These are not the fruits we choose to bear anymore. We choose fruits of life ... cultivated through the labour of love.”

Mashirika

Images, top: Mashirika performance choreographed by Hope Azeda to mark Holocaust Memorial Day 2023.

Right: Delah Dube recites poetry as part of the Mashirika performance.



Dr Jean Damascène Bizimana, Minister of National Unity & Civic Engagement



Text edited from translation of speech.
View in full: bit.ly/HMD2023-Bizimana

This day of remembrance at the Kigali Genocide Memorial is a joint opportunity for everyone to reflect on the Holocaust and recall the fundamental human values that the Holocaust shamefully violated.

Holocaust commemoration reminds us we have a duty to younger generations of the world. These young people must know the past so that they can do their best to ensure that the lessons of the Holocaust are used to fight against the perpetration of other genocides and to join efforts to fight its denial.

Let us remember that in 1948, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, which was intended to prevent genocide.

A year later, in 1949, the UN adopted a series of laws and conventions, the Geneva Conventions, which regulate armed conflict. However, this legal arsenal was not enough to prevent the world from experiencing other genocides after the Holocaust, as evidenced by events in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda.

Rwanda, as a State that experienced genocide, understands the gravity of the Holocaust. We have a collective responsibility to commemorate and deal with the consequences of the Holocaust and of the Genocide against the Tutsi, including treatment of residual trauma, organisation of remembrance policies, preservation of historical sites, and promotion of education and research. This includes raising awareness of the causes, consequences, and dynamics of these crimes to build the resilience of young people to ideologies of hate.

I would like to conclude by expressing once again my sympathy to the victims of the Holocaust, to the survivors, and to the States of Israel and Germany as they join hands to commemorate the Holocaust and draw lessons for preserving the true values of humanity for a better future.

"Holocaust commemoration reminds us we have a duty to younger generations."



Special thanks

Images, top: group photograph, all dignitaries and special guests attending the 2023 Holocaust Memorial Day commemoration at the Kigali Genocide Memorial. Bottom: Dr Ron Adam discusses Yad Vashem's temporary exhibition 'SHOAH – How Was it Humanly Possible' with Dr Jean Damascène Bizimana and Dr Serge Brammertz.

The Aegis Trust and Kigali Genocide Memorial thank all who made the events in this report possible, including our esteemed contributors Emil Fish, Dr Shay Pilnik, Marc Cave, Rabbi Haim Bar Sela-Habad, Dr Ozonnia Ojielo, Dr Thomas Kurz, Dr Serge Brammertz, Dr Ron Adam, Dr Jean Damascène Bizimana, Dr Deborah Hagit Adler, Fred Mfuranzima, Hope Azeda and the cast of Mashirika. We also thank Yad Vashem for the exhibition 'SHOAH – How Was it Humanly Possible'.

Special thanks also to our partners and friends whose financial support enables the maintenance and smooth running of the Kigali Genocide Memorial day to day, without whom none of this would be achievable.





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