

Holocaust Memorial Day 2024

Theme vision



HOLOCAUST
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Learning from genocide -
for a better future

Fragility of Freedom

'That is when the trouble started for the Jews. Our freedom was severely restricted by a series of anti-Jewish decrees.'

Anne Frank, diary entry, Saturday 20 June, 1942 – reflecting back on May 1940 when the Germans arrived in the Netherlands



Barbed wire fences at Auschwitz-Birkenau © Chris Jackson / Getty

1. Introduction

Freedom means different things to different people. What is clear is that in every genocide that has taken place, those who are targeted for persecution have had their freedom restricted and removed, before many of them are murdered. This is often a subtle, slow process. **The ten stages of genocide**, as identified by Professor Gregory Stanton, demonstrate that genocide never just happens. There is always a set of circumstances which occur, or which are created, to build the climate in which genocide can take place and in which perpetrator regimes can remove the freedoms of those they are targeting.

Not only do perpetrator regimes erode the freedom of the people they are targeting, demonstrating how fragile freedom is, they also restrict the freedoms of others around them, to prevent people from challenging the regime. Despite this, in every genocide there are those who risk their own freedom to help others, to preserve others' freedom or to stand up to the regime.

HMD 2024 marks the 30th anniversary of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. 49 years after the Holocaust ended, 19 years after the genocide in Cambodia, the world stood by as Hutu extremists shattered the fragile freedom in Rwanda, following decades of tension and violence, culminating in the murder of over one million Tutsis in just one hundred days.

2. Eroding freedom

Freedom is fragile and it cannot be taken for granted. Here are some examples of ways in which the freedoms of people targeted during genocide are restricted, showing how fragile freedom is and how we must not be complacent about it.

Freedom of religion and freedom to self-identify

In 1933 the Nazis came to power in Germany, and life became increasingly difficult for German Jews. Anti-Jewish legislation was passed, which denied Jews many freedoms and restricted their rights, starting with removing them from certain professions and schools and universities. The Nuremberg Laws in 1935 restricted who Jews could marry, and went further than that: they defined anyone who had three or four Jewish grandparents as a Jew, regardless of whether or not that person saw themselves as Jewish. Thus the Nuremberg laws took away people's freedom of religion and freedom to self-identify. On 9 November 1938, Jewish shops and businesses in Nazi territories were attacked and destroyed. The night became known as The Night of Broken Glass. Jewish people were banned from cinemas, theatres and sports facilities.



Jewish shops and businesses were destroyed during The Night of Broken Glass in 1938
© Bettmann / Getty

As the German army swept through and started occupying European countries, Jewish people in those countries often had many of their freedoms taken away: they were forced into ghettos, living in cramped conditions and often doing hard labour for the Nazis or for German industries; they were deported to concentration or extermination camps. Being imprisoned or enslaved is the very antithesis of freedom. And this was simply because they were Jewish.

After the arrival of the Germans in the Netherlands, Anne Frank wrote in her diary:

'That is when the trouble started for the Jews. Our freedom was severely restricted by a series of anti-Jewish decrees: Jews were required to wear a yellow star; Jews were required to turn in their bicycles; Jews were forbidden to use trams; Jews were forbidden to ride in cars, even their own; Jews were required to do their shopping between 3.00 and 5.00p.m.; Jews were required to frequent only Jewish-owned barbershops and beauty salons; Jews were forbidden to be out on the streets between 8.00 p.m. and 6.00 a.m.; Jews were forbidden to go to theatres, cinemas or any other forms of entertainments; Jews were forbidden to use swimming pools, tennis courts, hockey fields or any other athletic fields; Jews were forbidden to go rowing; Jews were forbidden to take part in any athletic activity in public; Jews were forbidden to sit in their gardens or those of their friends after 8.00 p.m.; Jews were forbidden to visit Christians in their homes; Jews were required to attend Jewish schools, etc. You couldn't do this and you couldn't do that, but life went on.'

Anne and her family went into hiding, but they were betrayed and Anne died in Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp, just three months short of her 16th birthday.

Freedom of reproduction

As part of the T4 euthanasia programme the Nazis sterilised hundreds of thousands of people because they were disabled or perceived to be disabled, physically or mentally. Franziska Mikus had her freedom of reproduction taken away by the Nazis, forcibly sterilised not once but twice, simply because she was deaf.

'With a heavy heart I [had] to be sterilised a second time. This was the cruellest thing I ever had to endure. I will never be able to forget that.'

Read Franziska's full life story at hmd.org.uk/franziska.

Freedom of movement

In the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, Eric Murangwa Eugène MBE's freedom of movement was shattered after the plane carrying the President of Rwanda was shot down on 6 April 1994. Radio broadcasts demanded people stay in their homes while soldiers crashed down their front doors to find those they deemed 'responsible'. Demanding people to stay home enabled perpetrators to find their target groups.

Read Eric's full life story at hmd.org.uk/eric.

In 1992, Kemal Pervanić was one of many Bosnian Muslim men incarcerated in the notorious Omarska Concentration Camp. One of his former schoolteachers became his camp guard. Kemal's freedoms were lost: every aspect of his life was controlled, living conditions were appalling and he suffered beatings and deprivations.

You can read more about his life at hmd.org.uk/kemal.

False freedom

Perpetrator regimes often deliberately conceal their genocidal actions and mislead those they are targeting, to keep them calm, for example, and to prevent revolts, creating a sense of false freedom among those who are persecuted. The gates at several concentration camps, including Auschwitz-Birkenau, welcomed prisoners with the now infamous slogan *'Arbeit Macht Frei'*, literally meaning 'work gives you freedom', but this was far from the reality.

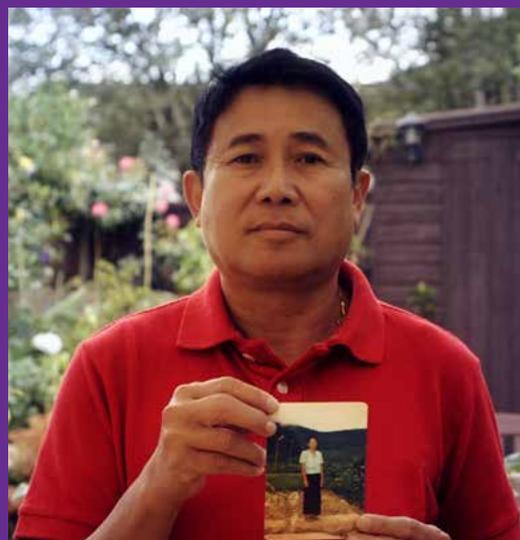
In 1981, having survived the genocide in Cambodia, Var Ashe Houston BEM learned in a letter from a friend that her husband, Virak Phong, had flown back to Phnom Penh in early 1976 with several hundred other Khmer intellectuals. The group had been told that the communist regime led by Pol Pot could use their skills to rebuild the country, but this was not true. In reality, they were imprisoned upon arrival in Phnom Penh. Virak Phong died in prison that year.

You can read more about Var's life at hmd.org.uk/var.

The Khmer Rouge told Sokphal Din BEM that he was going to leave the labour camp they had imprisoned him in, to be reunited with the rest of their family. Sokphal was suspicious, but excited. However, his optimism was short lived. The Khmer Rouge led Sokphal deep into the jungle where he was abandoned without food, water or tools to help him survive. The Khmer Rouge had lied and Sokphal realised that he would never see his father again.

You can read more about Sokphal's life at hmd.org.uk/sokphal.

There are often limited options available to people attempting to flee persecution as their freedoms are restricted. Jewish people trying to leave Germany in the 1930s had to pay an increasingly heavy emigration tax, for example, and securing a visa became progressively difficult.



Sokphal Din BEM holding a photo of his mother, taken in a refugee camp in Thailand

El Sadiq 'Debay' Mahmoud Manees fled persecution in Sudan, choosing *'to go across the Mediterranean Sea – hoping either to be able to live in peace, or to die.'* This was not an easy decision to make, but if Debay had stayed in Sudan, he would almost certainly have been murdered. Debay was luckier than many others who attempted the journey. He was rescued and taken to Italy, where he slept rough. He had a long and difficult journey through Europe, unable to find work or safety, until he eventually reached the UK where he claimed asylum. Today, Debay lives in the UK, and was a key worker during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. He is grateful to be safe, but his freedom feels incomplete because he cannot be with his family in Sudan. He says, *'Still my heart is in my village and the refugee camps with those I left in Darfur.'*

You can read more about Debay's life at hmd.org.uk/debay.

Freedom of expression

Often in genocides, people's freedom of expression is limited and restricted, with state-controlled media ensuring propaganda is fed to the general population. Those who speak out are often imprisoned or murdered. Jean Baptiste Kayigamba, a survivor of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, now living in the UK said:

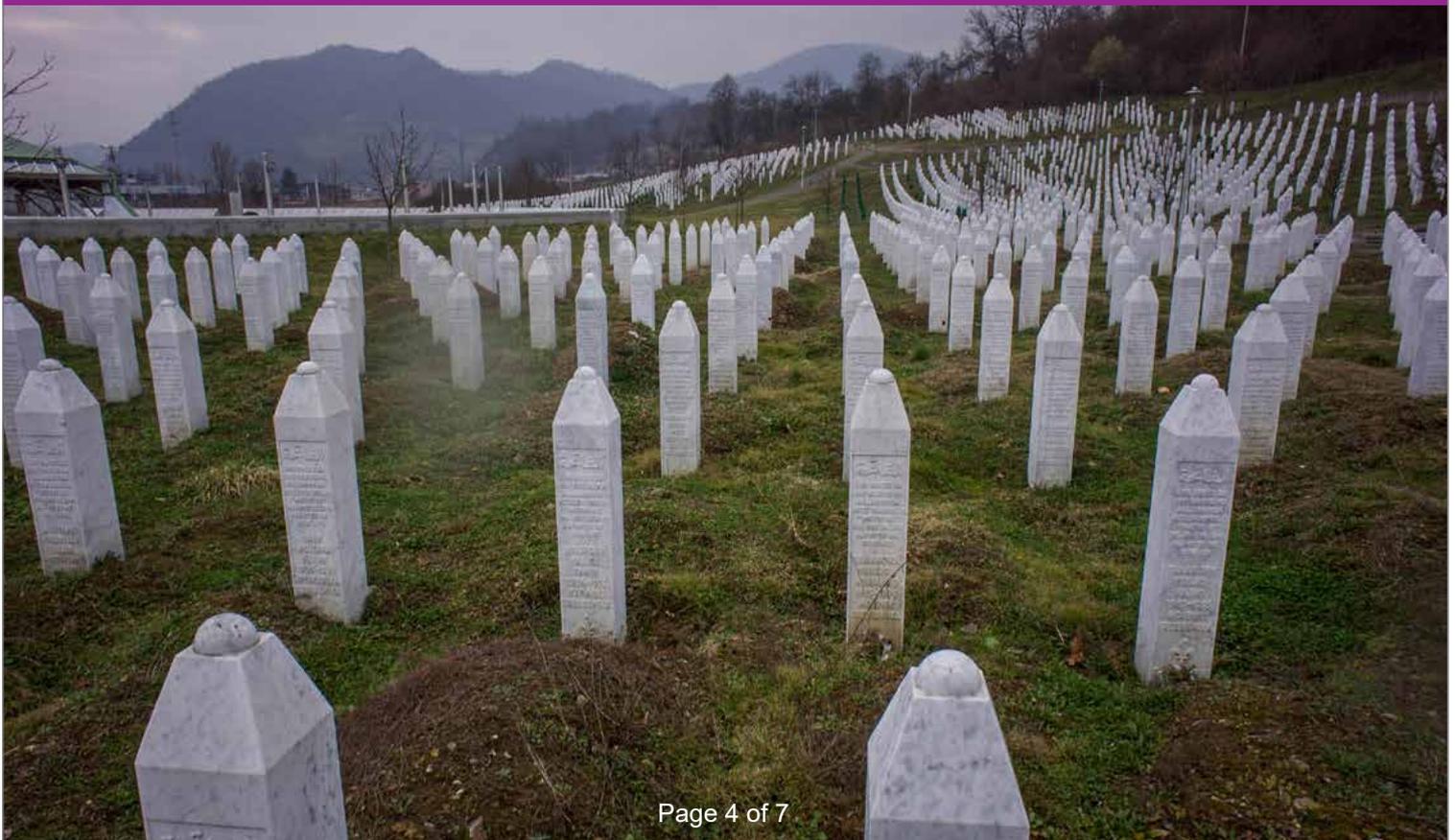
'The infamous hate Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines was spewing its venom against the Tutsis, blaming them for assassinating the president.'

Even after genocides have ended and societies are rebuilt, survivors making new lives in different countries may not be allowed to express themselves freely as new regimes make accommodations with the past, and when relatives in the home country may still face danger.

Freedom to live

Genocide is the ultimate manifestation of violence ending freedom to live. During the Holocaust, six million Jewish people – men, women, children and babies – were brutally murdered in fields, ghettos, concentration camps and death camps. In more recent genocides, vast numbers of people have been murdered purely because of their faith, ethnicity, or other form of identity.

Below: The Srebrenica-Potoari Memorial and Cemetery for those murdered during the genocide in Srebrenica, Bosnia © Giles Clarke / Getty



3. Risking freedom

It isn't only those directly targeted for persecution whose freedoms are affected by perpetrator regimes. Vali Rácz risked her freedom and her life to save Jews in Hungary during the Second World War. Despite knowing she would likely be murdered if caught, she built a false partition into a large wardrobe to hide people. She was arrested several times but with no proof that she was hiding Jews, was released.

Listen to a podcast with Monica Porter, Vali Rácz's daughter, at hmd.org.uk/vali.

Despite the horrific scenes taking place across Rwanda there were also acts of great bravery. Sula Karuhimbi was an elderly woman who lived alone on a small farm and had knowledge of natural medicines. When the genocide began she hid more than 20 Tutsis in her animal shed and fed them from her small stock of vegetables. When attackers came to her farm she used her reputation as a 'witch' to frighten them off and protect the people hiding, risking her freedom as she did so.

Five students from Munich University and one of their professors challenged the Nazi regime by forming the White Rose group. They asked German people to react to the violence and oppression which were all around them by standing up and fighting for freedom.

Although they were successful in spreading their messages, the members of the White Rose group were all beheaded by the Nazis, who wanted to discourage anyone else from fighting for freedom.

Read more about the White Rose group at hmd.org.uk/whiterose.



Vali Rácz, who risked her life to save Jews during the Holocaust © Monica Porter

4. Liberated but not completely free

It is a misconception that liberation from the perpetrator regime means the end of suffering and the start of a free life. Whilst allied liberators freed Holocaust survivors from the physical imprisonment of concentration camps, and dreadful conditions, the prisoners then found themselves alone, often unable to return home, and having to move to a new country, learn a new language and rebuild their lives from scratch. They had to rebuild new lives with the painful absence of family members and friends. Many have described the years post-liberation as 'being physically free, but not mentally free.'

Holocaust survivor Esther Brunstein said:

'The first few days after liberation were joyous and yet sad, confusing and bewildering. I did not know how to cope with freedom after years of painful imprisonment.'

Read Esther's full life story at hmd.org.uk/esther.

As Otto Rosenberg who was persecuted by the Nazis because he was Sinti noted, it was hard to enjoy freedom knowing his family members had been murdered:

'They say: "you have your freedom now, be happy". There was no way I could be all joyful, because I missed my brothers and sisters, always, to this very day. When the holidays came and people celebrated, or the families sat together, that was when this inner thing, this nervous strain came. That was very hard.'

Read his full life story at hmd.org.uk/otto.

Indeed, gay men who were imprisoned by the Nazis did not find the freedom they had hoped for as they were still regarded as criminals after liberation and it wasn't until 1968 when they would be safe from prosecution.

Read more about the persecution of gay people and what happened afterwards at hmd.org.uk/gay-people.

Just because one person was liberated, it did not mean that the rest of their family were safe. As Sabit Jakupović, a survivor of the genocide in Bosnia explains:

'And that was one of the very hard moments because I felt safe, and I felt lost. I was in a completely different country, different weather, different language. Then I remembered that I left my brothers behind. Those emotions were tearing me apart, you can't enjoy the freedom and liberty because the war is still happening.'

Read Sabit's full life story at hmd.org.uk/sabit.



Otto Rosenberg (front) with his mother and siblings, many of whom were murdered by the Nazis

5. Enjoying freedom

Some survivors were able to enjoy their freedom. After surviving ghettos, concentration camps and a death march, Holocaust survivor Alec Ward came to England. He said:

'We lived in Southampton for a while where I was intoxicated with the freedom in England. I could walk freely wherever I wanted, I could ride a bicycle and everyone was so extremely kind and helpful to me.'

Read his full life story at hmd.org.uk/alec.

6. Vulnerability of freedom

For some survivors, post-genocide freedom remains always vulnerable to being snatched away. Denial and distortion follow all genocides, and are on the increase where countries attempt to reshape their past. Holocaust distortion and antisemitism (anti-Jewish hatred) have been present since the end of World War Two and remain prevalent today.

Leon Greenman built a life in the UK after surviving Auschwitz, only to suffer an antisemitic attack on his home in London in the 1990s.

Antoinette Mutabazi did not feel free to return to her home village after the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda when she heard that a perpetrator had been released from prison and had returned to the village.

7. Freedom today

Today many people in western democracies take freedoms for granted – this HMD, we can reflect on how these freedoms need to be valued, and on how many people around the world face restrictions to their freedoms to live, worship, work and love freely.

For example, Uyghur Muslims in China are facing forced relocation to Xinjiang province, 're-education' that threatens to eradicate the Uyghur culture, and other limits to free expression, free movement and freedom of worship.

Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims are living in refugee camps in Bangladesh, having escaped religious persecution in Myanmar.

Conflict is still ongoing in the Darfur region of Sudan. Survivors of the genocide, now safe in the UK, are terrified for the safety of their family members still in Darfur, and scared to speak out publicly in the UK lest their family members' lives are threatened.

8. Holocaust Memorial Day 2024

Anne Frank's comment, quoted above, concludes '*You couldn't do this and you couldn't do that, but life went on*'. But of course, for Anne, and millions of others, life did not go on – they were deliberately murdered. Building upon the multiple restrictions on their freedoms, their freedom of life was destroyed.

On HMD 2024, we can all reflect on how freedom is fragile and vulnerable to abuse. As we come together in communities around the UK, let's pledge not to take our freedoms for granted, and consider what we can do to strengthen freedoms around the world.

Further Reading

As well as the links in this paper, the following are recommended:

- Our range of [life stories](#) of people affected by the Holocaust and genocide
- The [ten stages of genocide](#)
- Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*, ed. by Otto Frank and Mirjam Pressler, trans. by Susan Massotty (Penguin Books, 2001)
- Horst Biesold, *Crying Hands: Eugenics and Deaf People in Nazi Germany* (Gallaudet University Press, 1999)
- Var Hong Ashe, *From Phnom Penh to Paradise: Escape from Cambodia* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1988)
- Sokphal Din, *The Killing Fields of Cambodia: Surviving a Living Hell* (Amsterdam Publishers, 2020)
- Otto Rosenberg, *A Gypsy in Auschwitz: How I Survived the Horrors of the 'Forgotten Holocaust'*, with Ulrich Enzenberger, trans. by Maisie Musgrave (Octopus Publishing Group, 2022)



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Page 6 of 7

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