

One person can make a difference

Thought for the Day

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For some years the UK and other European countries have marked the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz on 27th January as Holocaust Memorial Day. Tomorrow night the First Minister will demonstrate Scotland's commitment to honouring the memory of the victims - and those who did what they could to save them - by launching a permanent Scottish Holocaust memorial.

It's a shameful fact that the Holocaust has not been the only genocide in history. So why then was it unique? Why should it be singled out, and not merged, as some have suggested, into a general Genocide memorial day? I don't wish to dismiss the suffering of others, and certainly not the other genocides that Holocaust Day also remembers, but what made the Holocaust unique was not just the scale. Other massacres, from the Conquistadors to Bosnia, via Rwanda and Bangladesh, were part of territorial wars or tribal conflicts, but never before or since has the power of the state driven the eradication of an entire people. It is this conjunction of ideology, government control, popular acquiescence, and the industrialisation of the killing itself that makes the Holocaust unique. That is why I believe Holocaust imagery or language should be avoided in other contexts – because to use it is to misrepresent the scale of the horrors, and so to dishonour the victims.

In marking this anniversary, we think also of the many thousands who did whatever they could to save even a single life, and often gave their own in doing so. This year's theme is "One person can make a difference" – a difference that could extend far beyond single individuals, to change the course of history. We honour them, as the Talmud says, because "whoever saves one life is as if they saved the whole world".

So as Scots around the world tonight toast another immortal memory, we should each ask ourselves what we can do to further Burns's vision, that

“man to man the world o'er
shall brithers be for a' that.