

Holocaust Commemoration Talk von Lily Brett am 5. Mai 2016 in Sydney

I am very glad to be here with you and to be part of this Holocaust commemoration ceremony.

If you look at my life, it looks like a pretty regular life. I am married. I have children. I have grandchildren. My husband loves me. My children, mostly, like me. I write books. I live in New York.

I am Jewish. So Jewish. I worry a lot. I panic easily. And worry needlessly. I cook way too much food. And I tell everyone that my son is a doctor.

Some aspects of my life are a little less regular. I was, in my youth, for quite a few years, a rock journalist. I interviewed Mick Jagger, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and many, many other rock stars. I wore long, psychedelic dresses, false eyelashes and bare feet. My father almost wept when he looked at me. I was, I have been told, considered to be the bad Jewish girl of my time.

The single most defining aspect of my life, and I have always known this, is the fact that I was born to two people who had each survived years of imprisonment in Nazi ghettos, labor camps and death camps. My parents were a rare statistic. Two Jewish people who were married to each other and who each survived death camps.

My mother married my father because her mother thought she would be better off being with my father's wealthy family when the Nazis invaded Poland. My father married my mother because he was madly in love with her. My mother was seventeen when she was imprisoned in the Lodz Ghetto. My father's family's wealth soon evaporated in the ghetto.

My mother and father were on the last transport from the Lodz Ghetto to Auschwitz, where they were separated. My mother had four brothers, three sisters, a mother, father, aunties, uncles, cousins, nephews and nieces. When it was all over, every single person in her family had been murdered. My father's mother and father and sister and all but one of his brothers were also murdered.

It took my mother and father six months to find each other after the war. They were housed in a displaced person's camp, in Feldafing, Germany. I was born in Germany, one of the first group of children born to survivors of the Holocaust.

My parents and I arrived in Australia as refugees and we lived in peace in a country my father called Paradise. In this paradise, my father worked double shifts, behind a sewing machine, in a factory and my beautiful mother, who had dreamed of being a pediatrician, worked in another factory, behind another sewing machine. We lived in one room in Brunswick, an inner-city suburb of Melbourne. We shared a kitchen and a bathroom with the other Jewish refugee families who lived in that house.

The worlds of my mother and father's pasts hovered over us. There was the earlier world in which my mother and father each had parents and siblings. And then there was the other world. The world of my parents' dead. A densely populated world that contained almost everyone they had ever loved.

The dead were so present. I could hear them. At night they sniffed and sighed and shifted around as though they were in constant discomfort. A discomfort we couldn't ease or relieve. I knew that every other family in our shared house had their own loud and unruly crowd of dead.

I went to a Jewish kindergarten, Bialik. In every kindergarten class photograph, we look like a misplaced group of European children. We are wearing European clothes. We small girls all have big bows in our hair and some of us are wearing cardigans, even in summer. The bright sunshine looks at odds with the more melancholy expression on many of our faces.

We all know we are out of place. We know we are new to this country and that we belong somewhere else. We just don't know where that somewhere else is. We are almost all the children of Holocaust survivors.

Too many of us have dead siblings. Siblings who came from our parents' pre-war marriages. Too many of us have ill-matched parents. Marriages made in haste and out of a desperate need to have someone to touch, someone to hold and someone to love. Most of our parents are still in shock. And all of them are still grieving. It is a grief that will never end.

Many of us children are the first in our families to learn to speak English. My parents, in their need to learn English, suddenly refused to speak anything but English to me. My English was fine. I had picked it up playing with Australian kids in the neighborhood. My parents' English was rudimentary. I learned to choose my words very carefully and speak very slowly.

Those of us in the kindergarten photos, and our parents, were remnants of European Jewry. Ashkenazi Jews who were dispersed all around the world. Dispersed to any country that would take us. Those of us in that kindergarten were your parents or your grandparents or your children's grandparents or a friend or relative of someone you know. This is your history, your past. Part of you will always be joined to that past.

Being a small child and a remnant of a once large, thriving and vibrant culture combined with a proximity to a catastrophic past has, without doubt, had a huge effect on who we were and who we became.

The older I become, the more effects of the past I see. I thought it would be the reverse. I thought the effects would recede. I thought I would be calm, wise and at peace with myself. Instead, I am more connected to that past. More bewildered by it. More horrified. And, as for calm, no-one would mistake me for a Zen priest.

When I was eighteen, I saw for the first time that that past and some of the aftermath of that past was shared by others, not just by Jews. I was staying at a youth hostel above the Dead Sea, in Israel. A group of German students was also staying at the hostel. They all, looking very pained, apologized to me for their country's murder of most of Europe's Jews. I was shocked. I instantly knew that it wasn't their fault. I could see their pain, their guilt and their humiliation. It was the beginning of my understanding that the children of the perpetrators and the children of the survivors had remarkably parallel experiences.

What was I doing in a youth hostel in Israel when I was eighteen? Not anything I think you would want your children to emulate. Through some half-truths if not outright lies, I managed to persuade my parents that I needed to study at the Sorbonne. My parents were desperate for me to get a good education. I had, in an act of rebellion, not sat for my final year high-school exams. My mother and father might have agreed to send me to the moon if it had meant me getting a university degree.

At the Sorbonne, everyone seemed bewildered by my enquiries about a course of study and no-one could understand my French. I moved on to London. I fell in love with London taxi cabs. For very little money I bought a retired London taxi cab. It turned in its own circle, ran on diesel fuel and, at a pinch, you could sleep two in the back.

With a friend, I headed off to explore the world. A world I had dreamed about. Farmers in France, Italy and Spain gave us diesel oil and sometimes homemade bread and cheese.

I was seeing a world that made sense to me. An old world with old buildings. And walls and streets that felt layered with lives and steeped in hundreds of years of thoughts and declarations and discussions and passions. Streets and buildings that were marked and molded by the memories they were storing and the secrets they were keeping.

A complex arrangement with a French accomplice enabled me to have my mail re-routed through Paris. I wrote to my parents every week detailing my improving French.

A few months later, I arrived in Israel. One of the German students, her name was Uta, invited me to come and stay with her, in Munich. I did. From Munich, I went to Dachau and cried and cried and cried. So much of what I saw at Dachau was so familiar to me. I couldn't understand why. I was eighteen. I had never been to Dachau or to any other concentration camp. I think it is possible that I had absorbed all of these images from shards of conversations and revelations that I heard before I could walk or talk.

Years later, in Germany, I would meet many Germans who had grown up with an ever-present uncertainty about what their parents or grandparents had or hadn't done during the war. I knew exactly how they felt. It was the same sort of uncertainty that often surrounded me.

When my mother talked about disgusting, unspeakable acts performed on her friend by Gestapo officers, I wondered whether my mother was talking about herself. And prayed that she wasn't.

Part of the collateral damage of this past, was, for me, a lack of religious belief. »There is no God«, my mother said, over and over again, when I was growing up., »There is no God« she said, at the oddest times. And always out of the blue. »There is no God«, she said when she was washing the dishes or hanging out the washing or getting dressed up to go to a bar mitzvah or birthday.

Both of my parents had come from religious homes. After the war, religion was a word they both scoffed at. They would not let me go to synagogue. My mother insisted that the only reason I wanted to go to synagogue was to meet boys. That didn't seem to me to be such a bad reason to go

to synagogue. After all, they had made it clear that I was expected to marry a Jewish boy – I disappointed them. Twice.

My father, who will be one hundred in a few weeks, has kept up his lack of faith in God or an afterlife. I woke up one morning, a few years ago, worried by the sudden thought that my father, who bought himself a burial plot in Queens when he moved to New York over a decade ago, might want to be buried next to my mother in Melbourne.

»I don't want you to spend thousands of dollars to fly me to Australia when I am dead« he said when I asked him about being buried next to my mother. He said it in the sort of severe tone he sometimes used when I was a fifteen year-old beatnik.

»You won't be flying business class« I said. »It won't cost thousands.«

This temporarily derailed him. »Where in the plane would I be flying?« he said.

To this day I don't know where in the plane bodies are stored.

»Probably with the luggage«, I said to my father. He started laughing and then resumed a monologue about being completely dead when you were dead.

»Mum won't know if I am next to her or not«, he said. »I do not believe in God and I am not going to change now«, he added.

I have spent a lot of my life thinking about God and wishing I could believe and envying people who do believe.

I have spent a lot of my writing life writing about the danger of deciding that someone else, because of their skin color or their religious beliefs or their sexual orientation is not quite like you. It is a very short, slippery slope from seeing people as different to you to being indifferent to others. And we Jews should know this even more profoundly than many other people. That danger should be embedded in our bones.

Indifference has always frightened me. Indifference is a perfect breeding ground for hatred. Indifference allows politics of hate to flourish. And that lays the groundwork for bigotry, racism and hate to seem reasonable to ordinary human beings. The results of politics of hate are always horrifying and inevitably catastrophic.

Auschwitz has, in many ways, become a universal symbol of the end result of politics of hate. I have been to Auschwitz many, many times. I go to Auschwitz in the same way that other people go to church or to synagogue. I go to be connected to another level of life, connected to something intangible.

It is the only place on earth where I feel deeply connected to the mothers and fathers and children who were part of my family, part of me. When I am in Auschwitz, I feel joined to them. And, non-

believer, that I am, I feel as though I am showing them that they are not forgotten, that they are loved.

I have rubbed soot from the walls of the crematoria, in Auschwitz, on my face, on my chest. That soot contained parts of someone or parts of more than one someone. It is the closest I will ever get to the dozens and dozens of members of my family I have never met.

In Birkenau I visit the women's barracks where my mother and the other women were so jammed in on the two meter by two meter wooden bunks that none of them could move. The barracks my father was in were built to house fifty-seven horses and often accommodated – although accommodated is not quite the right word – nine hundred men.

About thirty years ago, I went to Birkenau with my father. My father stood in his former barracks with an expression of disbelief on his face. And then, in a move that was typical of my father, he talked about a young Jewish boy who had a beautiful voice and who would sing every night and soothe everyone with his singing. I could see that my father was hearing the young boy's voice again and was again transported by its beauty.

I came home from my recent trip to Europe – I had been in Germany and Austria for book related events – to find a local rabbi visiting my father. This rabbi regularly visits my father. The rabbi lives in the hope of instilling just a small shred of religious belief in my father. My father looks forward to the rabbi's visits so he can enjoy speaking Yiddish and enjoy tormenting the rabbi.

»You were in Germany weren't you?«, the rabbi said to me.

Over the last two decades, I have done dozens of book tours of Germany. I have been there so many times. And I have learned so much. I have seen, over and over again, how tied to each other we are, the children and the grandchildren of the perpetrators and the children and the grandchildren of the victims.

We have each grown up with guilt, sadness, secrets and shame. My mother, like so many victims felt ashamed of what was done to her. I felt awash in my mother's shame. I have met Germans in their thirties, forties, fifties and sixties who have almost drowned in their shame.

»Yes«, I said to the rabbi, »I was in Germany.«

»I hate Germans«, he said.

I felt shocked. I thought people of religion lived on a higher plane than the rest of us. I thought hatred wasn't in their vocabulary.

I hope that the rabbi is in a minority of Jews who can speak and think like that. We cannot be haters. We cannot add to the hatred being voiced and acted out. Too many of us were, and come from, the victims of hatred. If we hate others, we have learned nothing.

There is hatred all around us. In all parts of the world. Refugees and asylum seekers are once again being treated as less than human, even in a country as lucky and as underpopulated as Australia.

We have to speak up and speak out. We have to be the best we can be, not the least we can be. We are Jewish. We talk a lot. We laugh a lot. Some of us eat too much cheesecake, myself included. We argue and we debate but, we don't hate.

Don't hate. Don't hate anyone. And enjoy being Jewish. I do.