

Speech: Holocaust Memorial Day Trust reception

The theme of 2018's Holocaust Memorial Day is "The Power of Words". And that's a theme that's particularly apt for the times in which we live. Last month, as you may have seen, the Crown Prosecution Service announced that it was going to start treating online hate crimes just as seriously as their offline equivalents. So if you are reported to the police for hurling vile, hate filled abuse at someone on Twitter, the CPS won't treat it any differently to abuse on the street.

We all know it's absolutely the right move. But there's a sizeable minority who say online abuse isn't really abuse at all. That anyone complaining about remarks that are anti-Semitic or homophobic or racist should just turn a blind eye.

That's nonsense.

Words have enormous power to do harm. Believe me, I've been receiving racial abuse my whole life.

There's the direct effect on the individual, of course. The emotional trauma and psychological damage that hateful abuse can cause. The fear and self-doubt it can sow. But there's also the bigger picture.

The wider impact.

Look at the Holocaust.

We all know where it ended: in the labour camps, the gas chambers, the death marches. But it began with nothing more than words.

With abuse.

With slanders.

With threats.

And when those words were allowed to go unchallenged, year after year, the consequences were catastrophic.

Only words, yes. But words that led to the deaths of millions.

Half a century later, in Rwanda, messages of hate filled the airwaves and the printed press, encouraging, even demanding, the slaughter that was to follow. One study found that the deaths of more than 50,000 Tutsis could be directly linked to the broadcasts of one radio station. 50,000 innocent men, women and children murdered because of words.

And the absence of words can also be dangerous. In Myanmar, one powerful

woman's refusal to raise her voice and speak out is having devastating consequences for the Rohingya people.

So history has shown us, again and again, that words can be used to cause and inspire hate, to encourage and justify violence. Words are powerful things that should be handled with care. But that power can also be a force for good.

Social media is often condemned as a platform for hatred, but the most liked Tweet of all time is Barack Obama sharing the inspiring words of Nelson Mandela:

"No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin or his background or his religion."

And harnessing the positive power of words has long been a core part of Holocaust Memorial Day. Every year we hear the words of genocide survivors, sharing their most harrowing memories so that we understand the importance of saying no to bigotry.

Thanks to HMD, late January each year sees our school classrooms flooded with words. Words explaining what happened in the Holocaust, in Cambodia, in Rwanda, in Bosnia and in Darfur. Words impressing on the next generation their duty to remember. Words warning what can happen if they fail to do so.

In 2018, with continued support and funding of government, the HMD Trust will be reaching out to more people than ever before. It will be organising more events than ever before. And it will be publishing and sharing more words than ever before. Only words, yes. But words that have the power to prevent genocide.

Around the world there are memorials to genocides that feature the most powerful words of all. Words that spell out the human cost of failing to fight back against bigotry.

At the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam you can see her diary, yes, but also another book. It's more than an inch thick, hundreds of pages of tightly printed words: the names of every Dutch Jew murdered by the Nazis.

Visitors to the Srebrenica memorial are greeted by a vast, curving wall. From a distance the grey stone appears to be filled with countless black lines. But as you move closer, you realise the lines consist of countless words. The names of thousands upon thousands of Muslims who were shot, stabbed, even buried alive. These words, whether printed on paper or carved in stone, speak to us of the individuals who died, the human tragedies behind the horrifying statistics of genocide.

They will soon be joined by the UK's National Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre, to be built a short walk from where we are today. It will contain millions of words. Words that share testimony. Words that stand as a reminder. Words that serve as a warning. They're only words, yes. But they're words that tell a story we should never, ever forget.