

# Speech: International Holocaust Remembrance Day 2019: Foreign Secretary's Speech

Ambassdor, distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I'm incredibly honoured to be here today as we remember those 6 million.

Seventy-four years ago, almost to the day, Soviet soldiers advanced into Poland and liberated Auschwitz.

There, amid heaps of corpses, they discovered about 7,000 men, women and children, emaciated, starving, stricken by disease.

These broken human beings were among the handful of survivors of the 1.3 million people who had passed through the gates of Auschwitz.

One of them, of course, was Primo Levi, who was found by Russian soldiers lying incapacitated with scarlet fever, indelibly tattooed with an identity number that he would bear for the rest of his life: "174517".

In his classic, *If This Is a Man*, he struggled to describe the essence of the crime wrought by the Holocaust. He said, "Language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man.

"In a moment, with almost prophetic intuition, the reality was revealed to us: we had reached the bottom. It is not possible to sink lower than this; no human condition is more miserable than this, nor could it conceivably be so.

"Nothing belongs to us any more: they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair. If we speak, they will not listen, and if they listen, they will not understand. They have even take away our name, and if we want to keep it, we will have to find in ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name, something of us – of us as we were – still remains."

Primo Levi and other remarkable people summoned enough strength to preserve their dignity in defiance of relentless efforts to extinguish the last embers of their humanity.

In 2006, I had the life-changing experience of visiting Auschwitz myself with Holocaust Education Trust. The trip was led by the inspirational Rabbi Barry Marcus, who many of you will know.

Before going into the concentration camp, we visited a museum to commemorate the Poles who had sheltered Jews. The penalty, of course, was death, not just for the individual, but for every member of that individual's family.

More than 5,000 Poles took that risk. Many others across Europe looked away. What would each of us do if history repeated itself?

I'll never forget standing on that railway platform where so many human beings' fate was decided by a simple instruction to turn left or right.

I'll never forget Rabbi Marcus singing in Hebrew as we reflected on the horror of what was around us. Nor will I forget the remarkable Polish guard who never once referred to Jews being killed: she always used the word 'murdered'.

And a question that troubled me as I tried to take all this in is, would I have looked away? Would I have done the right thing?

With three young children that I have now whose lives are just beginning, what would I have done?

So today as Foreign Secretary, it is an incredible privilege to honour some of those who did not look away, and who worked for the Foreign Office, or our sister organisation, the Secret Intelligence Service.

One of them was Captain Frank Foley, whose bust we shall shortly be unveiling.

Frank Foley fought in the trenches during World War One before being recruited by the British Government and dispatched to our Consulate in Berlin.

Ostensibly, he was in charge of passport control; in fact, he was an SIS officer – something that the Government has taken the exceptional step of publicly confirming.

After Hitler came to power in 1933, Foley used his official position to issue visas to thousands of Jews trying to escape Germany.

He applied the rules with what might be called sympathetic flexibility.

British visas could only be given to people with financial guarantees, a requirement that ruled out many Jewish applicants. So Foley invented a variety of ways to get around bureaucracy.

Richard Lachs, a Jewish company administrator, was one of many desperate people with no chance of providing any guarantees.

Penniless and unemployed, he had been hounded out of his job in Cologne and forced to take his family into hiding after the Kristallnacht pogroms.

He sought asylum in the United States, only to be rejected because the quota was full.

So he then applied for British visas for himself, his wife and their two children, with no guarantees – and little hope of success.

Richard Lachs's son, Werner, remembered what happened. "It was a Sunday morning," he said. "A friend was there, and the post produced a letter from the British Passport Control Office in Berlin, requesting that my parents should send their passports to receive their visas. We just jumped up and down for joy."

The Lachs family did not know it, but Foley found a way of overlooking the regulations. He appears to have decided that since someone else called Lachs had previously been granted a visa, that person's guarantee could be taken to cover Richard Lachs and his family as well.

"I am 99 percent certain," said Werner Lachs, "that but for Mr Foley, I and my family might have become another statistic of the Holocaust".

Today, Werner Lachs is 92. He has nine grandchildren, four great-grandchildren and he lives in Prestwich. A few months before the outbreak of war in 1939, Foley arranged visas for a 24-year-old Jew called Gunter Powitzer and his infant son, Walter.

Yet, by the time the documents were ready, Powitzer had already been interned in Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

So Foley went to the camp himself and demanded the prisoner's release, explaining that since Powitzer now held a British visa and was entitled to British protection.

Powitzer, who had recently been flogged, remembered how he was "bandaged, cleaned up and shaved" and presented to a "small man wearing glasses".

"My name is Foley," said the visitor. "I am from the British Consulate in Berlin."

The following day, Powitzer was released from Sachsenhausen, reunited with his son and allowed to reach safety in what was then the British Mandate of Palestine.

Had Foley not acted, Powitzer would have stayed in the camp where 30,000 inmates would be murdered by 1945.

Nearly 70 years later, when a statue was raised to Foley in the Somerset town of his birth, a man called Asher Rubin wrote from Israel, "Frank Foley saved me and my father, Gunter Powitzer. Foley's efforts are responsible for the lives of our family."

I hope SIS will forgive me if I add that Foley made good use of what is euphemistically called 'tradecraft'. He would direct Jews to reliable suppliers of fake passports.

He would place them in touch with SIS contacts who knew exactly how to cross the Swiss frontier. And he kept up a steady barrage of requests to London for more visas and more permits for Jews to settle in Palestine.

Yet, as the Ambassador alluded to, the bleak truth is that not everyone in

the British Government of the day possessed the same moral clarity or the will to confront the realities of Hitlerism. The policy of appeasement, no matter how well intentioned, was futile and morally bankrupt.

We should reflect that it was not the state as a whole, but remarkable individuals like Frank Foley who did the right thing, made the correct moral choice, often in defiance of the rules.

So here I ask: what would each of us have done if we had been in his place?

Frank Foley died in 1958 having observed the code of his profession and kept silent about his service. Four decades passed before Michael Smith wrote his biography and he began to receive the posthumous recognition.

In 1999, Yad Vashem decided to honour Foley as one of the Righteous Among Nations.

One of the Jews he saved happens to be the father-in-law of my cabinet colleague, James Brokenshire. Others include the grandparents of an SIS officer who is serving today.

Thanks to Foley, many people were spared the ordeal that Primo Levi endured and chronicled.

But even as we take pride in the memory of Frank Foley, we should never lose sight of the hard truth that when the crucial moment came and the moral test was posed, there were too few people like him.

So today, we draw inspiration from his example, and we hope that those inspired will thus never be the next people to look away in the face of atrocity.

Thank you.