

## And then they came for me

Holocaust survivor and York resident Marc Schatzberger talks to [George Wood](#) about his rescue, emotions and confrontation with the 'incomprehensible subject'

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Photo credit: Eleephoto

2711 concrete slabs, or "stelae", cover a 4.7 acre public site that stands one block away from the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, Germany. Walking through this "Field of Stelae" becomes increasingly uncomfortable; paths twist and slope, and what seemed an orderly, banal site turns out to be a disorientating and uneasy experience to walk through. There is only one plaque on this public site, and it reads "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe".

At first glimpse, this site seems unremarkable, barely adequate in commemorating one of the worst human atrocities of all time. But, as designer of the memorial Peter Eisenman once said, "The enormity and scale of the horror of the Holocaust is such that any attempt to represent it by traditional means is inevitably inadequate".

Joe Lichtenstein, a Theatre, Film and Television student who put on a play in York as part of the Holocaust Memorial Day, seems to agree, "Peter Weiss put the Frankfurt Trial on stage, but said you cannot represent the Holocaust on stage... It's just impossible to even think about doing it." His rendition of *Smoke of Home* at the University of York's own memorial event last month was unique in its portrayal of the Holocaust. Written by Jewish prisoners in the Theresienstadt concentration camp, the play "is an allegory that compares the situation to the Thirty Years War".

Premiering in the UK at York's memorial event, this performance draws on research by Dr Lisa Peschel, whose historical investigation on Theresienstadt has revealed that great artistic works created by prisoners have survived the suffering and deprivation of this Jewish ghetto. According to Peschel, these pieces of art capture "the hopes, dreams and fears of their Czech- and Austrian-Jewish authors", including the dream to "return to their homes - the homes they remembered from before the war, from before Hitler".

But where *Smoke of Home* differs from other plays of the time is in its foresight of its two young authors, Zdenek Eliáš and Jirí Stein, who realised that "even if they survived, postwar life would be radically different". As I watch these scenes from today's context, this foresight becomes shockingly evident. For Joe, his stance as a young person and his background link to the Holocaust - Joe's grandfather escaped to

Britain as a Jewish refugee – seemed to generate some sort of connection between the authors and his position as director: “It’s interesting that I’m twenty-one, and the authors were twenty-one when they wrote it. So I feel like I’m sharing something.”

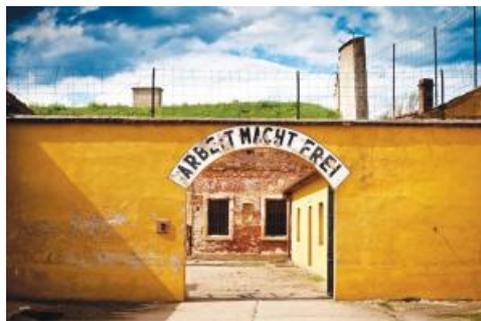
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Exploring this answer further, I asked how far his grandfather’s experiences and his Jewish family background have shaped the person he identifies himself as now. “Having a father who is always dealing with being the son of a Holocaust survivor, I’m kind of having to deal with being the son of the son of being a Holocaust survivor... I feel that it’s a huge part of my life – part of my existence is that history, but I’m not sure. At the moment, in my early twenties, I’m discovering and working out how much this means to me, to have an identity which is connected with it.”

Joe’s grandfather survived the Holocaust through the Kindertransport, a rescue mission established by the British government prior to the Second World War which found refuge for 10,000 predominantly Jewish children in the United Kingdom. Describing him as a “moving forward kind-of guy”, Joe admitted that his grandfather “doesn’t really talk about [his experiences] very much”. Given that despite surviving the Holocaust, Kindertransportees were still torn from their homes and families, this is understandable. Nevertheless, Marc Schatzberger, Kindertransportee and York resident, was willing to share his experiences at the University’s memorial service.

Marc’s story begins in his birthplace of Vienna, as an only child of Jewish parents. He spoke of the situation in Austria following the country’s annexation with Germany: “Before I left, there had been a period of uncertainty and instability, because the whole Jewish population of Vienna was in a state of flux: people wanting to come out, people waiting for visas, people waiting for permits, people being carted away to concentration camps and others being left behind. All of this was instrumental in making one feel very insecure.” I wondered how far Marc was aware of such events at the time, but at the age of twelve it was clear he could never forget such experiences. “[I was] aware of a lot of things... aware of the fact that I would be without my parents for the first time, aware that all the things that were familiar to me were left behind, and all the things that were ahead were unfamiliar, including the language.”



“Labour makes you free”: Theresienstadt ghetto, where the play, *Smoke of Home* was originally written in Czech. Photo credit: Norto

Marc’s experiences of coming to England were recounted through two postcards that his parents had left in Switzerland before being deported to concentration camps. The first was written on the train that took Marc away from Vienna on the 3rd June 1939. For a boy of 12 years, the brave face that Marc puts on here for his parents is remarkable – the opening line of his postcard reads: “So now your boy is gone too. Can’t be helped. I’m having a good time.” Interestingly, the postcard is signed by “Wolfe”, rather than by Marc. “My birth certificate actually says Wolfgang Marc Schatzberger. When I came to England, the name Wolfe,

or Wolfie as English people pronounce it, was a bit awkward, so they decided it should be Wilf, and from Wilf it became Will, and from Will it became Bill. At that point, I thought enough is enough. I'll use my other name, so that's how I became Marc."

The second postcard that Marc presented, which was sent two months later, was equally positive. Written in a children's refugee hostel in Margate, Kent, the postcard describes Marc as having one of his parents' "famous moments", or "a sort of very bad mood... dispelled immediately by the arrival of [his parents'] dear letter". The tone of his postcard was light and humorous, as Marc spoke of buying a dart at a threepence (which, as a boy, he described as a "sort of throwing arrow" and "a popular folks' sport here"), as well as eating apples all day. Incidentally, the apples referred to the times when Marc and the other Kindertransportees he was with would help a local farmer with his harvest. "Kent, being the garden of England, there were loads of apples, and they were delicious. I hadn't eaten apples like that ever since." But it was the strength of Marc's character in keeping up his parents' spirits despite his own troubles that was truly astounding: "It pleased me to know that you think of me as a tough guy. I've always wanted to avoid becoming a softy, and I think I managed that by my own efforts, because I think you rather spoilt me."

The pause that Marc gave after reading out these two postcards in the memorial service indicated he was nearing the end of his testimony. "My parents had finally achieved permission to come to England in mid-September. War broke out in early September. I never saw them again."

When I talked to Joe about representing the Holocaust on stage, he spoke of the "unbelievably incomprehensible" nature of the subject that makes it so difficult to portray. It is the stories by survivors such as Marc which transform the vast and unimaginable enormity of the Holocaust into more relatable, personal tragedies. Yet films, books and plays about the Holocaust continue to be produced, and when asked about how he perceives such works, Marc acknowledged that his emotional response is ultimately defined by his family: "I escaped the Holocaust because of being here, but inevitably, I transferred emotions on the Holocaust to my father and mother, and my uncle and aunt, who together went to their deaths in Auschwitz. Everything that I see, like *The Boy In The Striped Pyjamas*, I transfer in my thinking, not to me, but to them."

But the response I received when I asked whether or not he kept in contact with other Kindertransportees such as himself was surprising. "I'm not into navel-gazing, I've not sort of wanted to delve and delve and delve like some people who sit and think of nothing else, how tragic their life has been and so on. Yes it has been tragic, but we move on. So that attitude, which I probably have to a fault, means that I have not actually sought to be in contact with people that I met in a refugee hostel and so on." The resilience that shone through Marc's postcards as a child hasn't seemed to have faded. Marc settled into a country which was once a foreign land to him, and had most of his education here, as well as his family, which now grows into a fourth generation. He admits that when he does go back to Vienna, he feels "fairly comfortable there, which may seem strange", but emphasises that, in terms of identity, he feels "totally British".

However, Marc's testimony of his experiences as a Kindertransportee and survivor of the Holocaust continues to serve an important purpose. His story is one of many here in York; Ella Seligman, student president of the Jewish Society, reminded attendees of the University's memorial service that there is "almost no European Jew whose family is unaffected by the Holocaust, and each has their own personal pain". In Ella's family, 84 members were "identified by name as being killed in the Holocaust". But it is the legacy of the Jewish peoples' survival through this genocide, characterised by individuals such as Marc Schatzberger, that "should encourage us never to allow morality to sink so low again". For young people today, in relation to commemorating and understanding the Holocaust, Ella identified that "reducing injustice and hatred starts with treating each other with equality, humanity and tolerance".

And as for Marc, he finished his testimony with the following: "There are thousands of stories like [mine], different in detail, similar in essentials. That's why we are here. It's why we remember the Holocaust as a horrible example of what persecution and race hatred can lead to."



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