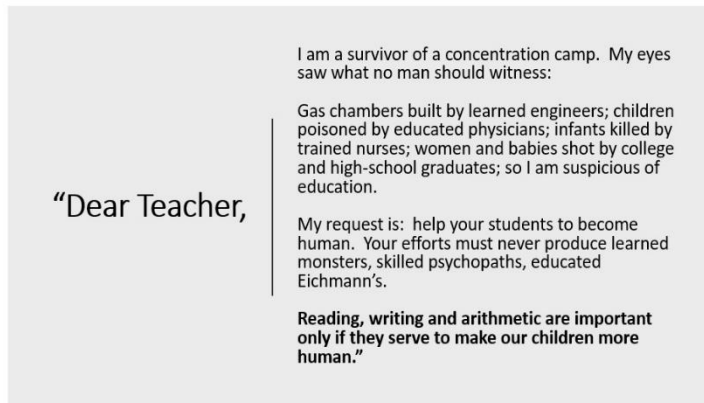


## At RWBA and beyond, it's 'Time to Teach and Talk About Genocide'

'That's what I say to teacher colleagues and to my students...

Having been awarded an MBE for services to Holocaust Education, Genocide Prevention and Human Rights Awareness you would expect nothing less, and yet, even saying the word genocide is difficult. It is not a very popular topic, it makes us uncomfortable, it's sensitive, it's challenging, but as the survivors' plea reveals... as educators, providing such learning opportunities is essential. This quote has remained at the heart of my academic studies, educational vision and practice, it is a mission and vocation, both a blessing and a curse.



But I must admit talking about genocide *is* disturbing. I mean when would be a good time to bring it up? When you are out for a meal with a friends or family, when would you segway into discussing the thousands of people being killed somewhere, or if you were with someone going through a difficult time themselves would you dare say, even at start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, 'well at least were not in Darfur?' Believe me, I've tried to talk about genocide for over twenty-five years and genocide is a conversation stopper, even Adolf Hitler admitted as much when before the invasion of Poland, and the start of the Second World War, he reportedly said *'Who, after all speaks today about the annihilation of the Armenians?'*

And he was right. Twenty years after the killing of 1.5 million Armenians, the world had seemingly forgotten about it, nobody seemed to care. But it is also interesting that he said 'annihilation', he didn't say genocide. Hitler wasn't a genocide denier. He was a genocide advocate, was pro-genocide: so why would he not use the word?

Well, in that time there was no word 'genocide'. Indeed, during what we today call the Holocaust, Winston Churchill would say we are in the midst of 'a crime without a name'... so why then on this day, December 9<sup>th</sup>, are we talking about genocide?

In the 1920s a Polish Jew, Raphael Lemkin, was studying law. He read in a newspaper of the trial of Soghomon Tehlirian. Horrified, he talked with one of his professors about the case. He asked whether Tehlirian had tried to have those responsible arrested for the massacre of the Armenians before deciding to shoot him himself. As the more he learned about the Armenian massacre and what had happened after it, the more outraged he felt. He could not accept the idea that a man could be punished if he killed another man, but a man who had killed millions could not be prosecuted for this crime. In his autobiography, Lemkin asked, 'Why was killing a million people a less serious crime than killing a single individual?' The two things were completely contradictory.

Lemkin resolved to do something about this and he develop his ideas and understanding of international law.

Lemkin worked as a public prosecutor in Warsaw, but life changed for he and his own family with the German invasion of Poland. Raphael left Warsaw on 6 September 1939 - as a Jew he was no longer safe. He fled first

to Sweden and later reached the US. During this time he remained worried for his family and was curious about the manner of imposition of Nazi rule and the nature of persecution of various communities and groups in countries the Germans and their allies came to occupy. He started to gather Nazi decrees and ordinances, believing official documents often reflected underlying objectives without stating them explicitly. He spent much time gathering, translating and analysing the documents he collected, looking for patterns of German behaviour, but also reflecting back to what happened to the Armenians. Lemkin's work led him to see the wholesale destruction of the nations over which Germans took control as an overall aim.

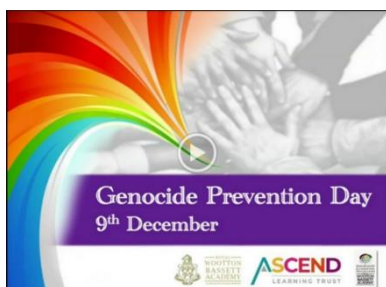
Lemkin lost 49 relatives in the Holocaust – they were targeted because they were Jewish. He worked tirelessly to ensure the crimes he recognised as had unfolded in occupied Poland and elsewhere – what we call today the Holocaust – echoed his learning about Armenia, and he knew justice must be done.

In 1944 Lemkin published '*Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*' within which he coined a new term, 'genocide'. And on December 9<sup>th</sup> we mark the 74<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its acceptance by the UN – a term, a convention, a law was created... and was ratified in 1951 and made a punishable offence.

A word, a law – a milestone, and so as a teacher at RWBA, and in my work supporting teacher training, I connect our strong Holocaust T&L with genocide.

And this year, that talking and teaching about genocide is taking place:

- With a Year 8 workshop 'Time to Talk About Genocide' – supported by colleagues Mr Radford and Mr Storey.
- RWBA PE will be taking a leading role in responding to and raising awareness of the UN's 2022 theme 'the role of sports in atrocity prevention', including sharing stories and examples via social media.
- We have produced a short video to mark the anniversary, remember Lemkin and his legacy



<https://youtu.be/nQmEIF1wl E>

- We raise awareness of the warning signs or 10 stages of genocide
- We recognise an opportunity to signpost to HMD2023 and the theme of 'Ordinary People'

We take the famous 'black box' (that's actually orange) as an inspiration for teaching about the Holocaust and about genocide. The flight recorder holds/tells the story of an aeroplane's travel. Most of the time we don't hear about it unless there's been an airplane crash, and what's interesting is that people don't just study the history of that flight, using the recorder they ask questions about it: they do talk about it, and one more thing that's incredibly important, they change things. They change the way airplanes fly and they change the way pilot's pilot. Why do they do that? Because they care. They recognise they themselves could be on an airplane. The airlines want to sell tickets, and most of us won't buy tickets if our destination leaves us dead. So as a result of all that, airplanes are incredibly safe. The flight recorders have helped us learn lessons, change safety standards...

I would suggest to you that a democracy or our society is like an airplane. It gets you somewhere and it can also crash and burn. The democracy of the Germans before Hitler came to power, the world the Germans lived in, was a democracy, filled with modern, educated, cultured people and yet in a few years it crashed and burned. It crashed and burned because insufficient numbers of people cared enough about their democracy, human rights and civic values, they didn't care enough about the Armenians, and they didn't care enough about their Jewish neighbours and the other victims of Nazi persecution... and the world didn't care enough to act to save Bosniaks and Tutsis.

Education could change that. It really could.

With all we know about the Holocaust, Cambodia (1970s), Bosnia and Rwanda (1990s) and Darfur (2000s) – education is our major toolkit for prevention. At very least it's a start and important foundation.

Instead of not wanting to talk about genocide, we should not want to tolerate it. I mean that would be an amazing accomplishment to say *no* to genocide. But to do that, along with talking about the Lemkin's, Karski's and Stanton's of this world – the people we should admire – we are also going to have to look at ourselves, our community and world today. We are going to have to face, in our talking and teaching, and our learning that, if we want to end genocide, our human nature – our full nature – who we really are as human being. We are each capable of incredible evil, unkindness, and hate, as well as great acts of selfless courage, compassion, respect and inclusion. That makes us uncomfortable and speaks to that idea of a blessing and curse- but what a civics and safeguarding opportunity, what a powerful learning experience can be had.

We need a strategy for prevention, both individual and collective – for me that is rooted in education, and why today, and everyday, we need inform and empower our young people to safeguard the future by learning about the past: we need to talk and teach about genocide.'

**Nicola Wetherall MBE – Royal Wootton Bassett Academy**