Holocaust Memorial Day Kingston 30th January 2011

LISTENING TO SURVIVORS AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

Professor Philip Spencer
Director of the Helen Bamber Centre for the Study of Rights, Conflict and Mass Violence
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Kingston University

The question of listening to survivors, about which I want to speak today, is critically important for a number of reasons.

It also presents, however, certain difficulties, some of them to do with the past, some to do with the present. It may seem odd now, but for a long time survivors' voices were not heard. This may seem puzzling – were we not desperate to hear then, directly from those who were there, those who came back from the dead, crawled from the wreckage. If we think of what is going on in Egypt today, after all, are we not, in the era 24 hour news coverage, craning to hear from those who were on the spot, who were witnesses to the events?

But genocide is not like that. It doesn't happen in front of the cameras, in front of the world's media. It takes place under cover, in sealed off places that the world's media can't (or won't)get) to. It takes time, a terrible amount of time usually, far more than it than it should, for news to get out. When survivors of genocide do emerge, they invariably find it hard (often unbearably hard, especially at first) to talk about what happened. If they have survived, they may often be the only ones in their family, their community, even their village. They have suffered a terrible bereavement, a loss which is almost impossible to bear. It is also a loss which is so hard to comprehend. There is no satisfactory answer to the pressing question "why". Why did they want to kill us? Why *did* they kill us? Why did I survive when others didn't? Why did no one help?

But there is also the problem that no one actually wants to hear even if survivors can bring themselves to speak. Primo Levi famously had a recurring nightmare about this – trying to tell his story and finding friends, even family turning their back on him, walking away. Only it was not just a nightmare. It was his actual experience.

Why did or does no one want to hear? There are lots of possible reasons. One may be to do with guilt – that "we" did nothing; that we were complicit; we let it happen; we came in far too late. And (partly connected to this) we are not interested in you – you are far away or different; you are not our concern, whether it is the Jews or the people of Cambodia, or Rwanda, or Darfur today. So often there are other priorities, problems to solve – rebuilding shattered Europe after the Holocaust; healing domestic divisions after Vietnam; not wanting to be entangled in new conflicts after the war in Iraq.

But historians and academics (like myself) are not innocent either. It took a very long time before the voices of survivors entered into the history of the Holocaust. Some of the greatest historians of the Holocaust, like Raul Hilberg, made a principle even out of this, preferring to stick with the documentary record because survivors' memories were "unreliable". Fortunately most historians today don't see things in this light, as we can see from the

remarkable work of writers such as Saul Friedlander and Christopher Browning who have shown us how to include their voices. Friedlander especially has challenged the whole idea of writing a history of the Holocaust *without* attending to the voice of survivors, suggesting that otherwise we end up with a false history which pretends to know what it can't - with a beginning, a middle and an end.

But genocide doesn't have that kind of structure. It doesn't "end" in some neat, tidied up way. Because genocide is a catastrophe – it *breaks* with everything we think we know about the world, about the society we live in, about the state (that's supposed to protect us) , about our neighbours, about each other. The worst (but also, occasionally, the best) is revealed. Listening to survivors is the only way to understand that because they were the ones who actually experienced that break.

If we are going to understand genocide properly (or better, anyway), we need to listen to what life was like *before* as well, as *during* the catastrophe – about survivors' hopes , their expectations, their families, their friends, their work, their communities – all taken away from them. We need of course to hear what happened *during* the genocide – and to pay close attention, to enter as far as possible into that world, even if we can never fully know. (How often do survivors say "you can't imagine"?) And then we need to hear about what survivors need *afterwards* in the here and now – especially if they live with us, among us. They are now our responsibility too.

Why do I say this? Because part of the problem of genocide, a big part, has to do with what one great genocide scholar, Helen Fein, has called the "universe of obligation". What happens in genocide is that people are cast out from this universe, they are treated as less than human, as not part of our state, our society, our nation, our community, our world. If you were a Jew, you were not a "proper" German , actually you were not a human being at all, so you had to be removed *from* humanity, wiped off the face of the earth. If you lived in the city, or were Vietnamese or Cham, or you weren't a loyal, devoted follower of the deranged Pol Pot, you had no rights at all – your life was forfeit as the great new Cambodia was being built. If you were a Muslim, you had no Bosnia to call home – that now belonged to Greater Serbia or Greater Croatia and you had no place in it – they would kill you if you stayed and would kill and torture many of you anyway to make sure you fled for good. If you are black now in Darfur, if you are not an Arab, your village will be burnt, your livestock destroyed , your homes razed to the ground,

The best, the most fundamental response to all of this, it seems to me, is to do the opposite – to bring people in, to extend the hand not just of *compassion*, but of *solidarity*. You belong with us, you are our responsibility, as fellow human beings who have suffered the worst that human beings can do to each other, which is what genocide is, why it is the "crime of crimes"

So listening means more than just hearing – it means doing something with what you hear - making the world a better place for those who have suffered, and a better place for ourselves too. Because that is the best defence too against this happening again. The more we make others our responsibility, the better prepared we are to deal with the forces that cause and wreak genocide – those who say that you or you or you don't belong here, *you* are not one of *us*, we don't want *you* here.

Which is how it all begins every time. Because we can know something now of how this all starts and how it all ends. We know because survivors tell us. If we listen to what they have

to tell us, when they are ready to do so, we should surely, finally, learn enough to be able to stop it happening again.