

My day of volunteering: The Holocaust Survivors Centre

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For my charity day I went to the Holocaust Survivors Centre to help out with whatever needed doing. The centre is a service for all the people who survived the Holocaust, which were largely split into four groups:

1. Those who went to the camps (Auschwitz, Dachau etc) – due to time, the survivors are now the people who at the time were 10-13 who all lied to say they were 18 to avoid going to the chambers
2. Those who were very young and sent to the ghettos with their mum
3. A group of Polish men ('The Boys') who were taken back from Poland on B-52s before Poland was totally taken over by the Nazi's. Unfortunately, only around 750 of the 1,000 who set off survived the trip
4. A group who were liberated from the camps and then repatriated to

Bosnia, only to go through another Genocide. They meet on Thursday nights when they can to sing songs and eat Bosnian food

The day was a special day as they were having an afternoon tea party to celebrate four of the survivors that were honoured in the Queen's New Year's Honours list. It was also the week following the Holocaust Memorial day on the Sunday, so it was an emotional day for everyone. I had heard on the radio that the previous Sunday some ashes that had recently been found in Auschwitz were buried near where I lived in Hertfordshire, bringing the memorial Sunday closer to home for me.

The first thing I did was sit with them, making them tea and biscuits and generally being helpful whilst they had their Yiddish session. As they were all taken from different countries around Europe, each individual Yiddish language was slightly different from each other, which meant it was an interesting session of about 75% Yiddish words, interspersed with words in English. Halfway through a man came in with his wife and stood next to everyone telling in Yiddish what was obviously an emotional story for him. A kind lady who clocked that I wasn't really understanding translated for me quietly and it was the first of the devastation I felt on the day – the man said that he hadn't cried since the war as something in him stopped him from doing so, but he went to the service for the ashes from Auschwitz that were buried in Hertfordshire as he believed it was the first time he could say goodbye to his father. As a boy, his dad was taken from him when they got to the camps and he had never known what happened to him, so this was his chance to say goodbye, and he wept for him.

After the Yiddish session, they played the 'Last Survivors' documentary that had gone out on the Sunday night, where half of the Survivors in the film were actually there in the room with us. One of the first Survivors I have met was Ivor, who had welcomed me telling me dirty jokes and asking for a bacon sandwich – he was the first person on the film and spoke of how he clearly remembers being 13 years old, naked, behind barbed wire and looking out to the trees beyond his reach paying his hardest to God that he just survived the day. I was at the back and just cried – cried for my ignorance and entitlement, for his suffering, for his strength and the sheer force of determination and history that was in the room. In the documentary Ivor's daughter was talking about how he was always joking around and being

silly because something broke inside of him when he was taken at 13, and hadn't been able to develop. So, actually, it made me realise that his dirty joke was a symptom of the holocaust and the evilness of the Nazis, still alive and acting now, today, to me. I find it hard to breathe even writing this down.

I implore you to watch it: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b0c1ngrx/the-last-survivors>. If you have the time, there are two books which helped put it into perspective: If this Is A Man by Primo Levi ([my important quotes here](#)) or Mans Search for Meaning by Viktor Frankl ([my important quotes here](#)).

After that, I helped serve lunch, which was an absolute mad house. Nanna in the kitchen was making all sorts of Kosher food and it was my job to take orders, bring them their food and help with drinks. They were like any other old people you know – some lovely, some quiet, some grumpy, some happy.

After that, we got out the balloons and set the tables for the party. More survivors turned up for the party until we had about 45 in the room. I had to step back under the sheer pressure of seeing all of these people in one room, these individuals who were so strong, so hardened that they were outliving their families and were now a bit lonely in their old age. It was an incredible privilege to be allowed to help them, but they were very, very welcoming and sharp as a tack. They knew all of the news + politics and were incredibly keen to learn about me, my family, my job and my future.

The hardest point of the day came out of the blue, when a leader of a European Jewish organisation was introducing the party and brought up statistics on anti-semitic attacks and the recent report from the Guardian that 1 in 20 British adults are holocaust deniers. To see these frail, strong people nod along to the idea that hundreds of thousands of people not just discount their suffering, but deny that it even happened, put a hole in my soul.

I am going to go back on my own time to help out where I can. Their time on earth is limited and after that their memories will be guarded by people who weren't there and have their own agendas. I was moved by the way they welcomed me even though I am not Jewish at

all (although I have been told that the Welsh might be the lost tribe, and I am a Spurs fan...)
and I cannot think of a better use of my time than to make their lives that little bit comfier or
happier

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