



Suggested Readings for Holocaust Memorial Day 2024

Fragility of Freedom

Introduction

These readings are provided for possible use in commemorative events, whether in schools or in the wider community, for Holocaust Memorial Day 2024. The texts relate, in a number of different ways, to the 2024 theme of *Fragility of Freedom*.

This theme invites us to consider one of the most uncomfortable but necessary conclusions that can be drawn from remembrance and study of the history of the Holocaust: how easily and quickly a society, with all of its widely accepted moral and cultural norms, can fall apart – and how readily some fellow citizens will participate in that process. This message is directly addressed in the first two readings (Aronson, Pagis), which are then followed by groups of texts which highlight the fragility of specific freedoms: the loss of rights and personal safety suffered by Jews in pre-war Germany and Austria (Silbermann, Knoller); the loss of home and freedom of movement brought by ghettos (Gebirtig, Friedmann); the loss of family, and with it, perhaps, faith in humanity (Wiesel, Sutzkever); the loss of communities which had flourished for centuries (Słonimski, 'The Jewish Shtetl'); and the loss of identity and dignity endured by the minority of victims selected for destruction through slave labour in the Nazi camps rather than immediate murder (Levi, Frankl). There then follow a pair of readings arguing for a stand to defend freedom (Wiesel again, the Jewish Combat Organisation). A final trio of texts (Lux Braun, Sachs, Helfgott) suggest that liberation at the end of the war did not mean complete freedom, thereby – like all of the readings – touching on the wider questions of loss and remembrance which form an essential focus of every Holocaust Memorial Day.

The readings are also appropriate for use in a classroom setting where they can stimulate discussion of key issues arising from the Holocaust. In History and English especially, the poems represented here could additionally be used to explore the value and possible limitations of literature as historical evidence. It is also worth stressing that many of the poems are works of great literary merit.

The texts represent a range of literary styles with varying levels of complexity so ceremony organisers or teachers should naturally decide which are appropriate respectively for their intended event audience or the age and ability levels of their class.

Background notes for each reading are provided at the end of this document.

‘Do not ever imagine that your world cannot collapse’

Do not ever imagine that your world cannot collapse, as ours did. This may seem the most obvious lesson to be passed down, but only because it is the most important. One moment I was enjoying an idyllic adolescence in my home city of Łódź, and the next we were on the run. [...]

Perhaps it is because I was only a child that I did not notice the storm clouds that were gathering, but I believe that many who were older and wiser than me at that time also shared my childlike state.

If disaster comes, you will find that all the myths you once cherished are of no use to you. You will see what it is like to live in a society where morality has collapsed, causing all your assumptions and prejudices to crumble before your eyes. And after it's all over, you will watch as, slowly but surely, these harshest of lessons are forgotten as the witnesses pass on and new myths take their place.

Stanisław Aronson

Europe, Late

Violins float in the sky,
and a straw hat. I beg your pardon,
what year is it?
Thirty-nine and a half, still awfully early,
you can turn off the radio.
I would like to introduce you to:
the sea breeze, the life of the party,
terribly mischievous,
whirling in a bell-skirt, slapping down
the worried newspapers: tango! tango!
And the park hums to itself:
I kiss your dainty hand, madame,
your hand as soft and elegant
as a white suede glove. You'll see, madame,
that everything will be all right,
just heavenly – you wait and see.
No it could never happen here,
don't worry so – you'll see – it could

Dan Pagis

'It was just accepted that if you were a Jewish child you were liable to be beaten up'

I was only seven years of age in 1933 and I had just started school a year before. [...] After 1933 it was just accepted that if you were a Jewish child you were liable to be beaten up, bullied or whatever else they chose to do with you. It was no use appealing to policemen or teachers because they're not supposed to interfere or even be interested in helping you because you are perceived as an enemy of the state. [...] The bullying and verbal assault was not confined to German children: it was quite common if some adult, who was nothing more than an ignorant thug, called you names, or kicked you. It was bullying all down the line and that was totally accepted.

John Silbermann

'A sight that chilled our blood'

That morning German troops entered Austria and the two countries became one. There was no such country as Austria any longer. The Anschluss had made us a province of Germany called Ostmark.

[...]

Out in the streets my mother and I saw swastika flags hanging from the windows of almost every home. Brown-shirted Nazis of the *Sturmabteilung*, or SA, roamed the streets. We saw them stopping conspicuously Jewish-looking men and forcing them to clean away the plebiscite slogans. Further along the street was a sight that chilled our blood. SA men continuously kicked an old bearded Jew in the backside as he tried to scrape a slogan from the pavement. All around gentile Austrians, some of them women with infants, laughed uproariously.

Freddie Knoller

Our Springtime

Springtime in the trees, in the fields, in the forest,
But here, in the ghetto, it's autumnal and cold,
But here, in the ghetto, it's cheerless and bleak,
Like the house of a mourner – in grief.

Springtime! Outside, the fields have been planted,
Here, around us, they've sowed only despair,
Here, around us, guarded walls rise,
Watched like a prison, through the darkest night.

Springtime, already! Soon it will be May,
But here, the air's filled with gunpowder and lead.
The hangman has ploughed with his bloody sword
One giant graveyard – the earth.

Mordechai Gebirtig

The Butterfly

The last, the very last,
so brightly, bitterly, dazzlingly yellow
perhaps the sun's tears chimed against a white stone
such, such a yellow
floated easily so high
certainly, certainly, it went because it wanted to kiss the last of his world.

For seven weeks I've lived in here
ghettoised
but I have found myself here
dandelions call to me
and white chestnut branches in the court
but I have never seen another butterfly here.

It was the last
Butterflies do not live here,
in the ghetto.

Pavel Friedman

Never Shall I Forget

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed.

Never shall I forget that smoke.

Never shall I forget the small faces of the children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent sky.

Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live.

Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes.

Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God Himself.

Never.

Elie Wiesel

Toys

My daughter, you must care for your toys,
Poor things, they're even smaller than you.
Every night, when the fire goes to sleep,
Cover them with the stars of the tree.

Let the golden pony graze
The cloudy sweetness of the field.
Lace up the little boy's boots
When the sea-eagle blows cold.

Tie a straw hat on your doll
And put a bell in her hand.
For not one of them has a mother,
And so they cry out to God.

Love them, your little princesses—
I remember a cursed night
When there were dolls left in all seven streets
Of the city. And not one child.

Abraham Sutzkever

Elegy for the Little Jewish Towns

Gone now are, gone are in Poland the Jewish villages,
In Hrubieszów, Karczew, Brody, Falenica
You look in vain for candlelight in the windows
And listen for song from the wooden synagogue.

Disappeared are the last rests, the Jewish possessions,
The blood is covered over by sand, the traces removed,
And the walls whitewashed with lime,
As for a high holiday or after a contagious disease.

One moon shines here, cold, pale, alien,
Already behind the town, on the road,
When night uncoils its light,
My Jewish relatives, boys with poetic feeling,
Will no longer find Chagall's two golden moons.

The moons now wander above another planet,
Frightened away by grim silence, no trace of them.
Gone now are those little towns where the shoemaker was a poet,
The watchmaker a philosopher, the barber a troubadour.

Gone now are those little towns where the wind joined
Biblical songs with Polish tunes and Slavic rue,
Where old Jews in orchards in the shade of cherry trees
Lamented for the holy walls of Jerusalem.

Gone now are those little towns, though the poetic mists,
The moons, winds, ponds, and stars above them
Have recorded in the blood of centuries the tragic tales,
The histories of the two saddest nations on earth.

Antoni Słonimski

The Jewish Shtetl

And once,
there was a garden,
and a child,
and a tree.

And once,
there was a father,
and a mother,
and a dog.

And once,
there was a house,
and a sister,
and a grandma.

And once,
there was life.

Anonymous

Shema

You who live secure
In your warm houses,
Who return at evening to find
Hot food and friendly faces:

Consider whether this is a man,
Who labours in the mud
Who knows no peace
Who fights for a crust of bread
Who dies at a yes or a no.
Consider whether this is a woman,
Without hair or name
With no more strength to remember
Eyes empty and womb cold
As a frog in winter.

Consider that this has been:
I commend these words to you.
Engrave them on your hearts
When you are in your house, when you walk on your way,
When you go to bed, when you rise.
Repeat them to your children.
Or may your house crumble,
Disease render you powerless,
Your offspring avert their faces from you.

Primo Levi

‘One literally became a number’

It is very difficult for an outsider to grasp how very little value was placed on human life in camp. [...] The list was the only thing that mattered. A man counted only because he had a prison number. One literally became a number: dead or alive—that was unimportant; the life of a "number" was completely irrelevant. What stood behind that number and that life mattered even less: the fate, the history, the name of the man.

Viktor Frankl

**‘Who would allow such crimes to be committed? How could the world remain silent?’
(Nobel acceptance speech, 1986)**

I remember: it happened yesterday or eternities ago. A young Jewish boy discovered the kingdom of night. I remember his bewilderment, I remember his anguish. It all happened so fast. The ghetto. The deportation. The sealed cattle car. The fiery altar upon which the history of our people and the future of mankind were meant to be sacrificed.

I remember: he asked his father: "Can this be true?" This is the twentieth century, not the Middle Ages. Who would allow such crimes to be committed? How could the world remain silent?

And now the boy is turning to me: "Tell me," he asks. "What have you done with my future? What have you done with your life?"

And I tell him that I have tried. That I have tried to keep memory alive, that I have tried to fight those who would forget. Because if we forget, we are guilty, we are accomplices.

And then I explained to him how naive we were, that the world did know and remain silent. And that is why I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must – at that moment – become the centre of the universe.

Elie Wiesel

'For your freedom and ours'

Poles, citizens, freedom fighters!

From out of the roar of the cannon with which the German army is battering our homes, the dwellings of our mothers, children, and wives;

From out of the reports of machine-guns which we have captured from the cowardly police and SS men;

From out of the smoke of fires and the blood of the murdered Warsaw Ghetto, we – imprisoned in the ghetto – send you our heartfelt fraternal greetings. [...]

A battle is being waged for your freedom and ours.

For your and our human, civic, and national honour and dignity.

We shall avenge the crimes of Auschwitz, Treblinka, Belzec, Majdanek!

Long live the brotherhood of arms and blood of fighting Poland!

Long live freedom!

Jewish Combat Organisation, Warsaw, 23rd April 1943

‘When I heard about freedom, I was also very frightened’

All through the war we had prayed for liberation, and here it was suddenly. You are free! But after I had digested the idea of freedom I realized that actually the whole time I had been hoping to see my father, and I even dared to hope that I might possibly see my mother, in spite of everything. I knew in my heart that this was almost completely unrealistic, but I was sure I would see my father. But still, there were doubts, and I began to understand that it might not happen. When I heard about freedom, I was also very frightened. What would we find?

We had survived, and we had to return to civilisation, but how did one behave in a normal world? We were two young girls who had nothing. Who would look after us? What would we do? There was excitement, but our feelings were mixed. We were afraid. It's hard to describe and explain these feelings of simultaneous fear and joy. That was our next stage. Now, after liberation, what were we going to do? We had nothing. We were frightened that we might not have anyone left in the world. We needed someone to look after us and take care of us. And to a great extent I was looking after my little sister and another girl. More than anything else I wanted someone to look after me and relieve me of the burden of caring for the girls, so that I wouldn't have to be responsible, so that I would be under an adult's protection. It's hard to explain it, but I wanted someone to look after me, I wanted someone to lean on. It turned out that freedom is relative to a very great extent. Worry about the future weighed heavily on me. We had to build our future, but how does one build a future?

Eva Lux Braun

Chorus of the Rescued

We, the rescued,
From whose hollow bones death had begun to whittle his flutes,
And on whose sinews he had already stroked his bow—
Our bodies continue to lament
With their mutilated music.
We, the rescued,
The nooses wound for our necks still dangle
before us in the blue air—
Hourglasses still fill with our dripping blood.
We, the rescued,
The worms of fear still feed on us.
Our constellation is buried in dust.
We, the rescued,
Beg you:
Show us your sun, but gradually.
Lead us from star to star, step by step.
Be gentle when you teach us to live again.
Lest the song of a bird,
Or a pail being filled at the well,
Let our badly sealed pain burst forth again
and carry us away—
We beg you:
Do not show us any angry dog, not yet—
It could be, it could be
That we will dissolve into dust—
Dissolve into dust before your eyes.
For what binds our fabric together?
We whose breath vacated us,
Whose soul fled to Him out of that midnight
Long before our bodies were rescued
Into the ark of the moment.
We, the rescued,
We press your hand
We look into your eye—
But all that binds us together now is leave-taking,
The leave-taking in the dust
Binds us together with you.

Nelly Sachs

'The family life that could have been was denied us'

I can't get over it. It hurts me more and more. My mother and my little sister being taken away to be shot. It hurts. It is agonising. What were they thinking? We boys of the '45 Aid Society may have led a full life. We have enjoyed the luxury of living. But we lost our parents when we were young. We did not have the pleasure of sharing our life with them – our achievements and our disappointments. There was always the missing ingredient of not being able to share with the people who brought me into this world. It is not something you can ever run away from. We have risen above it. We have attacked adversity. But the family life that could have been was denied us. We had a taste of it when we were young. That is why the memory is so painful. It gets worse. I do not talk about it, but I feel like screaming, and saying "Why? Why? Why?"

Ben Helfgott

Notes on the readings

“Do not ever imagine that your world cannot collapse”

Stanisław ('Staszek') Aronson (1925-) was born into a highly assimilated Jewish family in Warsaw and grew up in Łódź, home of Poland's second largest Jewish community. When Germany invaded Poland in 1939, his family fled to the eastern city of Lwów (now Lviv in Ukraine), which was occupied by the USSR under the Nazi-Soviet Pact. When Germany then invaded the USSR in 1941, they fled to the Warsaw Ghetto, believing it to be safer than Lwów, where massacres of Jews were already taking place. However, Staszek's parents and sister Janka were murdered in deportations from the ghetto to Treblinka extermination camp. Staszek himself escaped from a deportation train, adopted an assumed identity, and eventually joined Kedyw, an elite sabotage division of the Polish underground. He fought, and was severely wounded, in the 1944 Warsaw Uprising (not to be confused with the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising) and later in the anti-Communist Polish resistance. Wanted by the Communist secret police, he escaped Poland after the war and eventually settled in Israel.

This extract, taken from a longer article published in 2018 on possible lessons of the Holocaust, addresses one of the most profound and troubling reflections prompted by study of the Holocaust era: the speed and ease with which the world around us, and the apparently accepted ethical codes which govern it, can fall apart. As Aronson argues, if there are lessons of the Holocaust, this is perhaps the most important to heed.

'Europe, Late'

Dan Pagis (1930-1986) was born in Rădnăuți in Romania from where he was deported, together with the rest of the town's Jewish population, to Transnistria, a Romanian-occupied region of southern Ukraine, in October 1941. Tens of thousands of Romanian, Moldovan and Ukrainian Jews died in the Romanian-controlled ghettos and camps of Transnistria in the years that followed. After surviving the Holocaust, Pagis migrated to Palestine in 1946. He published his first poetry at the age of 19, eventually becoming one of Israel's leading poets despite only having learned Hebrew after his arrival in the country.

'Europe, Late' is one of several Holocaust-related poems written by Pagis. It evokes, in a very different literary form, the same concept as Stanisław Aronson: the incomprehensibility that the world could fall apart. Like many of Pagis's poems, it makes use of dialogue, most of the poem representing snatches of voices enjoying what turned out to be a last summer of freedom. Its abrupt ending (another technique often used by Pagis) may be seen to represent both a literal counter-voice ("it could happen") and a demonstration of that truth (the speaker is presumably intending to say "it could not happen" but is violently cut short).

'It was just accepted that if you were a Jewish child you were liable to be beaten up'

John Silbermann (1926-2016) was born as Manfred Silbermann into a middle-class Jewish family in Berlin. In response to the increasing loss of rights and violence suffered by

Germany's Jews, his parents decided to send him to the UK on the Kindertransport programme for child refugees. John arrived in London in July 1939 and was initially accommodated in a hostel for teenage refugees before being evacuated to Bedford during the war. After the war, he discovered that his parents had been murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau. John remained in Britain, setting up his own road haulage business and eventually becoming the chair of the Road Haulage Association, for which he was awarded the OBE.

This extract from John's testimony highlights one immediate loss of freedom suffered by Jewish children after the Nazi accession to power in 1933 – and the role of ordinary citizens, including other children, in this process.

'A sight that chilled our blood'

Freddie Knoller (1921-2022) was born into a middle-class family in Vienna as the youngest of three brothers. When the Anschluss (the German takeover of Austria in March 1938) was followed by even greater violence in the Kristallnacht pogrom in November, Freddie's parents decided to send all three boys abroad. In Freddie's case, this meant Belgium where he stayed in refugee camps. After the German invasion of Belgium in May 1940, Freddie fled to France where he eventually became a member of the French Resistance. However, after being betrayed to the Gestapo by an ex-girlfriend, his Jewish identity was discovered and he was deported in October 1943 to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where he was selected to work in Monowitz (also known as Auschwitz III). Freddie was evacuated from Auschwitz in January 1945 and eventually liberated at Bergen-Belsen in April. He emigrated after the war, first to the USA, where he married an Englishwoman, and then to the UK. It was only in the 1990s that Freddie discovered that his parents, who had remained in Vienna, had been murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau. He continued to share his experiences with young people through the Holocaust Educational Trust's Outreach programme until well into his late nineties.

Freddie's memories of the immediate aftermath of the Anschluss highlight both the speed of the loss of rights and security suffered by Austrian Jews and, as in John Silbermann's testimony, the very active role played by many of their fellow citizens. The description of Jews being forced to scrub away "*plebiscite slogans*" refers to the abortive referendum which Austria's dictator Schuschnigg (who was a Fascist but anti-Nazi) had called in an attempt to preserve his country's independence.

'Our Springtime'

Mordechai Gebirtig (1877-1942) was born into a working-class family in Kraków, a city in which he spent almost his entire life. He first began to publish his poems in socialist periodicals before the First World War but it was in the interwar period that Gebirtig truly established his reputation as a popular Yiddish poet and songwriter, frequently performing his songs in Kraków. In 1940, the Nazis expelled most of the city's Jewish population; like many Kraków Jews, Gebirtig and his family were forced to live in a nearby village. They returned in March 1942 when some of the expelled Jews were forcibly relocated to the Kraków Ghetto (which had been created in March 1941). Gebirtig was shot in the ghetto in 1942 during the mass deportations to Bełżec extermination camp.

'Our Springtime', written in the spring of 1942, a few weeks before the deportations began, vividly contrasts the beauty of the lost free world beyond the ghetto walls with the the daily struggle to survive (physically and psychologically) of its inhabitants. In so doing, the poem also stands as a potent example of the attempts by Jewish writers to use their literary creativity to explain and explore the conditions in which they found themselves.

'The Butterfly'

Little is known of the life of Pavel Friedman (1921-1944) except that he was born in Prague, from where he was deported to the Terezín Ghetto in April 1942, and that he was then deported from Terezín to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where he was murdered, in September 1944.

Like 'Our Springtime', 'The Butterfly', written in June 1942 and discovered after the liberation of the ghetto in May 1945, highlights the use of poetry to document and respond to the unimaginable and to lament the loss of the free outside world which Pavel had once enjoyed.

'Never Shall I Forget'

Elie Wiesel (1928-2016) was born into a deeply religious Jewish family in Sighetu Marmatției (pre-war Romania, wartime Hungary). He was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau together with his family and the rest of his community in May 1944 after the German invasion of Hungary. His mother and youngest sister Tzipora were murdered on arrival; his father died in Buchenwald in January 1945 days after he and Elie had arrived in the camp on a death march. Elie Wiesel first recounted his experiences in Yiddish in *Un di Velt Hot Geshvign* (*And the World Remained Silent*), a 900-page memoir, which formed the basis for *Night* (first published in French in 1958), one of the most compelling Auschwitz testimonies. Wiesel was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986 as a testament to his tireless campaigning to preserve the memory of the Holocaust and to raise awareness of more recent genocides.

The widely-anthologised 'Never Shall I Forget' first appeared in *Night*; it powerfully evokes the shock and devastation brought by the sudden loss of everything Wiesel held dear on his arrival in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

'Toys'

Abraham Sutzkever (1913-2010) was born in Smorgon, Russian Empire (now Belarus) and grew up in Vilna (interwar Wilno, Poland; now Vilnius, Lithuania) where he became a leading member of the Yung Vilné (Young Vilna) group of Yiddish poets and artists. Following the creation of the Vilna Ghetto in September 1941, Sutzkever's poems recorded the realities of ghetto life whilst also urging Jews to resist. Just days before the ghetto's final destruction in September 1943, Sutzkever and his wife escaped and joined the Jewish partisan movement in the forests around Vilna. They settled in Israel after the war.

This poem, written in Israel in 1956, is a moving elegy to the child victims of the Holocaust. In urging his young daughter, born after the war, to cherish her playthings, Sutzkever evokes

the fragility of existence, and specifically the memory of the children of the Vilna Ghetto in the devastating final stanza. (The phrase “*all seven streets / Of the city*” is a direct reference to the ghetto, which was concentrated in a small area of Vilna’s historic Jewish quarter.) It is given added poignancy with the knowledge that Sutzkever’s own newborn son was murdered by the Nazis in 1942.

‘Elegy for the Little Jewish Towns’

Antoni Słonimski (1895-1976) was a Polish poet and journalist with paternal Jewish roots (his father had converted to Catholicism to marry his mother and Antoni was brought up as a Christian). He established himself as a prominent figure in the interwar Warsaw literary scene and spent the war years in Paris and London with the exiled Polish government.

This moving poem evokes the lost communities of Poland’s small towns which had been the heart of the Jewish world for half a millennium, highlighting – like the earlier readings of Aronson and Pagis – how completely and quickly an entire civilisation can be destroyed.

‘The Jewish Shtetl’

Like ‘Elegy for the Little Jewish Towns’, this simple but affecting poem, written by an unknown author, reminds us that the Holocaust represented the sudden and unforeseen destruction of communities and cultures which had existed for centuries as well as of individuals and families. ‘Shtetl’ is a Yiddish word, typically used to denote a small town with a majority Jewish population in eastern Europe. Such communities existed across Poland, Lithuania and the Soviet Union in the pre-war era; all were destroyed in the Holocaust.

‘Shema’

Primo Levi (1919-1987) was a Jewish chemist from Turin. After an ill-fated attempt to found a partisan group, Levi and a group of friends were arrested in late 1943. When he revealed his Jewish identity, believing that this would save him from execution as a partisan, Levi was sent to Fossoli di Carpi transit camp and from there, in February 1944, to Auschwitz. He was selected to work in Auschwitz III (Monowitz), attached to IG Farben’s Buna chemical factory, where he remained until liberation in January 1945; ironically, he was saved by a bout of scarlet fever which meant that he was left behind when the SS evacuated the camp thereby sparing him the horrors of the death marches. In 1947, he published *If This Is a Man*, perhaps the best-known and most powerful Auschwitz memoir. The Holocaust continued to haunt much of Levi’s literary output in the following decades and contributed to the periodic bouts of depression which he suffered until his death (officially ruled as suicide) in 1987.

‘Shema’ was first published as the introduction to *If This Is a Man*. The Shema is a Jewish prayer declaring the singularity of God which is the centrepiece of prayer services. Levi, a lifelong atheist, adapts elements of the prayer to instead invite those of us fortunate to live in freedom and security to consider the humanity of the victims of Auschwitz and to be vigilant in preserving their memory.

‘One literally became a number’

Viktor Frankl (1905-1997) was an Austrian psychiatrist who served in public hospitals and private practice in Vienna before the Anschluss; like other Jewish professionals, he increasingly saw his freedom to work taken away by the Nazis, until he was restricted to only treating Jewish patients. In 1940, he obtained an immigration visa to the USA but could not bring himself to abandon his elderly parents, so remained in Austria until his deportation in 1942 to the Terezin Ghetto with his wife and parents. Frankl’s father died in the ghetto; the remaining family members were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944. Frankl survived because he was transferred after a few days to Kaufering and then later to Tuerkheim, both subcamps of Dachau. His mother and brother were murdered at Birkenau and his wife died of typhus in Bergen-Belsen. Unlike many Austrian survivors, Frankl chose to remain in Vienna after the war. In 1946, he published *Ein Psycholog erlebt das Konzentrationslager* (*A psychologist experiences the concentration camp*), which was translated into English in 1959 as *Man’s Search for Meaning*. The book allied his experiences as a prisoner to his psychological theory that the central purpose of human existence was to find meaning in life.

Man’s Search for Meaning was controversial, because some read it as implying that survival was to some extent a matter of personal choice, dependent on one’s mental attitude. However, this particular extract from it makes a less contentious assertion, evoking – like Levi’s ‘Shema’ – how the Nazi camp system sought to deprive its inmates (including the relatively small minority of Jews like Frankl and Levi who were selected for work rather than immediate murder) of the freedom even of an individual identity.

‘Who would allow such crimes to be committed? How could the world remain silent?’

This second reading from Elie Wiesel builds on the earlier ‘Never Shall I Forget’, taking the sudden devastation he experienced on arrival at Birkenau as a starting-point to consider its implications for humanity and posterity. Taken from Wiesel’s Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, the extract represents a powerful call both to remember the Holocaust and to take action in defence of freedom.

‘For your freedom and ours’

The Jewish Combat Organisation (*Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa* or ŻOB) was founded in the Warsaw Ghetto by members of socialist and Zionist youth groups in the summer of 1942, during the Great Aktion in which close to a quarter of million Jews were deported from the ghetto to their deaths at Treblinka. Lacking weapons and military experience, there was little that the ŻOB could do to stop the deportations at that stage. Following the end of the Aktion in September, the organisation built up its forces and established links with the Polish underground. After skirmishes with the SS during a small-scale Aktion in January 1943, the ŻOB launched the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising when the Germans entered the ghetto on 19 April 1943 to begin its final liquidation. The ŻOB leaders had no illusions of victory, but they kept German forces pinned down for almost a month in the first major civilian revolt anywhere in Nazi-occupied Europe. Most fighters died during the course of the uprising.

This manifesto, issued in the first week of the uprising, was addressed to Poles beyond the ghetto walls, and by implication to the wider world. The phrase “*for your freedom and ours*” would have been familiar to any Pole, having been adopted in the nineteenth century by Polish insurrectionists to highlight the commonality of Poland’s struggles for independence and those of other oppressed nations. The extent to which the Polish underground offered – and was able to offer – an appropriate response to the ŻOB’s struggle has remained a source of debate since 1943. Nonetheless, the manifesto stands as a testament to the idealism and sacrifice of the young people who chose to fight for their dignity against almost unimaginable odds.

‘When I heard about freedom, I was also very frightened’

Eva Lux Braun (1927-) was born in Košice in Czechoslovakia, a city which came under Hungarian rule after the Munich agreement of 1938. Following the German invasion of Hungary in 1944, Eva was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. After surviving in the camp for several months, she was transported to Salzwedel, a subcamp of Neuengamme concentration camp, where she was liberated in 1945. She settled in the United States after the war.

As this powerful testimony demonstrates, the liberation of the Nazi camps in the spring of 1945 produced ambiguous reactions from many survivors, a reflection of the fact that physical freedom did not bring an end to the challenges they faced.

‘Chorus of the Rescued’

Nelly Sachs (1891-1970) was born into an assimilated Jewish family in Berlin. Although she wrote poetry from an early age, her reputation as a writer rests on the poems and plays she produced following her flight, with her elderly mother, from Nazi persecution to Sweden in May 1940; she remained in Sweden after the war, taking citizenship in 1952. Her first volume of poetry, *In den Wohnungen des Todes (In the Houses of Death)*, published in 1947, addressed Jewish suffering both in the Holocaust and earlier in history, a pattern repeated and developed in later works. She was jointly awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1966 with the Israeli writer Shmuel Yosef Agnon.

Like Eva Lux Braun’s testimony, ‘Chorus of the Rescued’ vividly represents the trauma carried by Jews who escaped the Holocaust and their struggles to rebuild their lives amidst its destructive legacy. The poem’s direct appeal to the reader also highlights the importance of the reactions of the wider world and of posterity.

‘The family life that could have been was denied us’

Sir Ben Helfgott (1929-2023) was born in Piotrków Trybunalski, a city in Poland which was the site of the very first ghetto established by the Nazis, in October 1939, a few weeks after the German invasion had begun. After working as a slave labourer in a glass factory in Piotrków from the age of 12, Ben was amongst a small group of Jewish workers deported to

Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany in 1944, as the Germans began to retreat from Poland. He was sent to Schlieben, a subcamp of Buchenwald, and finally, in the last weeks of the war, to the Terezín (Theresienstadt) Ghetto in Czechoslovakia (one of the few internment sites still in Nazi hands); he was liberated there in May 1945. Most members of Ben's family were murdered during the Holocaust, largely at Treblinka extermination camp or in shootings in a forest outside Piotrków. Only Ben, his younger sister Mala and cousin Ann survived. Ben came to the UK in 1945 as part of a group of Jewish teenagers (nicknamed 'the Boys', although they also included a small number of girls) sponsored and cared for by Jewish refugee charities. Ben later became a British weightlifting champion, captaining the weightlifting team at the Olympic Games in Melbourne in 1956 and Rome in 1960 as well as the 1958 Cardiff Commonwealth Games, where he won a medal. In 1963 he founded the '45 Aid Society, which brought together 'the Boys', who had formed close-knit bonds in their new country, to raise money for charitable causes. Ben was knighted in 2018 for his services to Holocaust remembrance and education.

This heartbreaking testimony, taken from an interview with Ben's friend the late Sir Martin Gilbert for his book *The Boys*, is – like the two preceding readings – a reminder that liberation and survivors' incredible efforts to rebuild their lives after the war were always tinged with the immense pain and loss they had endured. Ultimately, the restoration of freedom after the war could never fully undo the consequences of its initial loss.