

Baeck tribute is a lesson in Shoah remembrance

THIS MONTH, the Association of Jewish Refugees unveiled a plaque in honour of Rabbi Dr Leo Baeck, a luminary of Progressive Judaism and one of the principal Jewish thinkers of the 20th century, whose work has helped to shape the post-war British Jewish community.

The public monument for Rabbi Baeck is a permanent dedication to one of the most prominent Holocaust refugees who rebuilt his life in Britain and is one of a series of plaques that the AJR is installing to recognise the disproportionate and everlasting contribution made by the émigrés to this country.

Four days earlier, a private foundation in Hungary abandoned its plans to erect a statue to honour Bálint Homan in the town of Székesfehérvár, not far from the capital, Budapest.

The statue was ostensibly to recognise his achievements as a former government minister and the co-author of a multiple-volume history of Hungary. But Homan was primarily an enthusiastic supporter of the deportation of Hungarian Jews, a member of the fascist Hungarian Arrow Cross and someone who helped to draft anti-Semitic legislation.

In its denigration of the proposed statue, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS) – the bastion of scientific study in Hungary – stood by its original July 1945 resolution that “during his rather extended position as Minister for Education and Religious Affairs, he (Homan)

worked tirelessly to subjugate the intellectual life of the country to serve German interests. In so doing, he became one of the central figures responsible for driving the country into the historical catastrophe that followed”.

On the same day that the Bálint Homan Foundation scrapped its proposal, the European Union announced its intention to incorporate a specific reference to the Holocaust in the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), thereby providing certainty to archivists that they can disclose documents bearing on the Holocaust to scholars and researchers without breaching rules on individuals’ right to privacy.

Given the causality between the Holocaust and the advent of the post-war European community, ensuring free and unfettered access to Holocaust-era archives is of critical importance if true history is to be written and to enhance our collective understanding of one of the defining episodes in world affairs, and one that has profound consequences for European politics, morality and civil society today.

While those who were culpable in perpetrating the Holocaust do not have the right to be forgotten, neither must they be publicly venerated. By contrast, we all have the painful but essential duty to remember.

The thread that ties these events is the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), of which the UK is a founding member.

IHRA brings together political and social leaders to advance Holocaust education, remembrance and research. Member countries commit to espousing the tenets of the Stockholm Declaration, including sharing a solemn responsibility to fight racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia.

At any time, the establishment of a statue to such a discredited figure as Homan would be deeply offensive and a grave insult to Hungarian Holocaust survivors around the world, but to have established the monument in the year in which Hungary chairs the IHRA would have been duplicitous and outrageous.

The last-minute volte-face on the Homan statue has helped to ensure that the leading role played by Hungary, as IHRA chair, in successfully lobbying for a specific clause on the Holocaust in the GDPR will not go unrecognised.

What all three episodes also have in common is the need to create and then perpetuate a culture of remembrance but one that reflects IHRA’s mission to, “share a commitment to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust and to honour those who stood against it.”

As the Nazis tightened their grip and Leo Baeck was offered a way of escape, he said: “I will go when I am the last Jew alive in Germany.” The HAS disbarred Homan, noting he was, “an accommodator of national socialist ideas in Hungary”. The exclusion of the Holocaust from the GDPR will ensure both are rightly remembered.



Michael Newman

Chief executive,
Association of
Jewish Refugees

‘Those who perpetrated the Holocaust do not have the right to be forgotten; nor must they be venerated’



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