

Jolly Old Genocide

Or

Didn't We Have a Lover-ly Time

Michael had decided to celebrate Holocaust Memorial Day with a visit to the Liverpool Museum. Of course 'celebrate' isn't quite the word that usually comes to the tip of the tongue when considering the holocaust. More like commemorate, or mark. Got to be solemn where the holocaust is concerned. No one's likely to say, "Oh, did you have a lovely time?" when you come back from your trip to a holocaust memorial museum. On the contrary, some years previously when he came back from a very powerful visit to *the* holocaust memorial at Auschwitz and Birkenau, not only did no one ask if it was good, but almost no one actually seemed able to hear anything about it at all. When he'd said where he had been in reply to such questions as "what've you been up to?", people often changed the subject completely – literally acted as if he hadn't spoken. It was extremely disconcerting and had shocked him at the time. Later he discovered that it was an enduring echo of what he'd discovered had happened to holocaust survivors who came to Britain after the war. A wall of silence. He'd wondered if it was the same in other countries too – and had hoped that it was less so, that it was the British extreme reluctance to talk about anything that involved anything difficult, let alone actual feelings.

Singing 'didn't we have a have a lover-ly time, the day we went to Auschwitz' in the car on the way there, Michael thought about all of the amazing people – himself included – who wouldn't be here if the holocaust hadn't become something to have a memorial day about, and that, he decided, was definitely something to celebrate.

It wasn't only holocaust survivors who didn't get to tell anyone what happened to them in the war. All those soldiers who came home with their hearts torn out of them and their minds reeling from what they'd seen and done. Not a word to anyone! No good crying over spilt milk. Chin up and get on with rebuilding the country. Act normal for the strangers who are your wife and children. Of course, you are one of the lucky ones – you survived! Mustn't grumble. That was in the days before post traumatic shock syndrome had been discovered. Fancy that - the wonderfully advanced western medicine figured out that war is traumatic and leaves scars on the heart and mind. Another breakthrough for modern science. Michael remembered his dad in the last weeks of his life fighting his feelings as he talked about the ones who hadn't survived. He'd spent a lifetime not crying. It was heartbreaking watching his confusion and misery as that lid just wouldn't stay on, nor properly come off.

At the toll before the tunnel under the Mersey, he wasn't sure what to do. Not being a frequent visitor to Liverpool, he just couldn't remember the drill. He stopped in the middle of the approach road, inviting a few honks. It wasn't yet 7.30 in the morning and still dark. He found his money – no change, only a two pound coin for the one-seventy fee. He needed the manned booth. Handing over his money, he received a handful of change and vaguely thought to

himself, he's given me that thirty pence in tuppences. Then he drove on right up to the barrier, waiting for it to open. It didn't open – he saw barriers open right and left to let the cars out, and thought that this busy time of day they were streaming the cars. Whistling the tune he couldn't get out of his head, he congratulated himself on his patience as he waited for the barrier to rise.

He became aware of shouts behind him, and looked round. "Put one pound seventy in the basket, mate!" They were shouting at him! Ah! It wasn't thirty pence in small change the guy in the toll attendant had given him – it was change for the two quid. Oops. Another old fool doesn't know what he's doing. He fumbled a bit as he found the money and reversed to drop it in. The barrier at once rose and he was off, waving apology to the considerable queue behind him. He laughed and laughed all the way through the tunnel, really laughed his head off. Didn't stop until he found a good parking space, and even then he was chuckling until he completed a couple of errands in the bank and post office and was ready to head to the docks.

There was a family of three outside the Museum waiting in the January wind for the ten o'clock opening. Obviously foreigners. Michael smiled at them. The adults looked startled, uncomprehending. "Oh God, please don't tell me I'm the first person in England to have smiled at them?" he thought to himself. "Now that would be a shame." But in the days of UKIP and smart phones he thought this rather depressing possibility wasn't too far-fetched.

The little boy, all honey brown eyes and shiny curls, grinned back at him and immediately started to play. The man's eyes darted this way and that, looking for the person Michael was really smiling at. The woman stared at him with blank eyes. No one seemed to be behind them. Michael was determined to persevere, particularly on this day, as he remembered his own ancestors, not so distant refugees to these green and grey shores, his grandfather who had walked all the way from Russia alone as a fifteen year old boy, only the hope of a distant cousin in London to keep him going, the only ones in their family to arrive in Britain in the early nineteen hundreds escaping the Czar. All the rest had moved to Vilnius and every single one had died along with two hundred and sixteen thousand other Lithuanian Jews.

So it was with a nod to the memory of his grandparents, strangers in a strange land, that he asked, warmly, "where are you from?" And then, "Your country?"

"Greece" said the woman. Michael smiled even more broadly, "Good! Good!" remembering that Greece had just voted in a proper Marxist government – about time! At least one country in Europe where the people had figured out that sharing wasn't just for nursery school or Christmas but could be applied with good effect to the whole of life. "Hospital!" said blank-eyes. She looked at Michael as if he had something for her. He smiled ruefully, and tried to wrap her in a glow of sympathy and well-wishing before the doors opened and the lovely little boy looked round with sheer delight and ran into the warm followed by the rest of us.

When does it happen, and how do we all allow it, this deadening, this squashing of the bright zestful beauty of childhood? Michael wondered how long this boy would manage to keep the light in his eye. The dad was a bit more alive – still had a bit of a twinkle, so perhaps there was

hope. Michael looked into his own eyes in the bathroom mirror as he washed his hands after taking a pee. "Anyone in there?" he inquired. Blue gray eyes looked back beneath a slight frown. "Not bad for an old man", he decided, ignoring the wrinkles and looking for the gleam. "I've seen those eyes looking worse. Try not to be numb, that's the trick."

The man at the desk looked blank when Michael asked him where the Moving Portraits film was being shown. "For Holocaust Memorial Day" Michael elaborated. "It's today you know."

"Well I know it's today, but there's nothing on here, it's all happening down the quays at the Maritime."

Michael pointed at the sign on the desk – 'Moving Portraits. A short film to mark Holocaust Memorial Day. The film will be shown on a loop all day.'

"Well no one tells me anything," grumbled the man. "Hold on, let me try and find out."

Ironically, no one seemed to have remembered to put the film on. After a ten minute game of pass-the-buck, it was finally admitted that someone would sort it out sometime soon. Michael felt annoyed. Having started to think about his ancestors, and Talia's ancestors, he'd opened a door in his mind to a dark place, allowed a tightness to begin in his chest. But being (almost) thoroughly Englishified, he tried not to let it show. "I'll pop down to the museum of slavery then, and hopefully it'll be fixed on my way back."

Out on the docks under the wintery gray sky it was lovely, really lovely. He'd not been to Liverpool for years and was delighted with the wide horizon, the colourful boats, the mix of history and modernity, the smell of mud and salt, the rush of the powerful Mersey which he fancied he could hear under the traffic and the wind. "Slavery and the holocaust!" He mused. "What a jolly day."

There was a special exhibition on about the Congo. Atrocious acts under the then King Leopold II of Belgium's decision to 'civilize' the natives – although of course he was really interested in the economic exploitation of resource-rich Congo. It was rubber in those days. Now it's that mineral they use in mobile phones, coltan or something. And gold.

The exhibition was called 'Brutal Exposure: The Congo. And it was brutal. Awful – beyond awful. In addition to the usual atrocities of slavery, which it wasn't even supposed to be because it had been abolished decades before, the Congolese natives were supposed to be paid for the rubber they harvested, there was worse. They cut people's hands and feet off if they didn't work, or didn't work enough, or possibly just on a whim. There were overseers who actually got paid according to how many hands and feet they collected. Men, women and children. There are actual photographs, taken by a white missionary Alice Seely Harris who was horrified and campaigned to stop it. It didn't come to an end until 1909 – around the time Michael's father Harry was setting up his tailoring business in Red Lion Square, London. And of course the legacy of that dreadful oppression is still getting played out today.

Michael sat in a small, dark room listening to a lecture about this whilst the Alice woman's slides clicked by on a TV screen in front of him. Grueling. It made him sort of look forward to the holocaust day stuff as a bit of light relief. He could laugh and joke a bit about the holocaust – not of course that he thought it was in any way funny, but as a way of trying to relieve the enormity of it; as a way of trying to feel something, trying to stay human in the face of it. But it felt wrong to make light of this – another peoples' outrage, someone else's terror.

After the exhibition about the not so distant Congo past, he watched another short film about modern Democratic Republic of Congo women and their hopes and dreams for the future. Their men all tied up in the awfulness of civil war. The brutalized playing out yet more brutality. The women can't go to work in their fields without fear of being raped by 'people in uniform'. The women were strong and without exception spoke first of their hopes for their children, and for a better future for their country. These women made him weep.

Aware of the time ticking away on his parking meter he headed off, but as he walked past a small alcove room with a seat in front of a glass fronted shelving unit the sign caught his eye – *Shrine to the Ancestors*. He sat in front of the objects – placed there by a traditional African medicine man or priest – things the ancestors would like, he read, as are found at ancestor shrines all over Africa; he saw water, food stuffs and strong liquor, some small traditional items and some more modern stuff - what looked like jazz memorabilia. He sat head bowed, and offered an apology – "I'm sorry for what my people did to your people. I'm sorry." Is there any light that can burn away that evil? How much healing there is to be done! Was it even possible?

Close by he saw a screen on which appeared wonderful African heritage people from all times, many great modern people of African heritage there dancing, singing, laughing, intelligent, proud, strong. There *is* light. There must be.

Praying in the ancestor shrine, he said Kaddish – the Jewish prayer for the dead. He'd learned it properly for the first time before his visit to Auschwitz museum. (There it was again – 'didn't we have a lover-ley time, the day we went to...'). He'd said it in the torture cells – if he had to pick the worst place, for him, in that hotel of horrors, it was the torture cells. His skin had crawled after trailing through them, and he would have loved to have had an immediate cold shower and complete change of clothes. He felt indelibly changed after traipsing round them, watching the shocked faces of troops of young people on a school tour coming back the other way. The saving grace of that prison block was the rows of photographs of Polish men - socialists, communists, free-thinkers – the first targets of Hitler's ruthless campaign to completely subdue Poland. Proud and strong, those wonderful brave men stared out at their Nazi tormentors with heads held high – free men in their hearts and mind. Michael had felt a deep pride in these long dead strangers. Fellow humans who kept their humanity to the end in this haunted place.

He'd said Kaddish in the gas oven in Auschwitz. And he'd said it where the giant gas chambers and crematoriums had stood in Birkenau extermination camp. It had been a beautiful day in early May. The sun shone, wild flowers bloomed, and the water in pits where the ashes of a

million dead were shoveled sparkled in the golden light. Little frogs with incredible bright green eyes played in these ponds, and as they left, at the end of the day, Michael saw a family of deer run right through the now-empty camp, pausing to sniff the warm evening air. Life after death.

On the way back he got sidetracked looking at the old boats moored up in the dock outside the Tate Liverpool. David would have loved to come here for an outing. Too late now. Not for the first or last time, he missed his dad. It hadn't always been easy to appreciate the old bugger when he was alive, but now he was gone Michael often found himself thinking of him with love seasoned with a little regret. He had been such a gentleman in the last year of his life, so unfailingly kind with mum as she wandered further and further into the infuriating territory of dementia. So brave and courteous as he faced his own deterioration and death. Michael's respect for him had deepened and something had eased between them as a result.

Checking his watch, he headed back to the Liverpool Museum. Same bloke on the desk, same blank look when he asked about the Moving Portraits, you know, the film about genocide survivors. It had only been about an hour since their last, quite extensive, conversation.

Finally someone appeared who sounded as though she was prepared to take some responsibility – or at least to apologize. “We’ve had some technical problems” she fudged. “Look, they’re trying to fix it now.” There was a man fiddling with a laptop plugged into the giant screen in the lobby. This made Michael nervous. He wanted some privacy. He had worked hard since his thirties to reclaim what everyone in the world is born with – the ability to cry, to allow feelings to move him. But he was a bloke after all, and they don’t even like women crying in public, in England. When he was growing up, he thought it was like this everywhere. His parents’ anxiety about ‘doing the right thing’ and never, ever, ‘standing out’ had definitely put a dampener on things like letting yourself be who you were. But he’d later discovered that there were places in the world where if you cried in public and were alone, strangers would stop to comfort you. How much less lonely it would be.

“The *technical problem* is that no one remembered Holocaust Memorial Day!” Michael quipped. He couldn’t help himself. The heaviness in his heart twisted him and made him feel mean. At least this woman looked him right in the eye, and agreed. “I know,” she said. “I’m sorry. We’re doing our best to sort it out right now.” Michael grumbled his reply “I haven’t got long, I hope it’s fixed soon or I won’t be able to see it. And I’ve come a long way!”

He managed to reign in the complaining and went for a drink in the museum café. He didn’t normally drink coffee, it gave him the jitters. But his father had loved it and he decided on a cappuccino in his honour. It wasn’t easy to give up complaining – he’d been working on it for a long time. But he came from a family of complainers. You know the type – maybe you recognize something of it in your own family; kind but fearful, afraid to try new things, living workable but small lives, a little too negative about just about everyone and everything. Every silver lining has a cloud. That type of thing.

It wasn't their fault, of course. Like everyone, they were products of their time and circumstance. The war generations. Unless we pay attention, learn about it and be prepared to dig a little, those of us who have grown up and lived our lives entirely in a country far from war really can't know how deeply it wounds. Everyone, not just the physically injured. Not even just those directly involved. All of us. Dad had never talked about the war, right up until his ninetieth year. He went all his life with a locked door behind which lay the memories of years of his youth. Not only locked. Locked, barred, lights out and piles of dusty boxes, oilskins, old sailing magazines, books and more books piled up so high and so thick in front of the door that you couldn't see there was a door anyway. A year or so before he died, he started to say what had happened to him, what he had seen. Terrible things. How lonely, Michael had felt, to have held all that inside, carrying it alone for seventy years. He'd begun to better understand the gulf between them, why his father couldn't really look you in the eye for very long. He'd start to shift around and hum a little song when things looked in danger of becoming a bit personal, a bit close. You couldn't really have him, somehow.

And if you do start to dig, you find shadowy offspring of these scars in your own heart. In the next generation, and the next, the wounds endure. They have been handed down just as reliably as your dad's love of football, your Auntie Betty's nose, or your Grandmother's silver Shabbos candlesticks. The stories lie dormant, imprisoned, waiting to be told, to be set free.

He slurped the cappuccino froth from the top of his cup with a spoon, just like his father used to do. He had to use a big spoon – this place had those wooden sticks to stir your drink with instead of teaspoons. "What is that about?" He wondered idly. The tightness was still there. 'Hello Mikey' he said softly to himself. He'd learned that trick from Talia's friend Jenny, their 'feelings guru', they called her. How to stay with yourself, how to let yourself feel when everything in you was pulling you to shut down. It worked. A small wetness came to his eyes, and he let it be there instead of finding fault after fault with this lovely museum. Hands slightly shaking, maybe from the coffee, he headed back to the lobby, making a mental note to have decaf next time.

'Today is the 70th Anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz/Birkenau' Michael read on the huge screen made of 16 square screens put together like a 2-D Rubik's cube.

'And the 20th year since the Bosnian Genocide.' He sat in his comfortable chair in the super-modern lobby of the Liverpool museum, all light and space, and tried his best not to be numb. It's not easy anyway, to think about genocide without the gears in your mind seizing up as they try to make sense of something incomprehensible – try it for yourself. And it was a particular challenge, at least for Michael, in a public place.

'These portraits show survivors of genocide who now live in the UK.' Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Dafur (still going on, that one). And last but not least, especially not for him, the big one – numbers-wise, of course. If it's your people who got targeted for extermination it's just as

terrible even if it isn't six million of them. Here they come. The Jews. Michael's own people – his, and Talia's. *'Keep the memory alive.'*

Every single one of Talia's mother's people had died in the camps. Every one. And a wall of silence lived in their house around this terrible, unfaceable fact. She would leave the room whenever the holocaust was mentioned – which was quite often in Israel, where Talia had grown up. "It was forced down our throats as children" Talia explained. "We just got fed up of it. Oh God, not the bloody holocaust again!"

'It's important to commemorate people who have gone' read the screen, the words of the young Rwandan man who came to Britain at the age of seven when all his family were killed. He watched the looped film through twice and a bit, used the handkerchief he had thoughtfully put into his pocket in the morning just in case, and headed back to his car before the meter ran out. He looked up at the famous liver birds - the large statues of some kind of sea bird, is it a cormorant, on the tops of the majestic Liver building at Pier Head. Someone had once told him that the story goes if they leave Liverpool the city is finished. He noticed for the first time that they were chained down so they wouldn't be going anywhere in a hurry. No one's taking any chances. Like the ravens in the tower of London with their clipped wings.

The day definitely seemed to have a theme of bondage. Not the fifty shades type – though perhaps there is something in that of the long shadow of slavery and oppression. Passing behind the town hall he was cutting through the arches when he noticed another men-in-chains theme: *'England expects every man to do his duty.'* "My God, what is that!" He asked around and eventually found someone who wasn't in a rush. She looked it up on their phone – "It's a monument to Lord Nelson, finished in 1813 eight years after Nelson's death." A lovely young girl, Spanish sounding, south American maybe.

"That's six years after slavery was abolished in Britain – although it wasn't stopped in British colonies until 1834 and even then people weren't properly freed until 1838." Michael exploded "What on earth was it, this obsession with chaining people up!" Although the men on this statue weren't Africans. They looked like Greek Gods.

"They represent the losing side in the victories of the Admiral Nelson," she continued. She didn't mind his outburst. Maybe a foreign student, she wore a lovely coat in bold colours, reds and blacks and blues. As she looked intently at her phone, he remembered what Talia's friend Sylvie had said about some kind of Native American prophecy that they had when the Europeans were overrunning their country and destroying their people and their way of life. Come to that, they'd been at the sharp end of genocide themselves, the first inhabitants of America. Along with the Australian aboriginals, and weren't the Tasmanians completely wiped out, every man, woman and child? These Native American prophecies were to do with the birth of a new age – an age of peace. Apparently there had been all these signs forecast hundreds of years ago that would show it was coming, this huge change for the good – and many of them had happened in the last few decades. One of the signs that would show the new world was

very close was that people would spend a lot of time *looking into little baskets of coloured lights*.

Michael had liked this story – no matter how gloomy it all looked, change was on the way, and not only that, but change that people were not entirely in charge of. The world had its own wisdom and its own power beyond all the might of our technology and science and super-sized egos. “Oh I love that,” the girl exclaimed as he told her. She looked right at him with her vivid black eyes blazing “Yes! Change comes. If you look in your heart there is always a light, no matter how dark is the night.”

Driving out of Liverpool, at the tunnel toll, Michael remembered his faux-pas of the morning and it made him laugh again. He laughed and laughed. Laughed his head off. Laughed until he cried, his face wet with tears that flowed unstoppable all the way home.

Pip Waller

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