

# AUSTRALIA

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Welcome to the third episode of histoPOD. HistoPOD is one part of histoCONLINE, which is the first digital edition of the event series histoCON organised by the German Federal Agency for Civic Education. HistoCONLINE aims to commemorate the end of World War Two from multiple and international perspectives. My name is Annika Brockschmidt. Today we're going to take a look at how the Holocaust is remembered in Australia. Our expert today will be able to tell us more about the generation of survivors in Australia that laid the groundwork for the remembrance of the Holocaust today. She will also explain to us why learning about the Holocaust is so important for Australians today. Also, when it comes to coping with the country's own violent past.

My name is Avril Alba. I'm senior lecturer in Holocaust studies in Jewish civilization at the University of Sydney and Chair of the Department of Hebrew Biblical and Jewish Studies there. But for many years, I also worked and continue to consult to the Sydney Jewish Museum. So, my work is a mixture, I would say of my scholarly interests are in Holocaust memory, commemoration, modern Jewish history, and Holocaust studies more broadly, all of those areas. But I also have worked as a practitioner as a museum educator and a museum curator.

So, what does Holocaust Remembrance look like in today's Australia?

There's not a national sense of Holocaust remembrance in the way that you would have in, say Europe or even the United States. The government does recognize January 27th obviously as UN Holocaust Remembrance Day and there are ceremonies. But because we're in the southern hemisphere and our year works slightly differently, we are actually in summer holidays then. Which makes it difficult in terms of things like school remembrance or even National Remembrance in many ways. So, Australia just recently made a move towards more National Remembrance of the Holocaust as last year, we became full members of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. And I serve as an expert delegate to that organization.

And so, as for members, we are committed and the Australian Government is committed to Holocaust education and commemoration. But the shape of that is still evolving and is complicated by our national calendar. So, what we've committed to is a Holocaust Memorial week. And in that week, we have a lot of different educational and commemorative initiatives planned. But that will actually happen in May, rather than in January and will be centered around events and dates that occur both in the Jewish calendar, but also, things like the liberation and end of the war in Europe that happens during those dates.

So, there's no one single narrative. And the other major difference in Australia is that up until the sort of more recent developments the majority of Holocaust commemoration was really generated by the Jewish community and in particular the survivor community. Which was quite unusual in the sense that Australia took the largest amount of Holocaust survivors per capita. So, not in sheer amount, but per capita after Israel, despite the fact that there were quotas on Jewish migration that kept going into the post war period.

After 1945, for example, the quota of Jews that were allowed to migrate to Australia was reduced from 5000 to 3000.

And this had a huge impact on the Jewish community in particular. Because there were Jews in Australia from white settlement, from the first instances of white settlement because they came as convicts. But it was always a very small community. And the coming of the survivors meant that it doubled, more than doubled they estimate. Although it's hard to get exact numbers because sometimes people didn't declare they were Jewish for fear of discrimination, et cetera. But there is clearly a huge influx. And this changes the character of the Jewish community, which had largely been an Anglo Jewish community prior to this with some migration from Eastern Europe, but really, very, very minimal. And the survivors, they change the face of the community in so many ways. Because they bring the traditions of European Jewry with them. But at first, really the commemoration of the Holocaust, I think it's fair to say was largely a private and sort of intra-communal one. And there were a lot of reasons for this. And they're common, I think, to a lot of survivor communities in the post war period.

It's not that they didn't speak about their experiences. But largely, they spoke about them amongst themselves. And there was good reason for that. They came to a country that although they were always grateful to come to, in the sense of Australia being a country with democratic traditions and an opportunity to sort of start again, it was not a country that was free of racism. And it was not a country that was free of explicit discrimination in terms of quotas of Jews coming to Australia. I wouldn't say an anti-semitism that that is in any way comparable to what happened in Europe, of course, but suddenly there were and there still exist instances of antisemitism in Australia. When the survivors first came here, they were often referred to as Refos, refugees, so Refos. And they also had the experience of coming to Australia and knowing that other migrants to Australia in the post war period had come from collaborator countries. Now, of course, they weren't the majority, but they did exist. And so, there was also a sort of fear of being too vocal or too public about their experiences.

But there were also political voices amongst the survivors.

We do have examples of where members of the survivor community who were more political were active in sort of anti-fascist causes and part of political life. And that was actually part of their Holocaust survivor identity. Although they may not have labeled it as such in the post war period.

But towards the 1970s Australia slowly moves away from racist migration policies.

And then you see, I think, a very interesting intergenerational change both externally and internally. What I mean by externally is that Australia moves to an official policy of what we call multiculturalism in the 1970s. So, this has a huge impact on the makeup of the country. Our immigration policies become explicitly multicultural, they were still classified as the infamous white Australia policy prior to that. Where Australia privilege migration from countries that could be considered white in prior to that and so moved to an explicitly multicultural program. And this enabled it-, Australia's ethnic communities, not only its Jewish community, but really its broad range of ethnic communities to have more pride in their home cultures.

This also changes the way that the Holocaust is remembered.

At that point, which of course, is the point where Holocaust survivors have already started to reestablish, many of them have remarried, they have children, they've started businesses, they've moved on in their lives to feel more comfortable talking about those experiences. And so, you do start to see a shift of Holocaust consciousness and Holocaust memory. Probably the most explicit example of this is the formation of official Holocaust survivor organizations.

So, the survivors start to organize amongst themselves. And from these organizations, particularly in Melbourne and Sydney, the formation of educational initiatives, exhibitions, and eventually the founding of the two major Holocaust memorial museums and education institutions in Australia, those being the Jewish Holocaust Center in Melbourne

and the Sydney Jewish Museum in Sydney. They were both major turning points. Because in essence, I guess you could say they were a statement that Holocaust survivors felt their experience was important beyond their own communities and important really for the country as a whole.

Let's take a step back and find out what the Jewish community looked like before World War Two and in the aftermath.

Australian Jews have never constituted more than point 0.5% of the population. They've also always been a very small minority. Having said that, they've been a very, I'd say involved minority. They've always been part of public life in Australia. And Australia is one of the first nations to have Jews in very prominent position. So, for example, you may have heard of Sir John Monash, who led the Australian forces in the latter parts of World War One and was responsible for a lot big, the sort of great victories in the latter part of the war and he was Jewish. He was born in Victoria and he's a celebrated figure in Australian life. There's even a university named after him. And this was in the early part of the 20th century.

We've had two Australian Jewish governor generals. Having said that, Australia was not a country that's free of antisemitic incidents in its history and of discriminatory policies. By in large, those policies have not been targeted at Jews specifically with the exception of the policies that I spoke about, which were quotas. And this is something that's hard for us to think about, I guess in terms of the memory culture that we now have today. But in that immediate post war period, yes quotas on Jews, so no more than a certain percentage of each ship that of refugees that came to Australia as part of the post war migration policies could be Jewish. And Jews were largely excluded from things like the IRO scheme.

The IRO scheme was a mass migration program by the international refugee organization. The IRO was ratified in 1946 by the United Nations General Assembly to deal with the problem of Displaced Persons, short DPs, in Europe.

The existing Jewish community had to assure that they would take responsibility, financial responsibility, et cetera, et cetera for resettling Jewish migrants.

But there is also antisemitism in Australia's post war history.

There's also a popular sort of antisemitism, you know, there's evidence of cartoons that were generating anti-refugee and anti-Jewish refugee in particular sentiment in Australia in the post war period. And so we don't have a completely clean history in that sense.

Unfortunately, antisemitism was not only a part of the Australian past, but also of its present.

Sadly, we also, similar to most of the rest of the world at the moment, we do witness an upswell at the moment of antisemitic activity in Australia. We have luckily not had major incidents. But there certainly is more reporting of antisemitic incidents in the present. So, it is part of Australian Jewish life. But having said that, the community has also flourished here and is very active in a whole range of public issues including what's called anti racial vilification legislation. So, working to make the public defaming of groups on account of their religious or racial or ethnic identity illegal.

How were Holocaust survivors that came to Australia being received by the Australian Jews themselves?

There again, there's a sort of internal story and an external story. Within the Jewish community, there was friction. Even though the Jewish community worked hard, and certainly particularly prominent members of it, to try and bring survivors to Australia, there were cultural tensions and cultural frictions. And those Jews who were very committed to a sort of Anglo Jewish way of life and saw themselves primarily as subjects of the Queen first, Australia second, were in some ways worried that this new sort of European group with their strange accents and their more strongly identified Jewish identities. I mean Melbourne had the largest population of Polish Jews per capita come to re-settle there, again, outside Israel in the world. And they really sort of reframe Jewish life. According to Polish Jewish life that we know was so vibrant and diverse, and strongly

jewishly identified prior to the second world war. So, if they were socialist, they were Jewish socialists, you know. And they had a strong Yiddish culture. And that was threatening to some Jews who believed that they should basically assimilate into the Australian way of life.

What was the perception of Holocaust survivors by the Australian public?

There was an increasing understanding over time of what the survivors had suffered. But it was not immediate and there were still existing prejudices. So, one of the interesting moments for Australian Holocaust memory is the Australian war crimes trials that took place in South Australia in Adelaide in the early 1990s.

In the 1980s, Australia undertook steps to examine allegations of crimes committed during the war made against Australian citizens. The unit who was responsible for the collection of evidence was called the Special Investigations Unit, SIU.

They were unsuccessful in the sense that they did not result in any convictions. But they were sort of extraordinary trials in what Australia attempted to do. Which was that in the decade preceding, in the 1980s, there was basically on the basis of some amazing investigative reporting by a man named Mark Aarons, it was found that the Australian government did indeed allow in the post war refugee population those that they knew had been collaborators in countries that had either been invaded by Nazi Germany or explicitly collaborated and had taken part in massacres of Jews predominantly in the shooting campaigns in the east.

So, over the course of the decade of the 1980s, hundreds of investigations were undertaken by a group called the Special Investigations Unit. And three men were put on trial in South Australia. As I said, because of the way that law works in the Australian system, I'm not a legal scholar, so I won't try and describe the details, but because of it there were no convictions, because the eyewitness testimony did not bear out in the courtroom. However, they also undertook forensic archeological digs on the sites of the actual massacres in Ukraine to establish that actually these crimes took place and that they were Nazi crimes and not Soviet crimes and to link those that were on trial in the Adelaide courts in South Australia to those crimes. That work then was utilized as a model for then later war crimes trials with in terms of what happened in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, et cetera, et cetera.

And yet, the war crimes trials are not really present in the memory of the Australian public today.

I'm not sure their memory has permeated Australian popular memory. When I speak to my students today, and I tell them, we had war crimes trials in Australia, the majority of them weren't even alive when these trials happened, but they're kind of amazed when I tell them, because there's not a living memory of it in Australian public life. But at the same time, they were remarkable in what they achieved. In terms of their public reception, they were also incredibly interesting, because there were definitely those both in their public commentators and in private inter-communal discussions, who felt they were going to stir up antagonism.

They were not unequivocally supported by the survivor community, who also feared that this was going to cause a resurgence of antisemitism. They ultimately were supported and obviously, they did happen. I think it's something now that the Jewish community and the broader community I think, are in many ways glad that they happened, because they enabled a sort of facing of a particular aspect of Australia's past that is not particularly comfortable, not particularly edifying, but is something that we needed to face.

Facing the past, at least for young generations starts in schools. So, let's take a look at how the Holocaust is being taught in Australia today.

It depends on which state. So, Australia has a federal and state hybrid system. And there is a national curriculum and it is in it, but the states have a lot of flexibility in terms of how their curriculum relates to the national curriculum. So, in New South Wales, it is mandated, it is part of the history course. How much time a teacher spends on it is largely really something that one cannot police, so to speak. And so the teachers who

are committed to it do an amazing job. I think a lot of them still feel very unable to approach the topic that it's too much, they don't know enough, it's very difficult material, they may do less.

But in New South Wales, the Sydney Jewish Museum does do a lot of work with teachers to try and help them teach the subject well and to facilitate that through visits to the museums and talks with survivors, et cetera. In Victoria, which is the second largest state by population and actually the largest Jewish community is in Victoria it wasn't part of the curriculum, but is actually becoming so as we speak.

Avril was kind enough to share some of her teaching experience of these topics on a university level with us. Her students, she tells us, almost immediately make the connection between the Holocaust and their own country's violent past.

I have to say I'm teaching a course at the moment with Masters level students and they are Master's level students in a museums and heritage program. So, it makes it easier, they've already got a sort of interest in the area. But it's a course particularly on Holocaust and genocide sites. And they immediately make the connection, immediately. They are sort of fascinated by it. They often wonder why it has taken Australia so long to come to the point where we are making those connections and where we are starting to reckon with our own past in a more serious way with regards to these kinds of issues. And so, for them, it's almost a natural kind of progression. I would say though, this is quite a recent thing.

For those of you who are not Australian history buffs, here's a short summary of Australia's colonialist history.

The broad scope is that when the British come to Australia, they declare it terra nullius, which means there's no one here. Which of course is blatantly untrue. But what it allows them to do is to settle on the land. And that process of settlement also begins the process of indigenous dispossession in Australia. And this goes through many, many different kinds of stages, some quite murderous, there's a term in Australia, the frontier wars and they are beginning to be taught more and more in Australian school curriculum and to Australians, by and large.

But I can tell you, when I was growing up, and it's not that long ago, it's in the 70s and 80s, the term frontier wars, was just not even understood. If someone had said that to me as a high school student, I wouldn't understand what they were talking about. I knew there was discrimination against Aboriginal Australians, but I didn't really fully understand the history and it wasn't taught to me in school, I only started learning about it myself when I went to university and was interested in it and wanted to. It is now thankfully taught in Australian schools, but again, there's a long way to go. So, there's first that history of dispossession and colonization.

One of the darkest chapters of Australia's history in recent times, however, is that of the so-called child removal. Which was practiced between the 1910s and the 1970s.

That spanned really, across seven, about seven decades, I think. Where the idea was that you remove Aboriginal children. And I mean, it's a terrible phrase, but it was used in order to, quote unquote, "breed out the black." The idea was that you would assimilate black populations completely into the white population. What's now called the stolen generation was for a long time, in a sense, justified as it was a policy of benevolence, right? It was trying to do a good thing. Now, there are those that will still argue that is the case, but if you listen to the testimonies of those who were taken from their families, it is very hard to justify such a position. Some people lost complete contact with their culture of origin, their language of origin, their immediate families, and their clan groups. Aboriginal Australians come from an enormous variety of different clan groups, different what they call country, areas of Australia, different linguistic groups. And that culture was basically decimated both through frontier wars and then through the program of child removal.

This brutal history of child removal was something that for a long time was not really talked about.

It's only in the last few decades, I would say 30–40 years, that white Australia has come to begin to reckon with our history. And there have been some significant both political gestures and political changes towards reconciliation, but I think anyone who takes reconciliation seriously in Australia knows that we are a long way from what's called closing the gap. And really coming to terms with what happened in this country.

But why has it taken Australia so long to start to come to terms with this part of Australian history?

I think there are many reasons why it's taken Australia a long time to do this. It's hard to say how nations do this, right? Because obviously as individuals this may not be true for so many people, but as a nation, somehow these commemorative cultures happen. And for Australians, our self-identity is very bound up in view of ourselves as inherently good, right? Inherently peace loving, inherently democratic and that we believe there's a particular Australian vision of what it means to relate to your fellow person that comes under a rubric of what we call mate ship, right? And what is mate ship? It's the idea of a fair go, it's the idea that everyone is equal. And don't get uppity with me because you might have English Heritage and I might have Irish heritage, et cetera, et cetera. We're all equal down at the pub kind of idea.

But once you start to peel away at that it doesn't have much credence really in reality. But I think hanging on to those kinds of self-images, it lets us off the hook and one of our past Prime Ministers talked about it, it's become a sort of infamous phrase, "having a relaxed and comfortable view of the past". To my view, that's not helpful to anyone. I'm not saying that we should be running around beating ourselves over the back the whole time. But you can't escape your past and I think if you try and escape your past, you do damage to your present.

There were other aspects of Australian public life that were influenced by racism.

We had racist laws for a really long time in this country. And we've had to change them and we continue to change them. I bet a lot of Australians are not aware that up until, actually honestly, I can't remember the exact date, but there were laws that if an Aboriginal person wanted to go into a cinema, they had to wait until the lights were put down. And then they were allowed in.

I asked Avril, whether there was something without equivocating the truth that Australians could learn from the Holocaust Remembrance when they're coming to terms with their own history? And if there were any dangers on the way?

I think that we do have a tendency to domesticate it in Australia. And I think we also can fight against that and there are great examples of where that is not the case, but it can happen. Because it is as we know, much easier to say, well, they did that over there, but we're not culpable of the similar kinds of actions. On the other hand, there have been instances in Australia where we have successfully negotiated that or brought Holocaust memory to bear on other instances of mass violence or human rights violations. But that said, would I say there's a sort of national understanding of holding these two things together? I don't think so. We also had our own history wars in Australia. There were historians, who were really challenging Australians to look hard at their colonial past and a lot of people really fought back against that and they fought back against thinking about that past is genocidal or even murderous to a certain extent.

There was a lot of pushback. And that pushback was the hardest whenever historian tried to evoke concepts of genocide or Holocaust in terms of what happened in Australia. There is an increasing public awareness. There's something called Sorry Day. There's reconciliation, weekend reconciliation events. And there was a very significant public apology made by our Prime Minister at the time in 2008, Kevin Rudd, particularly to the stolen generations. There was also an earlier speech by another Prime Minister Paul Keating, the famous Redfern speech was made in Aboriginal urban

heartland a place called Redfern. It was the first time that a Prime Minister of Australia acknowledged what Australia had enacted upon its black populations.

Holocaust Remembrance all across the world faces the loss of the last survivors as time passes on. How will Australia cope with that? And what will it mean for Holocaust Remembrance there?

Do we see it only as loss? I guess that's the question. Do we see it only as loss? And I guess, when I think about it, I can take some comfort from another Australian experience of this kind of loss. And that is the loss of the veterans of World War I. They were known in Australia as diggers, because they dug into the trenches. And the diggers were really an extraordinary generation in Australian history. And they were a huge part of bringing knowledge of what they suffered in the war to the Australian public. Their legacy has truly outlived them. And what is interesting is that when I was a youngster growing up in Australia, so let's say generously 40 years ago now, Anzac Day, the day where we commemorate those who served in Australia's wars, but in particular those in the First World War, was not really a big deal. It was always obviously a big deal to veterans and their families and it was a national day.

But the kind of public participation that we see now in Anzac Day commemorations where Australians go to Turkey, to the site of the Gallipoli massacres and where they adorn services across the country, where the knowledge of World War I is, the books are still multiplying the stories, the films are still multiplying. And the exhibitions, when I look at the role that the Australian War Memorial plays in public life, I think it does give you a bit of encouragement that the generation itself has seeded something. They have put something in place that will exist beyond them.

There's one thing that I hope that we will do differently from the Anzac legend. Which is that I think Anzac has become a bit of a domesticated memory, we don't like to think of the trauma those men suffered. We don't like to think of the families that lost not one, not two, but sometimes three of their sons in that war. Literally whole families decimated, the mental health issues, the poverty that was a result of returning from a war with no training and no qualifications, and you're all of 20 years old, because you told them you were 18, when you were actually 15 when you went off to that war. So we don't like to think about that aspect of World War I a lot. But we do have great historians, and we do have great institutions like the war memorial that keep those stories alive as well. And I think as long as we too can be truthful about what our Holocaust survivors experienced and give them, honor them for the lives that they then made, but also recognize the losses that they endured and then any enduring impact of those losses, then we will actually honor that generation even when they pass on.

Thank you for listening. You can find more information about the histo-podcast, as well as various other offers on [www.histocon.de](http://www.histocon.de). To stay updated please feel free to check the website on a regular basis as the histoCON-19 plans to successively expand the offers throughout the year. If you have any further questions, please reach out to the team via [histocon2020@bbp.de](mailto:histocon2020@bbp.de). The music we used is sincerely by Kevin MacLeod. Take care and stay healthy. Until next time.