

## Graduation 2009

### Oration for Honorary Graduand Dora Love

Orator: Professor Rainer Schulze

#### **Chancellor, the Senate has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon Dora Love**

In 1945, when she was nursed back to life, Dora Love wrote some poems reflecting on what happened to her and her family during the Holocaust. In one of them she exclaimed:

'Time to forget' they say;  
But how can I  
When things that haunt me  
Never die?  
'It all happened so long ago,  
Forget, my dear, forgive.'  
Never, no, never  
For as long as I live.

This determination not to forget informed much of Dora Love's work as an educator since 1945: her belief that only remembering, no matter how painful, gives future generations a chance not to fall into the same trap again. A timely reminder, if any was needed, of the importance of remembering came only a week ago or so, when in an interview in one of the flagship national newspapers Hitler was approvingly described as a man who was "able to get things done". Holocaust survivors such as Dora Love can best testify, with the authenticity of the survivor, what it was that Hitler, and his régime, were able to get done. As Dora Love put it: "Somebody has to survive to tell the tale – unless you hear it from somebody who was there, how could you believe it."

Dora Love was born on 21 May 1923 in the small town of Plunge in western Lithuania, the third of four children of Hirsch and Jette Rabinowitz. Her father owned a successful porcelain and glass business, and in 1924 the family moved to near-by Memel on the Baltic Sea. After the First World War, Germany had to give up the old German port town of Memel and its hinterland, the so-called Memelland, and the territory was annexed by Lithuania.

Although her parents continued to speak Russian with each other at home, they regarded themselves as part of the German cultural community in Memel. Dora was brought up speaking German and attended the German lyceum for girls. The family was well off, and there was no reason to think that their lives would be turned upside down before too long. The Jews of the Memelland felt safe under Lithuanian rule; in fact, the Jewish community grew significantly after 1933; with refugees from Germany – and, later, Austria and Czechoslovakia – coming to the Memelland in the hope of escaping Nazi persecution. Dora found school easy, especially the learning of languages, and she advanced quickly, graduating from the lyceum in March 1939, two years ahead of her age group. She was planning to go to university, and her ambition was to work in the field of international communications.

However, just four days after her graduation, the German *Wehrmacht* occupied the Memelland, making it part of Hitler's Greater German Empire. Suddenly, this safe heaven was no more. Dora, her sister and one of her brothers were hurriedly brought out of the Memelland into Lithuania by their father's German business manager just a few hours before the arrival of the Germans, and

they were re-united with their parents a few days later in (Šiauliai, or) Schaulen, in northern Lithuania. Dora's father re-established his porcelain business there, but options were limited for Dora, who missed the liberal life of Memel with all its opportunities and freedoms. She was considered too young to attend university in Lithuania, and could only enrol on a teacher's training course.

In June 1940, Lithuania was invaded by Soviet troops and lost its independence. The new rulers began a policy of Sovietization, nationalising all private property, including the porcelain business of Dora's father. A year later, the Germans marched into Lithuania as part of their war against the Soviet Union. One of Dora's brothers fled with the Soviet troops eastwards – he ended up in Stalin's Gulags. The rest of the family decided to stay put. The SS quickly rounded up all Jews and crammed them into a Jewish ghetto set up in Schaulen. Most men were killed; only a few, including Dora's father and remaining brother, escaped this fate. The ghetto inhabitants had to do forced labour; for Dora it meant first digging peat and then anti-tank ditches. In late 1943, the ghetto was cleared, and most of the inhabitants were transported, in cattle trains, to the notorious Stutthof concentration camp near Danzig. It was here that Dora experienced what she calls "the depth of inhumanity" – her brother, her sister and her mother did not survive the inhuman and brutal conditions in the camp.

Dora survived, and in late April 1945, with Soviet troops advancing, she was one of the prisoners who were sent in small boats westwards across the Baltic Sea. Many of the prisoners drowned along the way, many died of thirst or starved to death. Dora was one of the few who reached the shores of Schleswig-Holstein after seven and a half days drifting across the Baltic Sea without food or water. As she lay on the beach, more dead than alive, she was found by British troops of the Surrey Regiment Battery 392, and among this group of soldiers was her future husband, Frank Love.

Dora had to spend some three months in isolation in order to recover from TB. Whilst still in hospital, she begged for something to do, and because of her multi-lingual skills, she was given some translation work for the British military authorities, ending up as a translator for war crimes investigations. As this work involved interviewing German prisoners-of-war, often of officer's rank, Dora needed a military officer's rank as well: the concentration camp prisoner who had been reduced by the Nazis to the number 53799 thus became a captain of the British Army: Captain Love, following her marriage to Frank in January 1946.

She stayed in Germany, working for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, and then the American Joint Distribution Committee, a Jewish relief agency, looking after concentration camp survivors who had nowhere to go. She soon became involved in a project to set up a home for Jewish child survivors in Blankenese, a suburb of Hamburg on the river Elbe. In the three years of its existence, several hundred children passed through this children's home. Dora's special mission was to find children who had survived in hiding, and she takes great pride in the fact that she could help to give them the space to be children after the years of persecution, provide them with an education and eventually assist them in getting to Palestine to start a new life. She is still in touch with the youngsters she was responsible for at Blankenese – now not youngsters any more, of course.

In 1948, after the establishment of the state of Israel, Dora's work at the children's home came to an end, and she moved, with her husband, to London where she worked as a teacher and head mistress. As her TB flared up several times, she was advised to settle in gentler climates than Britain, and this prompted her move to South Africa, as this was a country where her husband could easily work in his profession as an accountant. They settled in Johannesburg.

Dora came to a country which had just begun to entrench apartheid as an official policy – a situation which she would have found strangely and threateningly similar to the early Jewish experience under the Nazis. Dora worked as a teacher at the King David Primary School, and she was also involved in the Special Needs Department of the local university (Wits = University of the Witwatersrand). It was in Johannesburg that Dora began to lecture on her experiences under the Nazis, and it was quickly suggested to her that she'd better be careful so that her words could not be "mis-interpreted". She later also did voluntary work in the townships. Not least because of her personal experiences, she provided a liberal upbringing for her two children who were born in South Africa; her daughter Janet later became active in the resistance movement and joined the ANC. In 1978, Janet had to go underground, and into exile, and later that same year Dora and her husband Frank were advised that it might be better for them if they, too, left South Africa.

They returned to Britain and eventually settled in Colchester, where Dora became Head of English for Foreign Students at the Adult Community College Grey Friars. Normal retirement did not go down well with her, and she continued to work as a supply teacher at some 20 different schools in and around Colchester, and even today, at the age of 86, she is still teaching German to students of the University of the Third Age.

Dora Love's achievement is not one single book, one great invention, or one important painting. Her lasting achievement is her whole life, her struggle to make a comprehensible story out of the incomprehensible atrocities she endured, her strength and determination to tell her story again and again. With her clear moral values, her amazing enthusiasm and energy, and her unpretentiousness and unconditional kindness she manages to engage people of all ages, all backgrounds and all nationalities with her message of tolerance and the importance of human rights. Dora Love's activism is very much 'hands on'; there is no posturing, and she has never sought the limelight. Her activism is fuelled by her optimism that human beings are not doomed to repeat the same mistakes if only they remember and learn from past experiences – and remember without a desire for revenge or retribution.

In a time when five seconds in the Big-Brother house are all too often enough to achieve celebrity status, when spin increasingly prevails over substance in almost all ways of life, when hedonism triumphs over idealism – in such a time Dora Love's life is a true inspiration for all of us. Dora shows us that we can make a difference, and that we do not need high office or celebrity status to do so – all we only need to do is to follow, in our own world, in our families, in our relationships, a clear ethical compass. Dora's belief in humanity was shaken to the core in the hell of Stutthof, but it was also ultimately confirmed and steeled in this very abyss: she managed to retain her dignity and humanity when so many would have turned to despair and hatred.

My own feelings on this occasion are difficult to describe. Here I stand, a descendant of the nations of perpetrators who were responsible for the atrocities that Dora and her family and millions more suffered; and I am giving this oration in a country that sacrificed much, including its global power status, in order to defeat Nazi Germany.

**Chancellor, it is therefore with great humility, and with immense pleasure, that I present to you Dora Love.**