

The Question

by Tom Palmer

One

Naomi and Laila sat in silence, like the rest of their Year 7 tutor group, staring at the front of the classroom. There was a man on the screen. He was old. Very old. His hair was white and his eyes looked tired, but his voice was clear and calm.

‘We were forced from the cattle trucks,’ he said slowly, ‘and made to stand on a long railway platform. Then soldiers came to put us into different queues. My father and I were sent into the same queue. My mother and two younger sisters were put into another and that was the last time I saw them. The place we had arrived at was called Auschwitz.’

Naomi watched the man’s face as he spoke. His eyes never left the camera that was recording his testimony. His name was Yossi Frenkle. He was a Holocaust survivor.

When the short video finished nobody spoke.

Miss Mehmi – Naomi’s history teacher – coughed and rubbed her mouth, glanced at the floor.

‘As we now know,’ she said at last, ‘Mr Frenkle survived the concentration camps and in May 1945 he was liberated by the Russians. Later that summer, he came to live in the UK. He was a refugee. Eighty-one members of his family had been murdered by the Nazis. His mother. His sisters. His father. Everyone.’

Miss Mehmi stared out of the window at the cold wintery school sports fields, the dusting of snow. ‘So... who knows what day it is today?’ she asked.

Kian Scott's hand went up first.

'Yes, Kian?'

'Holocaust Memorial Day, Miss.'

'Correct,' the teacher smiled. 'And we are very, very lucky that Mr Frenkle is coming to speak to us in school today. In person.'

Another silence in the room. Naomi looked at the other Year 7s, who seemed transfixed by the frozen image of Yossi Frenkle on the screen. He really was coming *here*. They were going to be able to see a Holocaust survivor. In person. Talk to him. It was hard to believe.

'Okay, so for the rest of the lesson – before we go and meet Mr Frenkle – we need to spend some time thinking about the questions we would like to ask him.'

Now there was noise. Thirty voices chattering. Naomi overheard the words 'striped pyjamas', 'gas chambers' and 'Hitler' above the racket. But she remained silent. She already knew what *her* question was. She had had it in her head ever since they'd taken the letter home to say that a Holocaust survivor was coming into school.

But – however much she wanted an answer – she wasn't sure she would be able to ask it. How do you ask a Holocaust survivor a question?

Miss Mehmi let the conversations go on, then, glancing at the clock above the whiteboard, she held up her hand. Slowly at first, then more rapidly, children in the classroom raised their hands too. And the room became quiet.

'Great. Thank you,' Miss Mehmi began. 'Now... who has a question they'd like to ask Mr Frenkle?'

Naomi didn't put her hand up.

Yunis Khan did. 'How about "What did it feel like to be in the concentration camp?"' he suggested.

Miss Mehmi nodded. ‘You could ask that...’ she hesitated.

At that moment Naomi identified something in her teacher. Something unexpected. Miss Mehmi was just as nervous about what they should ask Yossi Frenkle as she was. It was funny. Sort of. Teachers were meant to know everything and be in control all the time. But not today.

‘Any more ideas for questions?’ Miss Mehmi asked.

Naomi still didn’t put her hand up.

But Gavin Barnes did.

‘I’ve got a question I’m going to ask him,’ he announced.

Miss Mehmi frowned. The whole class braced themselves. Gavin Barnes could be difficult. Difficult. That was the word their head of year – Mrs Halifax – had used when he was suspended for a week after blocking all the plugholes in the girls’ toilets, leaving the taps on, flooding the whole ground floor.

‘I hope it’s a sensible question,’ the teacher said.

‘You’ll have to wait and see,’ Gavin grinned.

Naomi and Laila shared a glance.

‘Let’s hope he doesn’t get picked,’ Laila said.

Naomi nodded.

Half an hour later the Year 7s were on their feet, moving towards the hall to meet Yossi Frenkle, past the Holocaust Memorial Day display that had been up on the wall since they’d begun at the school, five months ago.

Laila walked alongside Naomi. And Naomi was glad of it. Since they had met in September, they had become good friends. Best friends. They knew everything about each other. Secondary school would have been a lot tougher for Naomi without Laila.

‘So, what’s your question for Yossi?’ Laila asked.

‘How did you know I had one?’

‘I can tell. And I think it is good. I’d never ever dare ask a question in assembly.’

The two friends laughed until they saw Mrs Halifax standing at the entrance to the hall, putting her finger to her lips. Now silence fell and Naomi could feel her heart hammering hard. So hard she felt sick. She was nervous, whether she was going to ask her question or not.

A lot of them were nervous. This was no ordinary assembly.

They walked in single file – and in silence – into the main hall. Up the raked seating, turning to sit and look at the front where an old man was sitting with their headteacher, Mrs Sedbergh. The man was taking a drink from a glass of water, his hand trembling slightly as he did so. He looked older than he did on the film. Thinner, too. But there was no doubt the man smiling back at them was Yossi Frenkle, Holocaust survivor.

Two

Once the children were sitting down, settled – and it didn't take long – Mrs Sedbergh stood up. She put down her notes, took off her glasses and smiled at the 210 Year 7 children and their teachers.

'We are honoured,' the headteacher began, 'to welcome Mr Yossi Frenkle to our school. Mr Frenkle has come from Leeds to speak to us today. You will know, from your preparation, that Mr Frenkle is a Holocaust survivor. Let me tell you a little about him.

'When he was 11, his hometown in Poland was invaded by Nazi Germany. He was forced to leave his home to live in ghettos and concentration camps, to endure death marches. For many of those years he was a slave before he came as a refugee to Britain. And – after all that – he is willing to come to speak to us about his experiences. I know that you will show him the utmost respect as you listen to what he has to tell us.'

Naomi saw Mrs Sedbergh glance at Gavin Barnes. She wondered if Miss Mehmi had warned the headteacher about his possible question.

'Mr Frenkle,' Mrs Sedbergh went on. 'You are very welcome here. And we are keen to hear what you have to say.'

'Thank you.' The old man took a few seconds to stand, pushing himself out of his chair. He brushed his shirt down and pulled at the cuffs of his jumper.

'Hello everyone.'

Some of the children replied with a 'Hello.'

Yossi Frenkle smiled.

‘You know about my life,’ he said. ‘About what happened to my parents and my sisters. So – first – I want to tell you about my childhood. Before all of that.’

He paused. Naomi saw his chest rise and fall.

‘It ended when I was 11,’ he explained. ‘And I know that *you* are 11. Most of you. That is why I wanted to speak to you today. Because you are 11. I lived in a small town in Poland called Lodz. My parents were both teachers and we had a good life, such a good life. We had a bicycle each. We had food. We had a piano. I had a bedroom of my own. It was warm. I had my own books, too. We all did. I played that piano until the age of 11. I was quite good.’

Yossi Frenkle smiled.

His audience smiled back. Here was a gentle man. A man with a kind face. Naomi could see that he already had them in the palm of his hand. Everyone was leaning forward in their seats to hear his story.

‘In the school holidays,’ Yossi Frenkle went on, ‘my mother and father would rent a small cottage in the Carpathian Mountains. On the banks of the lake. We would stay there for a month. A whole month by a lake. Can you imagine? I taught my sisters to swim. I taught them to fish. We would make dens. It was heaven. We were there all August in 1939. Then – just after we had returned home to Lodz – Germany invaded Poland. Aeroplanes came and bombed our town. And then, of course, the German soldiers on our streets.’

Yossi Frenkle paused. Naomi thought she saw his face cloud over as if he had had some memory that he did not share.

‘And now there would be no more holidays by the lake,’ he went on. ‘We had to hand our bicycles to the Nazis. Jews must not have bicycles. Jews must not walk on the pavements, but only in the gutters. Jews cannot go to school. Then we had to give up our house, our piano. We were walled up

within a few streets in the centre of town. All the Jews. That place was called the ghetto.'

Yossi Frenkle paused and gazed at his audience. Then he carried on, speaking faster now.

'But, even in the ghetto, we had a teacher. A secret teacher. We had secret lessons in a cellar. Until they found him teaching us. Imagine soldiers coming in here now and dragging your teachers out of the school, burning all the books in a great pile, then beating your teachers to death as you stand watching.'

There was a single laugh from the audience.

Yossi nodded and smiled. 'I would have laughed, too. Before. Like you. I didn't want to go to school. I hated some of my teachers. Until they said we could not go to school, we could not learn, when all the other children – the non-Jews – could learn and flourish and have the power that education gives you. They killed our teachers because they gave us power. Remember that.'

As the old man continued to tell his story, Naomi recoiled into herself. This was so difficult to hear. She had had enough of it already. Then, just as she felt like walking out, Yossi Frenkle began to talk about Russian soldiers coming to rescue them, being fed on rice pudding, an aeroplane flight to Britain, arriving in the dark somewhere new, smelling water, then waking up the next morning to find themselves in paradise.

'I thought it was the lakes and mountains from when I was 11,' he told them.

Yossi Frenkle paused. A long pause. And Naomi's mind drifted to visiting the Lake District with her mum and dad and *her* two sisters. She was struck by how similar her life had been to Yossi's until the age of 11. Up to now. A lovely home. A happy family. Two sisters. A bike. Toys. Meals out. A piano, even.

Holidays on boats and up mountains. These similarities were not what she had expected to hear from this man.

But she understood that, for Yossi Frenkle, everything had changed from that point. Naomi remembered all the things their headteacher had told them about what the Nazis did to the Jewish people 80 years before. She shuddered and listened as Yossi Frenkle spoke about how he was forced to leave his home, was made into a slave, saw his family murdered in front of his own eyes as he slowly starved, close to death himself.

And then she realised nobody was speaking. Yossi Frenkle had picked up his glass of water to take another drink, his hand no longer trembling.

There was silence as Mrs Sedbergh stood up, her eyes red as she spoke.

‘Thank you, Mr Frenkle. Thank you for sharing your story.’

Naomi felt a heat behind her eyes. She closed them and took a deep breath.

‘You are very welcome,’ Yossi Frenkle said. ‘Now do any of you have questions? Please ask anything you want to.’

After a short pause, hands went up. The first question came from Yusra Ali.

‘Thank you for speaking to us,’ Yusra began. ‘I won’t forget what you have said. May I ask, what did you do when you got to Windermere?’

Yossi Frenkle smiled. ‘We lived,’ he said. ‘We ate. We slept. Then we were given the most precious gift after food and a place to feel safe.’ The old man paused, so the children could wonder at what gift he meant.

‘Education,’ Yossi enthused. ‘We hungered for it like bread, after having been denied it for so long.’

Naomi felt another wave of emotion. She *would* ask her question. She could. She knew she could, but, as she raised her hand, she saw Yossi Frenkle point to another Year 7.

Gavin Barnes.

Naomi noticed Mrs Sedbergh frown.

‘Yes, young man?’ Yossi said. ‘What is your question?’

Gavin Barnes’ voice was hard. ‘I want to know why – after you’d been liberated – you didn’t just go back home, back where you belong.’

Three

There was a gasp from the Year 7s after Gavin Barnes asked his question. Mrs Sedbergh began to stand as the question still echoed around the hall.

Why didn't you just go back home, back where you belong?

Yossi Frenkle put his hand out to stop Mrs Sedbergh intervening.

'It's okay,' he said. 'I can answer.'

Several people were staring at Gavin Barnes now. Naomi could see he looked cowed, knew he'd made a mistake. They all waited to hear what the speaker had to say.

'So, young man, you ask a good question,' Yossi Frenkle began, then looked at the rest of the children. 'Please don't anyone blame our friend for asking something like that. We only learn to change our ideas by asking questions. That's why I'm here. And I have a good answer for a good question.'

Yossi Frenkle hesitated and Naomi watched him. She could see that he was comfortable on the stage. And comfortable with the question. Perhaps he'd been asked it before. She realised that he was completely in control of the audience. That he might be a little old man with white hair, but he was a performer too.

'A few days after we were liberated by the Russians,' Yossi Frenkle explained, 'I met up with a boy from my hometown. We were amazed to see each other. We had both survived. It was a miracle. We laughed. We danced on the spot. It felt so good. Someone from home. Someone from before all this. And, overexcited with our new friendship, we decided to do what you ask: to go home together. Back to Lodz. We travelled by train a little. Walking. Sometimes in jeeps with Russian soldiers who gave us beer to drink and food

to eat, and we had travelled about 500 miles across Poland when we arrived at Lodz Railway Station in the late evening.

‘It was dark. But we were home. And ahh... it felt good.

‘So we walked – triumphant – through Lodz Central Square. Found our way down to my street to stand outside the house where I had lived for the first 11 years of my life. I knew my home had been taken by a local family. Not Jews. The Germans gave the houses to non-Jews when we were taken away to the ghetto. Now I could see through the front room window and there was my piano. My bedroom, too, that I had dreamed about for five years, upstairs. The wallpaper was the same. And – the best thing was – that I could smell flowers in the garden. It was like going back in time. I almost expected to see my mother cutting roses for the dining table. Eventually the people in my house saw us standing there. They shut and bolted the doors. They closed the curtains on us. Maybe they saw what we looked like. Ragged clothes. We still had shaven hair then, or, at least, very short.

‘But then a loud noise. A truck came down the road. Two men climbed out. They were police. We walked towards them. They had guns. One of them was holding a long stick. He was waving it about. “Go now,” he said. “We could kill you. Just go. Don’t come back.” And I saw faces at windows. More doors closing. More curtains and blinds being drawn. People looking away. Looking away because they didn’t want to see what might happen next. And I understood that we must leave. “Leave now. Or we *will* kill you,” the second policeman said. So, quickly, I dragged my friend to the railway station. Then away. Away from my home. We were not safe in Lodz.’

Yossi Frenkle took a deep breath.

‘And those police? They were Polish, like me. Not Germans. The Germans had gone.’

Yossi Frenkle breathed in again. Paused.

‘The truth is,’ he explained, looking Gavin Barnes in the eye, ‘many Jewish people went home to their villages and towns. Our houses had been taken. Our possessions. And all the Jewish people – all of them – were gone. The synagogues had been looted and burned to the ground. Our businesses and jobs taken by someone else. So, you see, I had no place to go anymore. No mother or father to look after me. They were dead. No home. Not until I came to Britain. And, because Britain looked after me, now Britain is my home. And I love this country.’

The old man sat down and studied the children. Naomi could tell he was shattered. There was a pause, then Yossi Frenkle raised his head again.

‘May I ask you a question now?’ he said to his audience.

There was no reply.

‘All you need to do is just put your hand up if the answer is yes,’ the old man explained. ‘I want to ask if any of you here have a parent or grandparent or great-grandparent who came from another country?’

Naomi put her hand up. Her grandfather and grandmother had come to Britain in 1953. From Jamaica. She had put up her hand, expecting to be one of only a few. So she was shocked when she saw more than half of Year 7 raise their hands. Most of the teachers, too. Even Laila.

‘You see,’ Yossi Frenkle grinned. ‘This country is made up of people from a hundred countries. Our history – if you read about it – is all about people wanting to come here. I have educated myself about Britain. The Celts: they came from Austria. The Angles and the Saxons from northern Europe. The Normans from Norway, via France. Our Queen, she is a little German. Our Prime Minister, his great-grandfather was from Turkey. This is why our country is called Great Britain.’

Naomi felt a rush of excitement. Inspired by the words of Yossi Frenkle, she thrust her hand up.

‘Yes, young lady,’ Yossi said immediately, grinning up at her.

And Naomi felt her heart leap into her mouth. Everyone was looking at her now. Now she had to ask it. The question.

Four

Naomi wasn't one for asking questions. She rarely did in the classroom. She never had in the school hall. She was always too afraid.

Any time she felt like asking a question her mind would fill with other questions. What if her words came out wrong? What if someone took the mickey? Then her heart would start hammering and she'd stop herself raising her hand and the moment would pass.

But Naomi also knew that sometimes you have to overcome your fears, put up with your hammering heart and push on. There was something she needed to know. She had been moved by the stories of Yossi Frenkle.

So what if it did go a bit wrong? Let them mock her. This was it. She took a deep breath.

'Thank you for your talk,' she heard herself say.

Yossi Frenkle nodded. 'Thank you for listening.'

Deep breath again. Naomi steeled herself.

'We have heard your story about what happened to you 80 years ago. But what you have told us is history. I don't think there is anything I can do to help you as a boy, or even now. I can't help *you*, but I know people today are suffering and I want to do something. I need to do something. Can you tell me what I can do?'

The whole of Year 7 watched as the old man stared at his hands for a moment. The longer the pause, the more Naomi thought she'd said something stupid. Had she really suggested that she couldn't help him? Was he offended? Naomi saw Mrs Sedbergh shift in her seat like she had when Gavin Barnes had asked his question. Was the headteacher going to intervene again? Had Naomi been rude?

When Yossi Frenkle's bright and sparkling eyes looked up at Naomi, she knew she had nothing to worry about.

'This,' he said, 'is the best of questions.'

Naomi breathed out a huge sigh. She was finding it hard not to give in to the wave of emotion she was feeling now. She adjusted her position on the bench, trying to distract herself, and waited.

'Education,' Yossi Frenkle said, 'is the answer.'

The Holocaust survivor let his words sink in, then began again. 'I told you that when I came to this country – after food and sleep – I wanted education. Do you remember?'

The audience murmured agreement.

'Good. Because, when the Nazis took our education, they left us ignorant of the world. They took our power. Even the Nazis knew that education is power. And, to spite the Nazis, I have survived. I am here. And I have educated myself to fight prejudice and intolerance throughout my whole life.'

Yossi glanced at Gavin Barnes as he spoke.

'Holocaust Memorial Day,' he went on, 'is not just about remembering the victims of the Holocaust. It is also about remembering the victims of other genocides. And not only events that happened in the past. Right now, as we sit here, some terrible things appear to be happening with the Uighur people in China. There are places where there is the risk of genocide. We must learn about that and do what we can to stop it. We can save lives.'

Yossi Frenkle paused and looked from Year 7 to Year 7.

'How many Jewish people were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators?' he asked. 'Can anyone tell me?'

Hands went up.

‘Six million?’ a boy from 7D replied.

‘Yes. Six million. Well done. *You* have been educated. But did you know that one and a half million of them were children? One and a half million.’

Another long silence.

How could you murder one and a half million children? How was that possible?

‘In Bosnia,’ Yossi Frenkle went on, ‘thousands were murdered. That was a genocide of a group of Muslim people of Europe. Just a quarter of a century ago. Most of your parents will have been children when that happened. The United Nations stopped it in the end. But how many more children would have died if they had not? How many came here to avoid being murdered?’

Naomi saw a hand go up to her left. Laila’s. She had no idea what her friend was going to say. Laila was even less likely to speak in class than her.

‘Yes, my dear?’ Yossi Frenkle asked.

‘My mum came here from Bosnia. In 1992. She was 11.’

Yossi Frenkle nodded as Naomi stared at her friend in astonishment.

‘She escaped through Slovenia,’ Laila told the old man. ‘Before Srebrenica.’

‘I know about Srebrenica,’ Yossi Frenkle frowned. ‘Yes. And I would like to meet your mother,’ he said.

Laila smiled, then stared at her knees. Naomi put her hand on Laila’s and their fingers closed around each other’s.

‘We must educate ourselves about what is happening in the world,’ Yossi Frenkle went on. ‘Like we do about Nazi Europe. Then – to answer your question – we must do something. We can write to our MPs. Tell them that we don’t want Team GB to compete in the Winter Olympics in China. We can share news stories on social media. We can choose where to shop. Last month

Tesco and Next and some other shops said they would not buy cotton from that part of the world. Shop at shops that care about these things. Tell them why.'

The old man sighed and fell back in his seat.

'And, so, my friends, I have one last question.'

The audience – still in the palm of Yossi Frenkle's hand – waited as their speaker paused and Naomi smiled. Here was a man she could believe in. Here was someone she could listen to, who could make her feel like there were things she *could* do.

'I want to ask you – again – the question our friend up there asked me.'

Yossi pointed again at Naomi. 'What can *you* do? Today? Tomorrow? Next week? What can you do?'

Five

Now that he had asked his question – ‘What can you do?’ – Yossi Frenkle sat back in his chair. He looked exhausted.

After a moment’s hesitation, Mrs Sedbergh stood, briefly studied her guest speaker, then began to pick out Year 7s who had their hands up.

‘Come on,’ she said, glancing back at the old man in his chair again. ‘We’ve heard from Mr Frenkle. We heard, too, Naomi’s question. Let’s have some ideas. We can do this.’

Hands were raised.

Answers came.

‘We can educate ourselves,’ Lily Halifax said, echoing Yossi Frenkle’s words.

‘We can sign petitions. If 100,000 people sign any one petition, they have to debate whatever it is about in Parliament.’

‘Good,’ Mrs Sedbergh said. ‘Very good.’

‘We can write to our MPs,’ Danny Harte added.

‘What will you write about?’ Mrs Sedbergh asked. ‘To your MP?’

‘About things we think that aren’t good. About those people in China. Once I’ve found out more about them,’ Danny said.

‘Good. Good. But what’s the point in writing to your MP?’ Mrs Sedbergh asked. ‘Will they listen?’

‘They have to,’ Naomi’s teacher, Miss Mehmi, interrupted. ‘It’s their job to hear what we say and take that to Parliament. They’re paid to represent us, not tell us what to do. And the more of us that write to them, the harder it is for them to ignore us.’

‘Yes,’ Mrs Sedbergh said.

‘But they won’t do anything,’ Kylie from 7H said. ‘They don’t listen.’

‘But they do,’ Yossi leaned forward. ‘Already the British government has warned China that it might not send a team to compete in the Winter Olympics because of the Uighur situation. But is that enough? We can write to say they *must* not send a team, not *might* not. Must not.’

‘Any more ideas?’ Mrs Sedbergh was smiling. Naomi could tell she was pleased by the reaction of her pupils. Maybe even proud of them.

‘We can choose where to shop. We can find out who makes our clothes and if they are treated properly.’

The conversation went on. Time passed. But nobody noticed.

Then, with the clock at 11:57, Mrs Sedbergh clapped her hands.

‘Right,’ she said. ‘I think we must stop.’

Yossi Frenkle was trying to stand. The headteacher moved over to help him out of his seat.

‘I am going to walk Mr Frenkle out of the hall ahead of you,’ she said. ‘So please wait until we’re clear. Even when you hear the bell.’

Mrs Sedbergh looked again at the old man.

She began to speak. ‘Please join me in thanking our wonderful guest for coming to talk to us today. He is an inspira...’

The headteacher’s words were drowned out by the sound of applause – some children stamping their feet on the hollow raked seating. And Yossi Frenkle raised his hand, walking, tentative, down the steps to the floor of the hall. He waved at the children, catching Naomi’s eye, then Gavin Barnes’, giving each a smile.

Then he was gone. After a minute or so, the applause died down. And the Year 7s were left with an empty stage and their own silence.

Naomi and Laila leave the hall without words, putting their coats on as they walk. The corridors will be chilly. There are windows and doors open throughout school, even though it is January. None of the Year 7s speak as they fill corridors and staircases.

It is lunchtime. The sun is low in the sky, bright light bursting through windows. Still, the two friends do not speak as they queue for sandwiches at the counter.

The door to the back of the school is open. The girls decide to go out and sit in the sun. It feels warm with their coats on. They sit on a bench and feel the sun on their faces.

‘Shall we write to our MP?’ Naomi suggests.

Laila nods, then adds, ‘And work out where we should not buy clothes from.’

‘Yes,’ Naomi says, then she turns to look at you.

Yes, you.

And Laila is looking at you too.

They have a question.

‘It’s Holocaust Memorial Day this week,’ they say. ‘What can *you* do?’

Thank you for reading *The Question*.

To find out more about Holocaust Memorial Day visit www.hmd.org.uk.

To read about Yossi Frenkle and his experiences during the Holocaust and coming to the UK as a refugee, you can read Tom Palmer’s book, *After the War*. Please visit www.tompalmer.co.uk/after-the-war.