

Part of article from The Journal 9<sup>th</sup> August 2015:

## The Rights Stuff; North East History and a Tragic Family Tale Led Peter Sagar to Champion Human Rights. He Spoke to MIKE KELLY

IT seemed appropriate to be talking to Peter Sagar, a human rights activist for most of his adult life, after his trip to Auschwitz last week.

For Peter, it had been a holiday of sorts and also part of his ongoing work with the Roma community in Newcastle.

Last week - August 2 to be precise - was the 70th anniversary of the massacre of around 3,000 Roma and Sinti men, women, and children in the so-called Zigeunerlager, or Gypsy camp, at the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp.

In all, around 20,000 of these nomadic people died during the terrible history of the camp, a fact that escapes many. Better known is the fact that, during this period, anything up to 1.5m Jews died at Auschwitz-Birkenau and Auschwitz 1, the original camp it was located next to.

At night he returned to his hotel room and the TV news was dominated by Gaza where, according to the UN, at least 1,890 Palestinians, mostly civilians, have died after Israel launched Operation Protective Edge on July 8. Israel's government says 64 soldiers have been killed. Its stated aim is the halting of rocket fire from militants in Gaza and destroying the network of tunnels it said were used to launch attacks inside Israel.

The dreadful pictures of civilians suffering as a result of the Israeli government's action has shocked the world and led to an anti-semitic backlash.

Peter, conscious of the unbearable civilian suffering that happened not far from where he watched the TV pictures, said: "I don't think I needed reminding, whatever you think about what the Israeli army is doing, there is no need for anti-semitism.

"You can't blame a whole group of people because of what its Government is doing."

And, as if to emphasise the point, he said among the host of speakers at the event, he personally found the most moving to be that of Claudia Roth, a Green party politician in the German parliament, the Bundestag.

"It was in German but there was a translation. She spoke from the heart of her feelings of guilt for what had happened. She was visibly distraught at the end. She was embraced by one of the Roma leaders at the end - it was very moving. There's a lot of healing that still needs to be done on both sides."

Peter, now 52, said his motivation to champion the cause of human rights started, perhaps, before he was born.

His elder brother David had a whooping cough injection which went horrifically wrong. "He had an 42 epileptic fit within five minutes of getting home from the hospital," said Peter.

As a result, David was left with severe learning difficulties. As an adult "he could just about write his own name".

"I grew up with that so I had direct contact with someone whose rights had been taken away, and I saw the suffering he went through."

He uses the phrase "there but for the grace of God" in some ways to sum it up.

"Whether you're religious or not, it isn't the point. I would like to think if I was in a camp like Auschwitz, a prison in Iran or being attacked in Colo

mbia - any number of examples -

I would like to think there was someone, somewhere, trying to help me. Empathy, I suppose."

Obviously a bright lad, brought up in Kenton, Newcastle, he said he won one of the last free places to the city's Royal Grammar School, funded by Newcastle City Council.

He later studied geography at Newcastle Polytechnic and did teacher training at Durham University before completing a master of philosophy in region identity at Northumbria University.

Peter knows his North East and is quick to extol its virtues in the human rights sphere and how it also played a part in his life choice.

"It's not as parochial a place as people might say."

He listed a long list of examples of how the region was at the forefront of human rights causes.

A meeting house in High Bridge, Newcastle - no longer there - was built around 1765 for the Rev James Murray, who preached of religion and civil liberty. ...