

The Holocaust Remembrance Day, 27 January 2016

Speech addressed to the Hellenic Parliament

by Nikolaos Filis, Minister of Education, Research and Religious Affairs

The date 27 January has been established as an annual International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust by a resolution adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2005, 60 years after the Second World War. This was preceded by a Declaration adopted by the Council of Europe in 2002 on the initiative of Ministers of Education.

The date is symbolic. On 27 January 1945 the Soviet soldiers entered Auschwitz. The liberators found only 7-8,000 people who had unexpectedly survived. A few days earlier the camp had been evacuated. 58,000 prisoners had been forced to death marches towards other camps in the interior of Germany. The liberation of forced-labor and extermination camps where nearly 1,000,000 Jews and also communists and other “enemies of the state” Roma, war prisoners, homosexuals were murdered is commemorated on 27 January. Since 1942 Jews from all occupied Europe and, among them, as from spring 1943, Greek Jews were exterminated in Auschwitz II- Birkenau in gas chambers and crematoria.

The term Holocaust refers to the mass destruction, the murder, of nearly six million European Jews by Nazis. This was genocide, a coordinated plan with the aim of annihilating the Jewish people. The Nazis’ enterprise was underpinned by racist ideology, anti-Semitism, and it was executed systematically by using government bureaucracy, the German war machine and with the complicity, the consent or under the indifferent eye of observers in Germany and in occupied Europe.

There cannot be any gradation of human pain and of the indescribable suffering of peoples during the course of their history. The genocide of the Jews, the Shoah, has the unique feature of the Nazis’ will to annihilate the Jews, to have them disappear from the earth. In order to put this unprecedented decision into practice, Jews had been persecuted, segregated, deported by trains to concentration camps and murdered: innocent men, women and children whose only “crime” was being Jewish. The Holocaust as a historical event was carried out by specific perpetrators and had specific victims. It was not inevitable, it was not a historical accident, it was not a simple incident without deep roots in anti-Semitism.

Our understanding of history can guide us to assuming responsibility in the field of educating and creating awareness. We have no intention to put forward any arguments serving identity politics. Our wish, however, is to grasp the depth of a painful chapter of history where bravery and solidarity were in conflict with cowardice and betrayal. Our wish is to

reflect on the nature of good and evil and the ways they are expressed in important moments of history and in everyday life. We shall never free ourselves from the weight of the past if we don't face the human barbarity included in the historical context.

The Holocaust had a global impact but it took place in civilized Europe and it is a matter of concern for us all. The plan of a new order based on the so-called racial hierarchy and the sovereignty of one race over the others was conceived and put into practice in Europe. The result was the murder of groups of people considered different. Right in the heart of Europe, Jews were gradually discriminated, deported and exterminated. Greek History is part of European and World History. Jewish communities in Thessaloniki and Ioannina were almost completely annihilated, all Jews in Zakynthos were rescued, many in Katerini, in Volos and in Athens. Some fled, some others joined resisters, some were hidden thanks to the solidarity and the support of their fellow citizens, others were betrayed by them. But the bottom line is that from Didymoteicho to Crete and from Corfu to Rhodes, Greek Jews have been violently uprooted, deported to concentration camps of the Third Reich and exterminated. Over 75,000 Jews lived in Greece before the war and when Greece was liberated less than 11,000 had survived.

The date 27 January is a memorial for all those who were murdered and did not even get a decent burial. This date is also to honor those few who survived the Nazi barbarity. Their suffering continued for years after their liberation from the concentration camps. Sometimes they were treated as passive, responsible for their fate, silent. Yet, despite the pain of loss, despite the endless difficulties, they managed to rebuild their lives. The dark shadow of the Holocaust covers European civilization. Survivors through their testimonies made us aware of the huge fracture in our civilization. As European citizens and with the knowledge we have now, we are challenged with the distance between us and their suffering while their faces, their voices remind us of the moral weight of the historical events and their consequences.

It is our duty, however, to reflect on the path that led to the Holocaust, especially at a time like this when racism and anti-Semitism reappear in Europe. The smoke rising from the crematoria was the outcome of a process which started with hate speech discriminating people, stigmatizing those who weren't part of the majority, asking people to disdain, spit and cause suffering to fellow citizens who were treated not as human beings, but as "parasites" or "asocial" infecting the healthy society. This hate speech begun only as extremists' opinions, but it bore fruit when the economic crisis stroke society and brought people to despair.

We ought to consider that words have consequences. When far right German organizations such as "Steel Helmet" (Stahlhelm), precursors of the Nazis, declared that Jews polluted Germany and that their high influence should be reduced, they couldn't have meant extermination of all Jewish men, women and children in death factories. When German doctors referred to "life unworthy of life", German citizens couldn't possibly have understood that this meant extermination of the people who were old, physically or mentally disabled. The Nazis applied those concepts to the extreme by their famous systematic and effective methods, their ideology on "parasites" which pollute a "healthy

society” and on “life unworthy of life”. This is why we should not undervalue the meaning of this kind of speech, unfortunately expressed even today directly or implied.

Here and now, I ought to address Greek anti-Semites who never miss an opportunity to question Greek Jews’ patriotism in any possible way. Greek Jews’ blood has been shed for the freedom of Greece, in the same way as by any Greek citizen each time this was required in order to gain our freedom. Greek Jews define themselves as a religious minority. They are Greek citizens residing in this country since ancient times.

The Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs has taken action in cooperation with Greek Jews to preserve our historical memory and to give the opportunity to teachers and students to comprehend the significance of the Holocaust for World and Greek history.

The Holocaust has been included in school books. Every year seminars for teachers’ training on teaching the Holocaust are co-organized by the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs. Additionally, one of the Ministry’s most important initiatives is that we support the visit of non-Jewish students to the Auschwitz Museum on an annual basis. In 2015 the launching of the educational video contest “The Holocaust of Greek Jews” was co-organized for the first time by the General Secretariat for Religious Affairs and the Jewish Museum of Greece and we are planning to organize it again for this year. Moreover, partnerships of schools in Greece with other schools abroad on projects with the topic of the Holocaust and genocides are supported by the Ministry. The 6th High School of Nea Smyrni has initiated such a partnership with a school from the U.S.A. For the first time after 2007, the Ministry of Education has issued a Circular on the Holocaust Remembrance Day and I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the President of the Parliament for his initiative which honors the Hellenic State, the Hellenic Parliament, the History of Greece and the Greek Jewry.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Memorial to honor the Greek “Righteous among the Nations” is going to be unveiled today. The lead of our non-Jewish compatriots who have risked their lives under German occupation to rescue Greek Jews is a light of hope showing the path of virtue and democracy. Let us follow it.

Translated by: Callis MITRAKA