

**Remarks by H.E. Mr. Tomislav Nikolic, President of the Republic of Serbia,
delivered at the Old Fairground
27 January 2016**

Esteemed Speaker of the National Assembly,
Members of the Government,
Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Rabbi, Your Eminences,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Seventy-one years have passed since the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp and the fall of the fence that surrounded and hid the worst human tragedy in the history of mankind. The darkest page, the most horrible ignominy, and the most despicable idea of the Second World War was, unfortunately, envisaged so as to last until the last Jew in the world be tracked down and brought to the camp. Together with the Jews world-wide, we mark 27 Nisan, the Holocaust Remembrance Day, the tragedy visited upon the Jewish people, the tragedy involving other peoples, either willing or unwilling, as well.

Each year I try to reflect on this tragedy and speak about it from a different vantage point, so that we might understand how this human tragedy, which one beholds silently and with his eyes cast down, had happened. I also ponder upon how people were silent as the Jews were being transported from the countries that had been their homes for centuries to concentration camps, how someone had been cultivating the land beside the concentration camp...

In vain, one cannot grasp the inconceivable. There is no explanation for the fact that an ideology used to turn common people into murderers. Were the racist ideas of superiority, of an animal conquering instinct and individuals' ludicrous aspirations so powerful that they managed to make a sea change even in the thoughts of clever and learned people with families? Did the Holocaust prove, once and for all, that there is always the peril of a man not becoming more tolerant of, but actually more susceptible to prejudice and extremist ideologies, in parallel with attaining more knowledge?

I will speak out each and every year, so as not to forget. Letting a crime fade into oblivion is tantamount to committing a crime itself. Some would like us to perpetrate this crime, to leave the Holocaust to oblivion, or even worse: to remember the crime only superficially and inaccurately. The tendency of relinquishing the past in favour of oblivion belongs in the sociological and cultural phenomenon of the new age, and is callously imposed on those who had suffered.

Walking through the Mauthausen death camp, I noticed an almost total absence of photos of those who had fallen victim to this notorious concentration camp. In hindsight spanning seventy years, how can one comprehend all the horrors and atrocities that had taken place at this mass murder site? Visible and lasting symbols that lend themselves to thinking are essential when remembering and reflecting on the Holocaust. While familiarizing ourselves with history, in all its cruelty, we must

always be reminded of it, lest it repeated itself at some other place in a different guise. Only then will the Holocaust be inscribed in the consciousness of all nations.

Remembrance is important because it bears a surprisingly modern relevance. Crimes committed in the Middle East have generated the migrant crisis, already unprecedented in history in terms of the numbers of refugees, while public executions, ethnic cleansings and eugenics are the dramatic facts sufficiently alarming for the clever ones.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Keeping alive the memory of the victims murdered in the framework of the Final Solution is of particular importance because, prior to the period of the Final Solution, almost half of the German Jews had emigrated, making someone anxious to see them all leave the country. The monstrous plan behind the Final Solution implied the removal of the Jews from the countries where they had lived for centuries together with other peoples, their physical exploitation, seizure of their property, their deportation to the East, and slave-like labour by them. The project was conceived to end in mass killings. Even highly educated men took part in it, cultural workers - the ones you would least expect to partake. Many individuals of the German nation and members of other nationalities were directly involved in killings. Had there been any differing public voices, or reactions in other countries, these would not have been taken into consideration.

The SS mouthpiece contained the following in its manifesto concerning the Final Solution (November 1938):

“...we were simple-hearted and naïve. There is a view that is heard at every step... if we had solved the Jewish Question completely and by the most brutal methods back in 1933, the outcry would have been no worse than it has been all the time since [we have been] solving the Jewish Question ... by applying single measures forced on us by the Jews themselves and their friends. But it had to remain in theory because at that time we lacked the military might that we possess today. At the time the Jews might have succeeded in bringing the nations to wage a war of revenge against us; today the most vocal of the voices of democracy will be the ones to hesitate the longest...we shall therefore now take the Jewish Question towards its final solution... it is necessary, because we no longer hear the world's screaming, and finally because no power in the world can stop us... The program is clear. It is: total elimination, complete separation! What does that mean? It means not only the elimination of the Jews from the German economy, neglected due to wars and murders. It means much more!”

Dear friends,

Serbia was not spared the ferocious plan of the Final Solution. The Jews and everyone who opposed the Nazi idea were subject to persecution. Under such conditions, one needed to pluck up a lot of courage to save a Jew. Those who did not affiliate themselves with the occupying forces, and who had roots in the Serbian people, showed immense courage at the time. All across Serbia, the residents helped the persecuted Jews. Nowadays, when we are unfortunately facing the denial of the

Holocaust, it is necessary to familiarize, in a novel way, the new generations with the sufferings of the Jews, the Serbs, the Roma and other nationalities and all the fatal aspects of Nazi ideology.

The Calvary of the Jews in ghettos and concentration camps was described on tens of thousands of pages. The testimonials of the survivors flicker like live images before our own eyes even today. From this point of view, one can hardly imagine the strength of the martyrs and their determination to resist the enemy, despite the physical pain and suffering. The letters sent from the Warsaw Ghetto testify to this fact:

“The ghetto has shown its strength. Kiddush Hashem, the concept of the sanctification of the Name of the Lord, was the topic of the inmates’ lectures and discussions. Everyone had a premonition that something was about to happen and they were preparing themselves for it. Rabbi Isaiah Nisenbaum then launched a wise thought inside the cosmos of the ghetto: At this moment we are dedicated to life on behalf of the Lord, and not death. Our enemies claimed our souls in the past, and the Jew offered his body as sacrifice, for the sake of sanctifying the Lord’s name. Now the enemy wants the Jewish body, and the Jew has the duty to defend it to protect his life”.

This imbued the ghetto inmates with a strong passion for life, unearthed their hidden strength, uncommon in normal times.

Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear friends,

We must not allow historical facts to be adjusted to suit consumer society and short-lived memory. The tendency to embellish the product, so as to make it more appealing to the broadest public is unacceptable. The Holocaust must be shown in its true colours, devoid of the insertion of trivial but easily digestible facts, without marginalization leading to the negation of the harrowing past and truth. Lest we become numb to suffering, lest we be blind to it, as a result of our own weakness.

The world is changing and we have to be aware that we contribute to the shaping of the future. The manner in which we are doing it, whether by taking action or failing to do so, will be reflected positively or negatively in the future. Therefore it is important to invest maximum efforts to ensure that the future generations may live in peace and unity, free of fear of conflict or war.

Shalom aleikhem (May peace be with you).