



Speech of Foreign Minister Urmas Paet at the opening of the exhibit “Convoy nr. 73 – Convoy with a singular fate”

14.05.2010

It is my honour to greet all those present on the occasion of this unforgettable day, when yet another tragic chapter on the fate of people during a time of desperation and hopelessness opens before us.

I would like to begin with a short journey into Estonian history before the Second World War. Our declaration of independence—the “Manifest for all the Peoples of Estonia” declared on 24 February 1918—promised cultural autonomy to Jewish people in the newborn Republic of Estonia. The cultural autonomy declared for Jews in 1926 received the attention of the international Jewish community, being an important event for the Estonian Jewish community and a unique phenomenon in Europe. In the 1930s, many Jewish spiritual leaders that fled Germany found refuge in Estonia. A year after Hitler came to power in Germany, a chair for Jewish studies was established at Tartu University. Everything was flourishing, and then came destruction.

In June of 1940, when France, which stood up to protect the honour and freedom of Poland, was engaged in a fight to the death with Nazi Germany, the USSR took advantage of the opportunity and occupied Estonia. The Soviet occupation that came into effect in Estonia liquidated a great many things, including cultural autonomy for Jews. On 14 June 1941, the Soviet authorities deported, among others, 400 Estonian Jews—close to 10% of the country’s Jewish community, who were labelled “bourgeois nationalists” and otherwise enemies of a progressive human race.

In the summer and fall of 1941, Nazi German armies forced the Soviet soldiers out of Estonia’s territory and instituted their own occupation here. The nearly 1 000 Estonian citizens of Jewish faith that had remained in Estonia were labelled enemies and executed according to the plans of the German occupation powers. The Nazi authorities declared Estonia to be free of Jews. Between the years 1942 and 1944 the German occupation forces brought more than 10 000 people from all of its occupied territories to the camps established here, and nearly all of them perished. To this day we do not know, and we will probably never know, exactly how many people sentenced to death were brought to occupied Estonia. People became numbers that were only known to the planners and implementers of the crimes. The concrete list of Holocaust victims is still being worked on today.

We can try, but we will never completely understand what those people were feeling, the ones who were sent from occupied France to occupied Estonia in May 1944 as part of ‘convoy nr. 73’. Just a few years before, two different democracies had met destruction—old and flourishing France, and young but nevertheless developing Estonia, which had even been praised by Albert Einstein for the tolerance it showed to the Jewish community. The future had been slashed and what used to be Europe became, for the captive peoples, a uniformly grey spider web of railway stations and concentration camps, in which each thread served a role in the evil system. In a time when very few could be completely trusted, the only thing that was certain was the desire to stay alive in spite of everything and maintain the awareness of one’s belonging to the human race—regardless of the Nazis’ endeavours to prove otherwise. Unfortunately, very few were able to save themselves as well as their families.

In 1945 this horrendous chapter of history ended, but the crimes against humanity perpetrated during World War II still require our attention. We must work together in the name of getting archives opened to everyone, increasing peoples’ awareness of what happened, and making sure that these crimes against humanity are never repeated. Within the past decades an invaluable amount of work has been done in Holocaust research and preserving the memory of the Holocaust. Estonia gained the opportunity to do such things after it was freed from Soviet occupation in 1991. Today’s free Estonia is proud of its active Jewish community, whose initiative led to the creation of the Estonian Jewish Museum. Many of the documents preserved there are also published on the internet and are therefore accessible to anyone in the world. Both France and Estonia are members of the Task Force for International Co-operation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research and help to preserve the memory of the Holocaust as well as provide a responsible education for youth, who will shape our future.

I would like to thank the association “Relatives and Friends of the Deported in Convoy 73”, the Shoah Memorial Fund, the French Embassy in Estonia, and the Estonian Embassy in France for this important exhibit and for the memorial plaque to be opened on 2 June. May the knowledge of our shared past deepen our joint efforts for a better and more just future.