

Remarks at the Site of the Future Holocaust Memorial Museum

October 5, 1988

Ladies and gentlemen, good morning. We gather here today, as we have been so eloquently told here, for a solemn, profound, saddening, and yet triumphant occasion. It's an occasion that commemorates all we've lost -- the irreplaceable humanity whose monstrous end will ever testify to the hellish depths of human evil. But it's an occasion that commemorates something else as well, it commemorates the seriousness of our intention -- as human beings, as Americans, and, in the case of many here today, as Jews -- to keep the memory of the 6 million, fresh and enduring.

We who did not go their way owe them this. We must make sure their deaths have posthumous meaning. We must make sure that from now until the end of days all humankind stares this evil in the face, that all humankind knows what this evil looks like and how it came to be. And when we truly know it for what it was, then and only then can we be sure that it will never come again.

Some people say evil of this degree is incomprehensible. They say we will never understand it. Some people even say that the word "evil" is insufficient to describe the Holocaust, and instead they use terms like mad, crazy, insane. I think they're wrong. What we saw there, at Treblinka and Belsen and Auschwitz and Dachau, was the image of the inferno. That may have been the ultimate purpose of those who made the Holocaust: a grotesque effort to hurl the Earth into the very pit of the serpent. I believe the Holocaust is comprehensible. Indeed, we must comprehend it. We have no choice; the future of mankind depends upon it. And that's what we're here for: to lay the cornerstone for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which will help us understand and make it impossible for us to forget.

The Holocaust Memorial Council is committed to this purpose. It is composed of Republicans and Democrats and independents who understand that partisanship has no place here. There are Jews who serve on it and Catholics and Protestants, who understand that religious divisions have no place here. It is composed of those who came through the flames of the Holocaust and those who did not, for we've required no rules for membership except an unyielding commitment to our mission -- to keep the memory alive.

To fulfill that mission, the museum will study the history of the Holocaust, provide an invaluable resource for researchers, and bring together in one place the greatest array of information and knowledge on this necessary subject. It will examine the nature and meaning of the continuing curse that is anti-Semitism. I think all of us here are aware of those, even among our own countrymen, who have dedicated themselves to the disgusting task of minimizing or even denying the truth of the Holocaust. This act of intellectual genocide must not go unchallenged, and those who advance these views must be held up to the scorn and wrath of all good and thinking people in this nation and across the world.

And yet just as we must challenge it here at home, so, too, we must challenge anti-Semitism abroad. We know that in certain nations an infamous and fraudulent document called the Protocols of the Elders of Zion is still being distributed and, in some cases, taught in school. This, the most profoundly cynical piece of anti-Semitic filth ever produced, is full of libels toward the Jewish people, particularly the horrifying "blood libel." We must send the message out to all the world: A blood libel against the Jewish people is a blood libel against all humankind, and no decent person will stand for it.

We know that the United Nations, whose peacekeepers were honored only last week for their service to the world, has yet to repeal its infamous resolution equating Zionism and racism. We know where such intellectual infamy can lead. The world has learned that when the truth is turned on its head, holocausts become possible.

And there are the subtler forms of anti-Semitism. There is the anti-Semitism that seeks to deny Jews their independent identity. In these days of glasnost, we hear talk about liberalizing attitudes toward Judaism in the Soviet Union. But it is still true that a Jew must have courage to rise and say with pride: "Yes, I am a Jew. I wish to study Hebrew, and I wish to emigrate to the homeland of my people." Those who speak those words know what follows them: the despair of waiting for permission to do that which is a basic human right -- to go where they will when they choose. There are still tens of thousands -- maybe even hundreds of thousands -- of Soviet Jews who wait to leave the Soviet Union so that they may live free as Jews.

And here, as we lay this cornerstone and vow that the Jewish people will never stand alone against tyranny, I want to ask the Soviet leaders a question: Where are those exit visas? Where are they? And you and I and all Americans of good will are united in the challenge I propose to the Soviet leaders today. I say: Let these people go!

The Jews of silence, Elie Wiesel called them two decades ago, but they're silent no more. They're obeying what the great theologian Emil Fackenheim called the 614th Commandment -- the Commandment of Auschwitz -- and that commandment is this: "Let there be Jews." That commandment is dear to the hearts of all. The Jewish people were on this Earth at the time of the pyramids. Those structures are still standing, and the Jews are still here. We must make sure that when the tall towers of our greatest cities have crumbled to dust in the turnings of time, the Jewish people will still be on this Earth to cast their blessings and remind all of us that this world and the people who live upon it have a history and, yes, even a destiny.

This week we celebrate one of the worst anniversaries of this century. Last Friday, 50 years ago, the European nations met in Munich and accommodated the expansionist designs of Adolf Hitler. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain returned to Britain and proclaimed that he had brought "peace for our time." And 11 months later the Nazi tanks rolled into Poland, and the war began. With the invasion of Poland the West awoke, may God be thanked, and the Nazis were finally defeated. But at what cost? At what cost?

Even to think about the cost makes sleep impossible. Had the West awakened to the meaning of Hitler, would those dead be with us today? Would there even be a need for this museum? It's a question without an answer. But we must never allow ourselves to have to ask that question

again. American troops who liberated the concentration camps saw things no human eyes should ever see. But if we in America remain strong -- if we hold fast and true to the conviction that, yes, there are things worth fighting for, there are things worth dying for, and we will heed the call if we must -- humans will never suffer so nor will others be called upon to save them from such suffering.

Before I go, I'd like to tell those of you who do not know it already about a song that was sung in the camps. It was a Yiddish song, and like many of the camp ballads, it was not about the hunger and the torture and the dying but about the coming of the Messiah. "What will happen," the song asks, "when the Messiah comes?" And the answer is: "When the Messiah comes, we'll have a banquet." And the banquet the song describes is no ordinary repast. For at that Messianic banquet, the guests will eat of the creature called the Leviathan and will drink the finest and sweetest wines. And they will sit and watch while Miriam the prophetess dances for their entertainment. And then they will sit and listen as King David plays songs for them on his harp. And they will sit and listen to a lecture given by the wisest of men, King Solomon. And they will sit and study the Torah with Moses.

I hope you'll forgive me if I say that I believe those who perished in the Holocaust have, after long suffering, attended that banquet. I cannot imagine our Lord would deny their request. We here will inscribe their names in human memory, and pray that God may bless us all.

Note: The President spoke at 11:57 a.m. at Raoul Wallenberg Place.

<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1988/100588b.htm>