



## **Speech by M. Jacques Chirac, President of the Republic, on the occasion of the official opening of the new exhibition in the French pavilion of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum**

Auschwitz - Birkenau (Pologne) - jeudi 27 janvier 2005

Auschwitz, 27 January 2005

(...)

60 years ago, on 27 January 1945, when the soldiers of the Red Army first entered Auschwitz and Birkenau, what remained of those millions of men, women and children, of those millions of lives shattered by the holocaust?

What remains today of the families, those individual destinies, those human beings annihilated in the dark night of the camps?

Through our presence here this morning, through this exhibition and the international ceremony this afternoon, we testify to the fact that there remains today the remembrance of those lives, each worthy of our deepest respect. We are haunted by the memory of their humanity. Testimony of their martyred lives imposes a duty upon us.

60 years on, Auschwitz and Birkenau remain in the history of mankind as an immense, an appalling calamity.

Here, unheard-of abysses were revealed. The criminal insanity of Nazism came to cast doubt on the very essence of humanity.

Here, a State apparatus led an enterprise of extermination that was scientific, systematic and methodical, one for which no comparison exists. The extermination of an entire people across a whole continent.

Evil is embodied in this place; it breaks our hearts and will burn forever in our consciences.

Today, in silence and profoundly moved, we come to reflect and to pay our respects to all the victims of the death camps. Going beyond words that can never be enough, we have come to express our determination before history. Our determination to bear witness, determination to pass on the memory. Our determination to honour. And our determination to act.



To bear witness is a duty for all those who survived the inexpressible.

It is that duty that brings you here this morning. And we can see the price you have paid for your presence and the courage with which you are here to fight against time, time that slips away, that erases. Because of you, the younger generations can hear the voice of truth. You force humankind to think the unthinkable. You are passing on the torch of remembrance. I say thank you to you in particular, dear Simone Veil. I thank you, dear Henry Bulawko. Through you, it is to all those who were witness to the unimaginable that I wish to express the admiration and gratitude of France.

I wish also to express my thanks to the many eminent public figures who have worked to design and create this new exhibition in the French Pavilion. Thank you for giving so much of yourselves to this essential contribution to the furtherance of truth. Thanks are due also to the Polish authorities, whose assistance has made possible the successful conclusion of this indispensable task of remembrance.

In order to express the reality of deportation, you have chosen to illustrate this Tragedy through the fate of individuals. In this Block 20, where the camp's sinister hospital was housed, you have picked out lives that, although singular, are no less representative.

In the emblematic figure of Pierre Masse, we can see those Jews who were Republicans through and through. Born in the Lorraine, a lawyer, a veteran of the Great War, a parliamentarian, a government minister, he wrote, before dying, gassed, after his arrival here: I shall meet my end as what I have always been: a soldier of France and of the Law.

In Georgy Halpern, we see the unbearable fate of the children. Fleeing Austria, his parents thought to find refuge in France. He was arrested in the children's home in the village of Izieu. Georgy died, gassed, on his arrival in Auschwitz on 18 April 1944. He was nine years old.

In Jean Lemberger we see embodied that generation of activists for whom the Communist Party was more than a commitment, it was a life choice. A Jew born in Poland, he was arrested in Paris in 1941, a year before the appalling Vel'd'Hiv round-up. Released, and then rearrested by the French police for his resistance activities, deported to Auschwitz and from there to Flossenbürg, he was set free by the Americans.

In Charlotte Delbo and the women on the train of 24 January 1943, we see the activists and the patriots. They entered Auschwitz singing the Marseillaise... Of those 230 heroines, just 49 survived.

And finally, Sarah and Hersch Beznos, with their children and grandchildren: another decimated family among so many. They arrived on train number 49 on 2



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March 1943, along with several elderly passengers, more than 90 years old... their fate, simply because they were Jews, was to be exterminated, in the holocaust, that absolute crime against humanity.

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To honour their memory, to honour the memory of all those deportees who died tragically in this place of suffering and extermination: that is the duty of all peoples who refuse to accept that the insult of oblivion should be added to this betrayal of human values.

Jews whose arrival in France is lost in the mists of time; Jews who came from Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans seeking asylum in the cradle of human rights; Jews who became French in their hearts, their minds and their language thanks to the Alliance Israélite Universelle, whose president I salute here, my friend Professor Ady Steg, who knows the respect in which I hold him; Jews of all ages, all social classes, all backgrounds, who contributed so much to our country, to our culture, to our civilization, caught up in the criminal madness of the Nazis: your children, your families, your fellow countrymen remember you. Remembrance of you, of that world that once was, is for France more than simply painful. It is an awareness of error. It is a demand for acceptance of responsibility.

Resistance workers, political and trade-union activists, patriots, all condemned because they were driven by a certain concept of humanity, the nation, society, France, your motherland, deported for refusing to submit, to compromise: you will be forever in our hearts. I thank all those who have worked to give back their names to each and every one. Their names, the only grave markers history can offer these men, women and children.

The exhibition that I have just visited with profound emotion expresses the universality of each of these individual destinies, to which I wish to pay homage in the name of our nation. When we remember each and every one of them, we give them justice. We prevail over their executioners, who promised them oblivion.

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To remember is to be present. But it also means to take action.

Action, that was the choice, in the past, of those thousands of Righteous Among the Nations, men and women of France, from every social class, every faith, who defied every danger to remain loyal to the universal values that have made our country great. To say no when there was still time. The Righteous Among the Nations remain with us as an example, for us all and for our young people, an example of the commitment, the individual ethic, the fraternity that are the sole source of the strength and exemplary qualities of a people.



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Action, today and tomorrow, means building a society in which such a monstrous, criminal enterprise is simply unthinkable.

We do so in France by firmly maintaining the demand for remembrance, a political duty of truth and responsibility.

It is in this spirit that in 1995 our country acknowledged the reality of its history. The nature of that for which it had been responsible. It is in this spirit also that our teachers have the duty and the task of handing down untiringly to all our young people the whole truth about those years. Reminding them of our history to ensure that the memory never fades. Enabling them to share in values of tolerance and respect for human dignity.

It is in this spirit that we shall deploy the whole rigour of the law implacably against all those who set out to deny the horror of what occurred. To deny the reality of the occupation and the deportations. To deny the reality of the gas chambers and the crematoria. To deny the reality of the holocaust. Wherever the unacceptable raises its head once again, we shall combat it resolutely.

We also take action on our continent, through our determined commitment to build a Europe standing together in peace, freedom and democracy. A Europe that is strong and proud of the humanist principles that unite its members, aware of all the tragedies that have punctuated its long history. A Europe in which hatred, intolerance and fanaticism wither on the vine. Here more than in any other place, in this seat of remembrance, we can see just how much Europe is, first and foremost, a shared memory.

We take action around the world through our resolute commitment to peace, the defence of human rights and justice.

It is for that reason that France mobilized her energies to support the adoption of the Rome Statute in 1998 and why she will continue to support the principle and the permanent implementation of international criminal justice. Some forms of interference are legitimate. Crimes against humanity must find refuge and respite nowhere.

France will never fail to shoulder her responsibilities, on her national territory and in the international community, in order to prevent such returns to the shadowy darkness of history.

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Ladies and gentlemen, I am thinking particularly of the young people from Longjumeau who have come with us today.

Will we be capable of keeping faith with the memory of the victims of the holocaust?



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Will we be capable of handing down to future generations the painful heritage of the past century, in all its appalling truth?

Will we be capable of drawing from history lessons for the building of a society based on respect, dialogue and tolerance?

In answer to these questions, listen to those Charlotte Delbo, and all her companions in suffering, ask us:

Oh you who know

Did you know that hunger makes bright the eyes

That thirst dims their shine

Oh you who know

Did you know that you can see your mother dead

And yet not cry

Oh you who know

Did you know that in the morning you want to die

And in the evening you are afraid...

Did you know that suffering has no limits

Horror no frontiers

Did you know

You who know

Ladies and gentlemen,

Yes, we know, we shall never forget.

We shall never abandon our idea of humanity and its dignity.

Conscious of all the irreparable acts this place has witnessed, we shall go away this evening more determined than ever to build a future of tolerance, justice and peace./.

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