



Speech by M. Jacques CHIRAC, President of the Republic, at the national ceremony in honour of the righteous of France

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Paris, 18 January 2007

Prime Minister,
President of the Senate,
President of the National Assembly,
Ministers,
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Members of Parliament,
President of the Foundation for the Memory of the Shoah, Dear Simone Veil,
President of Yad Vashem,
Chief Rabbi of France,
Ladies and gentlemen,

65 years ago, in an almost completely enslaved Europe, Nazi barbarity decided on the implementation of the Final Solution. A horrifying ideology made terror reign: a racist ideology based on the criminal, insane belief that some men were by nature "superior" to others. And this at the heart of a continent considering itself to be the culmination of civilization.

They were countless, the women and men whom the Nazis condemned to death solely because of their origin, like the Gypsies, because of their religious or political beliefs, sexual orientation and disability. But it was against the Jews that Nazi insanity was unleashed with the greatest cruelty and systematic violence. It was they who suffered the most terrible death toll: six million human beings murdered in indescribable conditions. The virtual disappearance of the Jews from Europe. The Holocaust.

As in a nightmare, the West found itself thrown back to the blackest times of barbarity. By exterminating the Jews, Hitler basically wanted to destroy the whole Judeo-Christian civilization, whole several millennia-old European civilization: the invention of democracy, in Athens; the birth of a civilization founded on law, in Rome; and the humanist message of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century.



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In France itself the country of the Enlightenment and the Rights of Man, the country where so many great men rose up to fight for the honour of Captain Dreyfus, the country which made Léon Blum prime minister a dark shroud of resignation, cowardice and compromised principles covered up the colours of liberty, equality and fraternity. The Vichy government disgraced itself by, on its own initiative, enacting on 3 October 1940 the sinister Ordinance on the Status of Jews, which excluded Jews from virtually all positions in society. The Jews of France were all the more stupefied by this State anti-Semitism because their country had been the first in Europe, back in 1791, to grant them citizens' rights. They loved their country passionately. They fought for it, like Marc Bloch and so many others, in 1914 and 1939: suddenly, before their incredulous eyes, the Republic abdicated, laid down its arms to Pétain and Laval and yielded to a vengeful clique, full of hate.

65 years ago, in France there was the shame of the first convoy of deportees, on 27 March 1942. There was the German order of 7 June and the ignominy of the yellow star. There was the irreparable crime of Vel d'Hiv, on 16 and 17 July. From 26 to 28 August, there was the roundup of thousands of foreign Jews in unoccupied France.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There was the darkness. But there was also light. France, starving, terrorized and cut in two by the demarcation line, was stunned by the scale of the defeat. But very quickly, voices were raised. As early as 11 November 1940, de Gaulle wrote from Libreville to the World Jewish Congress saying that the Jewish status would have no validity in Free France. He denounced the violation, by Vichy, "of the principles of freedom and equal justice on which the French Republic was founded". Then, in the worst collapse of our history, at a time even when the Wehrmacht still seemed invincible, great numbers of French women and men were to show that the values of humanism were rooted in their souls. Everywhere, they took in, hid, saved risking their own lives children, women, men persecuted because they were Jews. In this waking nightmare which the Jews had been living in since 1940, France, their France, in whom they had so fervently believed, hadn't disappeared. In the depths of the country, a gleam of hope was emerging. It was fragile, faltering. But it existed.

There was the town hall secretary who provided Jewish families with papers and convinced the village's inhabitants to share their food ration coupons: the courage of a single person crystallized the generosity of everyone. There was the couple running a hotel who found on their doorstep a starving, exhausted man who had escaped from a police roundup: they sheltered him for two of those terrible years. There was the baker who recognized an arrested adolescent and alerted the boy's headmaster: warned, a gendarme, who was a member of the Resistance, released the young man. Thanks to this human chain of solidarity and courage, a life was saved. There was the Latin teacher who, right to the end, tried to protect the pupil he was putting forward for the concours general (1). There was the concierge who, on hearing the squealing of the brakes of the German lorries, went round all the Jewish occupants in her block of flats to



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tell them to stay behind their closed doors and thus saved them from deportation. There was Pastor Trocmø, who gave a lead, in the sheltering of hundreds of fleeing Jews, to a whole village, a whole Haute-Loire plateau: Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, whose name today echoes in our hearts. There were the nuns who gave Jewish children sanctuary, in their convents, their boarding schools. There were the Savoie protestant pastors, who, because of the ways things were, had become professional facilitators, taking refugees over the border. There was the general commanding a military region who refused to lend his troop to supervise the embarkation of deportees, which led to his immediate dismissal. There were all those farmers, whom Agnès Varda showed us with such deep feeling, who took in, loved and protected so many children.

There were so many, many others, from all social classes, from all the professions, from throughout the political spectrum. Thousands of French women and men, who without questioning it, chose what was right. What courage, what nobility of spirit they needed! Everyone knows the risks incurred: the sudden arrival of the Gestapo. Interrogation. Torture. Sometimes even deportation and death.

Some have been recognized as Righteous among the Nations. Others were to remain anonymous, either because they lost their lives helping others, or, in their modesty, hadn't even thought of making their acts known. Some are here today, as are those they saved. I greet them all, with infinite respect. In France, thanks to "concrete active solidarity (solidarité agissante), to use Serge Klarsfeld's fine expression, the Righteous helped protect three quarters of the pre-war Jewish population from deportation, i.e. almost certain death: out of over 75,000 deportees, only around 2,500 survivors returned. And after what unspeakable suffering: you can bear witness to that, dear Simone Veil, you, whose courage, on every occasion, was a model. The majority of the murdered Jews were handed over to the Germans by Vichy and the collaborators. But most of the Jews who were saved were saved by French citizens.

Today, for the nation's tribute to the Righteous of France, recognized or anonymous, we have come together not only to remember our past, but also to enrich our present and our future. "He who saves a single life saves the entire world," says the Talmud, the motto inscribed on the medal of the Righteous. We have to understand the full force of its meaning: by saving one person, every Righteous has in a way saved mankind. This memory, you can be certain, take pride in the fact, will endure from generation to generation.

By this gesture, you prompt us also to question our consciences. Faced with a crucial choice, what makes someone act according to his/her duty, i.e. considering the other person for what he/she is, a human person before all else? For some Righteous, it's a matter of religious faith, and those, let's not doubt it, hear the message of the Church in its truth. Others, sometimes the same people, belong to long oppressed groups, like the protestants, or were viscerally hostile to Vichy's policy. But for everyone, it was a reaction coming from the innermost depths of the heart, the noblest expression of what is called charity.



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All of them all of you had the courage to see and understand the anguish with the eyes of the heart. That courage galvanized Monsignor Saligge, the archbishop of Toulouse, who was instrumental in making French Catholics realize the need for action. Despite being disabled and cloistered in his Episcopal Palace, he managed to portray, in his admirable pastoral letter, the reality of unjustifiable suffering endured by people whose only crime was to have been born. This courage to see and understand with the eyes of the heart was found everywhere: in a neighbour you barely knew who, without asking questions, welcomed your family when the militia was knocking on doors

You, the Righteous of France, have conveyed to the nation an essential message, for today and tomorrow: the refusal of indifference and blindness. The clear demonstration through deeds that values are not disembodied principles, but are absolutely necessary when a concrete situation arises and we can open our eyes.

Now more than ever, we must heed your message: the fight for tolerance and fraternity, against anti-Semitism, discrimination, and racism in all its forms is one which is continually being refought. Anti-Semitism raged in the 1930s and 1940s because it was not condemned firmly enough. Because it was, in a way, tolerated as one opinion among others. That is the lesson of those dark years: if we compromise with extremism, we must realize that we offer it a breeding ground and sooner or later we will pay the price. Faced with extremism, there is only one attitude: rejection, intransigence. And we must fight mercilessly against Holocaust denial, a crime against the truth, an absolute perversion of the soul and spirit, the most heinous, most contemptible form of anti-Semitism.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Righteous chose fraternity and solidarity. They embody the very essence of man: free will. The freedom to choose between good and evil, according to one's conscience. Here, where the nation honours her great men, she expresses her respect and esteem to all of them. Faithful to her founding principles, you also embody what is most universal about France. Thanks to you, thanks to other heroes across the centuries, we can look France in the eye and face up to our history: sometimes we see profoundly dark moments. But we also and especially see the best and the most glorious of them. Our history has to be taken as a whole. It is our heritage, our identity. It's on the basis of our history and by mapping out new paths that we can step into the future, our heads held high. Yes, we can be proud of our history! Yes, we can be proud to be French!

What the Republic's collapse in June 1940, the tragic illusion of turning to Pétain, and the dishonour of Vichy also teach us is just how fragile a nation is. Today, comfortable in our certainties, many feel that France is eternal, that democracy is natural, that you can boil solidarity and fraternity down to our social security system. In a society which despite its difficulties is prosperous and stable, the idea of happiness too often seems reduced to the satisfaction of material needs. We must heed your message. A nation is a community of women and men supporting one another, bound together by shared values and a common destiny. We are all guardians of a fragment of the national



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community, which itself exists only if each of us feels fully responsible for it. At a time when individualism and the lures of antagonism are on the rise, what we must see in the mirror offered us by every human face is not his/her difference but what's universal to us all. To those who ask what it means to be French, to those who ask what France's universal values are, you, the Righteous, brought the most magnificent response at the darkest moment of our history.

In the name of France, on behalf of the entire nation, I bow to you today with respect and gratitude.

(1) competitive examination with prizes, open to secondary school children.

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