

POLAND

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Remarks
by Piotr A. Świtalski, Ph. D.
Undersecretary of State
Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland
at the OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism and on Other Forms of
Intolerance
(Cordoba, 8 – 9 June 2005)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Intolerance and xenophobia have many forms. None of them, even the most innocent one, is acceptable. It is worth remembering it now. We are having this meeting at the time of discussion on the future of Europe and its borders. Europe is going through a challenging debate. The future of European integration is at stake. Sometimes the debate takes an emotional dimension. But emotions always open space to populism and populism sometimes exploits stereotypes. We must not allow the discussion having xenophobic undertones. It is important as we go through the debate that the fundamental values upon which integration is based are reaffirmed – one of them is tolerance, openness and respect for diversity.

Having said this, let me focus my remarks on the subject of anti-Semitism. This year we commemorated 60th Anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz concentration camp as well as 60th Anniversary of the end of the Second World War. All of us in Europe remember well that the biggest, most horrific mass murder in the history of humankind, borne out of hatred, happened

here on the Old Continent. Although one would have thought that after the Holocaust anti-Semitism would never again make its presence felt, even as anti-Semitism has been moved into the margins of social life, many countries still encounter it.

Polish people feel an imperative to approach this issue in a special manner. Poland has for many centuries served as the homeland to the majority of Jews living in diaspora around the world. Here they found refuge from persecution. To this day almost half of the Jewish nation traces its roots to the former and present-day Polish territories.

There is yet another reason behind this imperative - the crime of the Holocaust was committed on Polish soil, though the executioners' hands were not Polish. Poland has become the guardian and custodian of places commemorating the biggest planned mass murder in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, Majdanek, Bełżec as well as many others. The genocide committed on Polish citizens during the Second World War had many names. Along with those I mentioned there were also places like Palmiry or Katyń. They all have a sacred place in our memory. We paid tribute to many thousands of Poles who risked their lives to save the Jews from the Holocaust fate, but we also have the courage to admit that there were incidents when the persecuted Poles, at the instigation of enemy or driven by a vile desire for self-enrichment, themselves turned into persecutors of Jews. It must be emphasised, however, that these were isolated incidents. Following Poland's regaining of independence in 1989 we have been able to face up to our past. Jedwabne, a small town north - east of Warsaw, where Poles participated in murdering Jewish people, has become a symbol of the fair and sincere way we have been accounting for history.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The several speakers mentioned the necessity of education. That is of utmost importance in particular for young people. There is no other way in which we could ensure that the future generations are immunised against the disease of contempt and hatred. Such an education must be based on the historical truth. I think that we cannot in all of our conscience build the future without fully comprehending the past. However, every now and then, attempts are made to relativise the horrible crime that was committed, or shift the responsibility on those who were not the executioners. Let me make it clear, every time the reference to the term “Polish death camps” is made, there will be a strong and immediate reaction from the Polish government and public opinion to such statements in the media. This term is an offence to the memory of millions of Poles and Jews murdered during the Second World War.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I believe that the forthcoming discussions will focus on serious challenges and dilemmas. What needs major consideration is how to raise a new generation free of racial prejudice, and moreover what can be done to eliminate the language of xenophobia and racial hatred from public discourse, without at the same time jeopardising freedom of expression. We should reflect on how to ensure that patriotism, a justified pride in one’s homeland and belonging to one’s nation is not constructed in opposition to the “others”. Poland has a lot of experience in this sphere and I am convinced that we will be able to share it with you.

Every nation has to come to terms with its own past regardless how painful it can be. You cannot build your national identity only on your days of glory. You must remember your days of pain and shame as well. If all nations

along this table follow this philosophy we would be less divided by the interpretation of history.

Today, let us make a critical analysis of our commitment within the OSCE. We must end up with a reflection on how the OSCE's assets can be used to advance the goals of this Conference. This process is not intellectual only, it is political and it must be catalyst for practical measures.

Thank you all for your attention.