

Remarks by Pavel Svoboda, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic

OSCE Conference on Anti-Semitism and on Other Forms of Intolerance

Cordoba, 8 – 9 June 2005

Mr. Chairman,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me make a few remarks on behalf of the delegation of the Czech Republic.

It is only fitting that this conference takes place in southern Spain, a region that almost one thousand years ago began to flourish thanks to a climate of tolerance between the Christians, Moors and Jews. There is a clear analogy with Prague, the capital city of my country. Throughout its history, Prague has seen periods of tolerance that mostly proved short-lived, but yet gave rise to a similar symbiosis of cultures, in which the Jewish intellectual tradition came to play an irreplaceable role.

Looking back, it is beyond dispute that every period of such free coexistence between Judaism and other religions and philosophies enriched our country and our national culture. This potential was, unfortunately, often neglected and even deliberately destroyed. Also in our country, the status of Jews as equal citizens was not always taken for granted. Although anti-Semitism is not a defining moment in the socio-cultural reality of our nation, we cannot close our eyes to the fact that it has always been present in our society, though mostly in latent forms. We saw this form of intolerance carried to terrifying extremes in the years of Nazi occupation, when 80,000 of our Jewish fellow citizens lost their lives and many others went through horrible ordeals. The Holocaust has left its traumatic marks on several generations and will always be engraved in Czech historical memory.

Although today anti-Semitism as such is rather a marginal phenomenon in our country, we certainly cannot afford to be complacent about it. Increasingly visible manifestations of anti-Semitism in some countries within the sphere of European civilization are a constant reminder that the roots of this phenomenon, the general human tendency towards prejudice and hatred for everything different, have not been and perhaps will never be pulled out completely. And it is sad to see anti-Semitism on the rise in today's Europe that claims to be more interlinked, friendlier, "without frontiers". This is happening in spite of all the lessons learned from the genocide inspired by anti-Semitism in the historically recent period of the Second World War.

Despite evidence that many present manifestations of anti-Semitism are nothing more than a convenient outlet for quite unrelated social and political frustrations, we still do not have a satisfactory answer to the perpetual question – what is the driving force behind the exceptional psycho-social dynamism of this phenomenon.

Much has been said about the root causes of anti-Semitism as the perhaps most distinctive form of religious and ethnic intolerance. We can approach the problem from various angles. In my opinion, it is especially inspiring – and relevant, in the European context – to look at the relationship between tolerance and identity. I am convinced that a reflection of one's own identity is one of the ways to cure not only the consequences, but also the causes of anti-Semitism.

In my opinion, only people who are quite sure about their identity, people who realize where “myself” ends and “yourself” begins, are really capable of tolerance. In brief: Europe's present problem with anti-Semitism is part of its identity problem. It is certainly not a coincidence that the question of European identity has arisen, in sharp contours, on the soil of the European Union.

You certainly know about the problems encountered during the negotiations on the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe. An explicit reference to the Judeo-Christian roots of Europe in the preamble was rejected, but then the talks on Turkey's accession started and everybody was suddenly upholding exactly this idea, even if not in so many words. I do not hesitate to call this a sort of schizophrenia. To name just one of the symptoms: an article on the values of the European Union was included in the Constitutional Treaty; however, only after the signature of the Treaty the Netherlands Presidency organized a conference on European values. And the conference showed that we are not able to define our shared values as long as we deny our Judeo-Christian roots.

An interesting attempt to define our shared values said that European values are concentrated in the concept of welfare state. I would just point out that the concept is based on full respect for every individual and that this respect is inherent in Judaism as well as Christianity. The founder of modern Czechoslovak statehood, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, once said that states survive only as long as they adhere to the values on which they are built. And this takes me to a provocative question: how can Europe survive if it is incapable to formulate, let alone fulfil, its values? The Roman Empire fell because its decadent citizens were no longer willing to defend the values of their state.

Finally, one more remark: no reasonable person would certainly question the important role of tolerance in resolving the problems of our time. Lack of tolerance is increasingly evident worldwide: growing manifestations of racism, xenophobia and hatred for various groups of population because of their different religion, colour, citizenship, and so on. It is not by coincidence that tolerance has become a natural motto of this conference. And in connection with my topic, I would like to point out one more danger: to be tolerant does not mean to surrender a part of one's identity to someone else. Pressures in this respect do occur, much too often, in European “realpolitik”. An example of a great personality, tolerant and yet self-assured and never betraying his identity, can be the recently deceased Pope John Paul II.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In my brief remarks I could only touch on some issues that arise from the aims of this two-day meeting. I wanted to underline that, as long as Europe wants to seek a remedy for intolerance, including anti-Semitism (and to eliminate its causes, not only its consequences) it must draw strength from its own identity and its roots. This seemingly logical thing is, regrettably, far from a rule in today's Europe.

Thank you for your attention.