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ON ANTI-SEMITISM

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am speaking here today not as President of the Polish PEN Centre, nor as Chairman of the Poland-Israel Association, nor as an honorary citizen of the State of Israel, but as a human being (born in 1922) and contemporary witness who was involuntarily forced to experience the unimaginable consequences of intolerance and hatred. Like my Jewish friend Elie Wiesel - who was originally meant to speak today - I, a Polish Catholic, belong to a generation that has personal experience of helplessness in the face of evil. I also spent seven months in Auschwitz. Finally, we are linked by an enduring collective feeling of shame for Europeans and for their passiveness and the failure of the European and American tactics of the time.

For most of us, concentration camps and extermination camps are the culmination of the persecution of the Jews, a devastating symbol of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust. Much more shocking, in my eyes, however, is the calm and calculated origin of the tragedy that was soon to take concrete form in Auschwitz and other extermination camps at a convivial lunch-time meeting at Wannsee in Berlin on 20 January 1942, a meeting that had already come to a close by early afternoon of the same day. The events that took place in those few hours, however, represented an unprecedented case of meticulously organized mass extermination of millions of victims, the birth of a terrifying idea thought up by the minds of educated people in an ostensibly civilized European country with long traditions. It is the best proof of how quickly any type of tolerated defamation, irrespective of where and under what circumstances, can grow out of all conceivable proportions. It is only a short step from the burning of books to the burning of people. No tolerance for intolerance is therefore the first and supreme principle on which methods to combat anti-Semitism should be based. This is the only way of preventing history from repeating itself.

Acts of cruelty in the past, however terrible they might have been, are not sufficient on their own as a deterrent and warning. This is why anti-Semitism has returned in spite of Auschwitz and the largely successful attempt to exterminate an entire nation. One way in which people of different national or ethnic groups, in many cases living side by side, can understand each other is through an unrestricted exchange of opinion. A free society in which different opinions can be stated without hindrance is the basic prerequisite for raising people who are free of prejudices and are not guided in their judgement of themselves or of others by stereotypical thinking.

The ability to change continuously is the reason why anti-Semitism reappears every epoch in a new form. As the renowned Austro-Hungarian political writer Paul Lendvai said, the current version is often “anti-Semitism without Jews”, a form of anti-Semitism that prefers veiled attacks to direct persecution. Thus anti-Semitism is sometimes masked as “anti-Zionism”, enabling base instincts to be manipulated and resentments to be revived.

Tadeusz Mazowiecki, who was to become the first non-communist prime minister of Poland after it gained its independence, wrote in this context back in 1960 when he was a young journalist about the “anti-Semitism of well-meaning and respectable people”. He said that on the face of it open, active anti-Semitism had disappeared from our lives but that there was still a form of anti-Semitism with a hidden face. Above all, there was still the widespread phenomenon in our society of “soft anti-Semitism”, a deeply rooted and covert contempt or quite simply the anti-Jewish myth which, like a glowing ember, would not be difficult to fan into flames again.¹

The text that I have just quoted is not therefore directed at active anti-Semites, whose fanaticism is in any case beyond discussion. It is aimed at the average citizen in Poland and elsewhere in whom anti-Semitic thoughts, left over from the past or newly planted, continue to flourish and rise to the surface when a suitable occasion arises. As the great Polish Jew and professor of medicine Ludwik Hirszfild used to say, the greatest tragedy of the Jews is not the hatred of the anti-Semites, but the well-meaning and respectable person who says “a nice person, even if he is a Jew”.

This dangerously insidious breeding ground for anti-Semitism is one that can be eliminated through sensible education. With the benefit of historical hindsight we have a clear idea of its potential consequences. We also have clear guidelines to help us to nip any expression of hatred in the bud and prevent the recurrence of the type of outbreaks that have taken place in the past. It is a responsible task calling for different measures.

The first thing that is required is a strong commitment by political elites, but also by intellectuals and the media. An example of the enormous role that the media can play is the popular television series “Holocaust” from the 1970s, which presented the trauma of Nazism and the extermination of the Jews in a very accessible manner. Its impact was based on the presentation of very complex historical processes through the stories of two fictional families, one German and the other Jewish, against the background of real events. This film, although not a historical document in the real sense of the word, left a much more telling impression than the trials of war criminals.

Second, all forms of active rejection of anti-Semitism or intolerance in general should be promoted. Hatred, animosity and misanthropy have different faces today, of which terrorism is only one.

Lastly, educational strategies must be devised to remove any basis for anti-Semitism now or in the future. Yesterday and the day before in the historical city of Krakow, a few dozen kilometres from Auschwitz-Birkenau, a conference was held on the role of education in commemorating the extermination camps. It was attended by intellectuals, educators and historians, including visitors from the Yad Vashem Institute and the Holocaust Memorial

¹ T. Mazowiecki, *Der Antisemitismus der gutmütigem und anständigen Menschen*, [in:] T. Mazowiecki, *Partei nehmen für die Hoffnung*, Freiburg 1990, p. 97-98.

Museum in the United States of America. The conference focused in particular on educational strategies at an academic level that would effectively highlight the fundamental relationship between intolerance, be it with a religious or ethnic background, and anti-Semitism. The history of Europe has shown only too clearly that wherever intolerance in thought or deed is allowed to exist without hindrance in public, the Jews are always ultimately affected. Intolerance has also served throughout history and in various forms as an effective instrument to deliberately oppress entire nations. Mention might also be made in this context of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews on the site of the former Jewish ghetto in Warsaw – a unique initiative in Europe which, with the help of modern technology, will provide information about the legacy of generations of Polish Jews and the flourishing political, economic and cultural life of large Jewish communities over the centuries.

In concluding, I should like to take this opportunity to thank those responsible for enabling the Netherlands Chairmanship to organize this long overdue international conference on such an important and sometimes “sensitive” subject. Personally, I am of the opinion that there is no such thing as a sensitive subject, but only people who do not have sufficient courage to discuss difficult problems in public. I should like to emphasize that this is the first event within the OSCE framework devoted exclusively to anti-Semitism. It is an initiative that has aroused an enormous amount of interest, as can be seen alone from the high-ranking representatives of the participating States who are here today. The attendance of invited specialists also guarantees discussion at a high level.

I should like to end my comments with a quotation from the book by Tadeusz Mazowiecki that I mentioned earlier. He says that “the fight against anti-Semitism is neither meritorious nor a gesture of compassion; it is not only a fight for the dignity of the Jews, but equally a fight for our own dignity. A fight for the dignity of all.”²

² *Ibid*, p. 121-122.