



British Embassy Athens

Speech on the Holocaust Remembrance Day commemoration event

By Ambassador John Kittmer

(Thessaloniki, 1 February 2015)

Mr Regional Governor, Mr President of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki, All who are here today to honour, commemorate, to pay their deep respects:

Seventy years ago, on 27 January 1945, the Red Army liberated the remaining prisoners at the death camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau. After most had already been evacuated on a death march, only 7,500 remained in the camp, to receive the warm and live-giving embrace of freedom. Those who remained had survived an experience which, however much it has been told and retold over the seventy intervening years, is incomprehensible, beyond imagining, numbing to those of us born in the generations after the end of the Second World War.

Indeed, as I prepared this address today, I wondered how I could marshal language, any language that would be sufficient to the trust you have placed in me today: the trust of honouring the memory of six million people, including 1.5 million children, whose lives were brutally and systematically exterminated by the agents of a barbarous and irrational ideology.

One of our great Jewish intellectuals and writers has said that:

"The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason. To speak of the *unspeakable* is to risk the survival of language as creator and bearer of humane, rational truth. Words that are saturated with lies or atrocity do not easily resume life." [Steiner]

In these terms, to talk of the Holocaust – the lies that sustained it, the atrocities that underpinned and constituted it – is to risk the humanity and rationality of language itself. Can something so monstrous, so unreasoning and pitiless, so industrial in its scale be subject to mere words?

And yet, we are here today because words, however inadequate they are, matter. We here today know that to speak about the Holocaust is our moral duty. To transmit its terrible knowledge is a sacred task. We know that through our words, our words of humility, we must educate and commemorate. And we know that education and commemoration are our greatest defence against the Holocaust's repetition and the barbarous ideology that caused it. In every generation, we need to learn and apply the lessons it taught my grandparents' generation.

This year, the country I represent is proud to hold the chairmanship of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. The Alliance, which now has 31 member countries, 8 observer countries and 7 permanent international partners, aims to mobilise and coordinate support for Holocaust education, remembrance and research, both nationally and internationally.

The Alliance's activities are based on the Stockholm Declaration, which sets out its founding principles. This year we are marking 15 years since the Stockholm Declaration was first made. Five days ago, in honour of the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the members of the alliance reaffirmed the Declaration and the solemn commitments which our Governments undertook in 2000. Let me read you the terms of the reaffirmation:

“The unprecedented character of the Holocaust will always hold universal meaning for us. We are committed to remembering and honouring its victims, to upholding the terrible truth of the Holocaust, to standing up against those who distort or deny it and to combatting antisemitism, racism and prejudice against the Roma and Sinti.

We are determined to continue to develop our international cooperation on Holocaust education, remembrance and research and the prevention of future genocides.

That is our reaffirmation.”

Since we assumed the chairmanship last year, it has been my great privilege to work with Jewish Communities, Jewish institutions and the Greek Government, in furtherance of the Alliance's aims in Greece.

We have aimed to support commemoration, to reflect on the role of education and to make a contribution to research on how the Holocaust is understood in Greece. The research we are supporting, with the collaboration of our Romanian and Canadian colleagues, will be launched toward the end of March, in Athens and in this great city.

Five days ago, my Prime Minister renewed Britain's promise to remember. In response to the work of the Holocaust Commission, the British Government has pledged £50m to set up a prominent and striking new national memorial to the Holocaust; to create a world-class centre of learning about the Holocaust; and to establish an endowment to secure the long-term future of Holocaust education.

My Prime Minister was clear that we will preserve the memory of the Holocaust. He said:

“We will not allow any excuses for anti-Semitism in our country. We not let any form of prejudice destroy the multi-faith, multi-ethnic democracy we are so proud to call our home. We will teach every generation the values of respect and tolerance that we hold dear. And we will ensure that they can learn from the stories of our Holocaust survivors long after we are all gone.”

Here in Thessaloniki, the Jewish Community, with support from the Municipality and many others, has plans to build a Holocaust Memorial and Education Centre, at the railway station from which the Jewish population of this city – the Mother of Israel, the Jerusalem of the Balkans – was deported. Those plans inspire me, as I hope they inspire you.

Last weekend, it was my privilege to lead a delegation of members of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance here to Thessaloniki. Most of us had already read and learned in the history books about the great Jewish Community that existed here, and about its murderous destruction at Nazi hands. We knew that Nazis attempted not only to exterminate the population, but also to erase its culture and memory.

In this city, which was animated for centuries by the rhythms, pulse and genius of its Jewish Community, we still largely have to understand the Holocaust by reading absence: the absence of the great cemetery, the absence of the synagogues, the absence of the great houses of commerce and the community centres. The Jewish Community is, of course, small now, but it has heart and soul and brains. The memorial in this square, the new memorial on the site of the cemetery, and the plan for a memorial and centre at the railway station are essential ways of combating the Nazi aim of erasure, of oblivion, of silence.

Here in Greece and elsewhere our task is an urgent one. Antisemitism and racism – the genocidal impulse – are with us still. The terrible events in France and Belgium. The desecration of monuments. The Holocaust denials. The rise of political parties that give new life to old hatreds and old lies. All of this demands our attention, our commitment, our action.

Last week, I met here a Holocaust survivor, a man known to you all, with a quiet manner and a great radiance. He told me his name was Heinz Kounio, and he gave me a copy of his book about his experiences in the death camps. These simple gestures – the telling of a name, the transmission of experience in the form of a gift, the reading of the book – are at the heart of the transmission of memory.

My words today bear witness to that memory and it is only fitting that I should close with the authoritative and morally compelling words of a survivor, with Mr Kounio's words:

“My published chronicle is another witness to the atrocities committed in the Holocaust. We must publish these stories. We must one day succeed in wiping out ignorance and prejudice. We must also make people morally conscious, so that NEVER AGAIN will the world stand idly by and allow a whole people to be exterminated”

Amen, I say, to that._