

**Speech by the President of the Republic of Poland. Aleksander
Kwaśniewski for the "Remembering the Past, Shaping the Future" session
organized by the Holocaust History Museum at Yad Vashem, Jerusalem
(March 16, 2005)**

Ladies and Gentlemen!

I am extremely honored and truly moved that I can – along with representatives of so many nations – take part in this extraordinary event here at Yad Vashem. The new Museum makes an indelible impression on all visitors, and is a forceful reminder of the enormity of the tragedy that was the Holocaust. It also inspires us to think of ways in which to keep the memory of those inhuman times alive. I feel especially bound to do so as the proud holder of an honorary doctorate conferred by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Nearly three months have passed since we met in the largest and most horrifying of the Nazi death camps – Auschwitz–Birkenau. Over forty heads of state and government, alongside hundreds of former inmates, paid tribute to the memory of the Jews, Poles, Roma, Russians, Ukrainians, and representatives of other nations murdered there. Still ringing in our ears is the dramatic plea from the Book of Esther invoked in those days: “Let my people live!” Today’s celebrations here in the State of Israel testify to the ultimate failure of the Nazis’ genocidal designs. For we, the descendants of victims and liberators, have gathered here today with a shared commitment to uphold the truth about the past. We owe this commitment to our contemporaries and to posterity, which must be free of hatred, xenophobia, and anti–Semitism.

We Poles are especially concerned that the memory of our Jewish brethren not perish in the ashes of the Nazi death camps. It is common knowledge that until the outbreak of the Second World War Poland was home to the largest Jewish community in Europe. For centuries, Jews had settled in Poland seeking a livelihood and the possibility to cultivate their religion and traditions. The vast cultural and scientific, religious and philosophical legacy created by the Jewish diaspora in Poland has survived and remains alive here in the State of Israel and in many countries throughout the world. Jewish communities and centers of learning made a significant contribution to Polish culture. The centuries we spent living together were ones of mutual inspiration and enrichment.

Efforts are currently being made in Poland to preserve the material heritage of the vibrant world of Polish Jews for future generations, and to commemorate their history for the benefit of all visitors to our country. A Museum of the History of Polish Jews testifying to over eight hundred years of Jewish presence in Poland is being built with the support of public and private funding on the site of the former Warsaw Ghetto. We can rest assured that it will be a unique

world-class institution, a remarkable site of remembrance and meditation, like the memorial opened a year ago on the site of the former Nazi death camp at Belzec.

As President of the Republic of Poland, and a friend of Israel, I am pleased with the very favorable development of relations between our two countries. Dialogue, better understanding and closer ties between Poles and Jews are bearing the desired fruit. Thanks to the multitude of projects involving Polish-Jewish history (such as the Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow or the activities of the Shalom Foundation), we in Poland are now happy to witness a growing interest in Jewish culture, especially among the younger generation. This allows us to look to the future with optimism. I am therefore convinced that meetings of Polish and Israeli youth have a great part to play in overcoming the unfounded stereotypes which have not yet been eradicated in our societies.

It is precisely because of this closeness that we are greatly concerned and saddened by the long-lasting conflict in the Middle East. Together with the entire international community we welcome with great hope the resumption of peace talks and negotiations. The new political situation in the region – including the gradual democratization of Iraq, and the changes underway in Lebanon – provides a chance for enduring peace and stability.

I believe that the day will come when Jerusalem, the cradle of many religions and cultures, will again bask in the glow of undisturbed peace.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

The fact that representatives of so many states and nations are meeting in this extraordinary place is in itself hope-inspiring. Over twenty thousand individuals from dozens of countries have been granted the title of Righteous Among Nations, 5,800 of them are Polish nationals. These are clear signs of shared responsibility for the world and of our concern for its future. We are joined together in our belief that history is more than just a series of events. We endeavor to understand its deeper meaning and draw universal conclusions from the lessons it gives us.

The words I now address to you will surely resonate with exceptional force here within the walls of the Yad Vashem Museum:

Let us always have the courage to take a stand against evil before it is too late. Evil must not be tolerated, appeased or overlooked. Peace on Earth will only be possible if democratic countries, respecting human and civil rights, act consistently and in a spirit of solidarity.

Yad Vashem is a cry of protest against politics motivated by cynicism, heedless of ethical standards and indifferent towards evil. Yad Vashem obliges all of us to put human rights in the forefront of the actions of states and nations. To respect human dignity, freedom of religion and the right of everyone to cultivate the traditions precious to them.

I believe that together we can guide the world in that direction. And I want to assure you that Poland will always be among those nations which, mindful of our history, are building the future of the world on the foundations of dialogue and respect among peoples.