

Special Assembly – „Remembering the Past, Shaping the Future” – for the Heads of Delegations & limited entourages, with the participation of the President of Israel and other dignitaries.

Yad Vashem, 16th March 2005

On behalf of the Austrian Federal President Dr. Heinz Fischer, I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation to the persons in charge of Yad Vashem. I congratulate you on the impressive precision and educational wisdom that have gone into the new museum and made it a unique documentation of the Shoah and the historical context leading up to it.

As an Austrian I feel that the exhibition speaks to me in more ways than one. What happened in my home country immediately after Austria had ceased to be a sovereign state in March 1938 was unprecedented at the time. It was the onset of an unprovoked pogrom against Jewish citizens: in his autobiography, the writer Carl Zuckmayr described it in stirring words: “What was unleashed here was nothing but the mindless masses, a blind destructive fury, and the hatred was directed against anything ennobled by nature or the mind. It was a witch Sabbath of the mobbing crowds and a funeral of any human dignity.”

These events of March 1938 initiated the tragic involvement of many Austrians in the Shoah. For about 70,000 Jewish fellow citizens it was to end in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, Sobibor, Madjanek or Treblinka. Many Austrians served as myrmidons of the National Socialist annihilation machinery, thus assuming significant responsibility and incurring their share of the guilt for this greatest crime of mankind.

It has taken Austria a long time to admit to itself that it was not merely a victim of National Socialist aggression, but that Austrians were among the perpetrators and that many actively supported or at least approved of National Socialism.

But there were also Austrians who risked their lives to uphold the spirit of humanitarianism and tried to help their persecuted compatriots. There were – to quote the title of a book by Erika Weinzierl – “Too Few Righteous People” who have followed the voice of their conscience. I would like to thank Yad Vashem for also honouring those who have actively fought to protect human life and dignity.

A few years ago, when I first visited the Yad Vashem Memorial, I was invited at the end of the tour to enter my thoughts in the guestbook: Memory is our fortune, our only fortune. It seemed to me that this quote by Eli Wiesel most appropriately expressed what Yad Vashem represents for all countries on the globe in the 21st century: a place of commemoration that reminds us of the abysmal atrocities which perverted human minds are capable of.

Ladies and Gentlemen, my country considers the inauguration of the new museum also as a remit to pass on the memory of the Shoah from generation to generation. It is of utmost importance in joint educational activities. Education reaches every school and every home. I will therefore see to it that the well-proven cooperation of recent years, which has provided visits to Yad Vashem for Austrian educators and teachers twice a year, will be continued and extended. In this context I would also like to mention the cooperation with the National Fund of the Republic of Austria. Finally I would like to thank all Austrians who have made important private contributions to the Yad Vashem Memorial in recent years.

Ladies and gentlemen, today we are being shown here in Yad Vashem what we have lost and what was destroyed. But Yad Vashem serves also as a reminder of what we must do in order to create a more equitable and democratic society.

Thank you for your attention.