

Speech by
President Ivan Gašparovič of the Slovak Republic
at an extraordinary session of Yad Vashem

Israel, 16 March 2005

Distinguished President of the State of Israel,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Solemn Gathering,

I believe that in this place one can only stand deeply moved by the cruel fate of defenceless people and also by human solidarity and unity that saved the lives of many. The Holocaust is the darkest stain on the history of mankind, when persons belonging to certain nations, in particular the Jews, marked as undesired by the fascist were exterminated in a systemic, premeditated and cruel way. In those days a human being – a Jew became a mere number and implement. They were degradingly marked with a yellow star, degraded, humiliated and eventually sentenced to elimination. I come from a country, which did not escape the brown pest – as we use to call fascism – and, unfortunately, it did not escape the deportations of Jewish fellow citizens, out of whom more than 70 thousands never returned home, either. The period of the WWII was, indeed, painful for Slovakia. On the one hand, there was a regime collaborating with German fascists, and on the other hand, there was a majority of citizens who could never reconcile with the fascist dictate. This was mainly reflected in the Slovak National Uprising that broke out in August 1944, in which the Jewish fellow citizens also participated and, thus, clearly showed their attitudes and will to freedom and democracy. Precisely because of the fact that my country experienced this horrible period and handed over its Jewish fellow citizens mostly to a place of no return my feelings of deep emotions are genuine. I want to assure you that every breath I take makes me feel the *genius loci* of this Memorial, where in addition to memories held in reverence, gratitude to “The Righteous among the Nations” – i.e. the people who put helping other people and humanity above their own safety and certainty, who did not hesitate to risk their life and to peril their closest persons, has also its place. I also admit that I really feel proud to see many Slovak names among the names engraved here. In numbers of saved Jews, Slovakia ranks among the leading countries – this is also a proof that humanity and solidarity enjoy a high credit in my country and that these values are deeply rooted in generations of the Slovaks.

Ladies and Gentlemen, may I tell you how much I appreciate that the Jews – it is the nation which has probably the most painful experience with persecution and extermination – feel the need to pay a tribute and show gratefulness to those who were at their side and who helped them. And they do not do it in an all-embracing way but they do it individually to every single person who took mercy and helped, who did not hesitate to give a helping hand to another person in extreme need. Just as it is necessary to remember the victims of the Holocaust, just as we must not forget them and the circumstances that resulted in that horrible period, so it is necessary to emphasise that the mankind also came to senses due to the Righteous among the Nations. That it were, in particular, these people who moved the conscience of the whole civilisation. And it is in particular the conscience of the mankind and humanity that will always remind us that racism, fascism, atrocity and extermination of people may never again win over humanity, solidarity and democracy. We must inculcate on

us that solidarity, good will to coexistence, and tolerance are the foundations on which the whole human community is built on.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

the Yad Vashem Memorial has been built here to prevent man from ceasing to be a human being and from the emptiness of their conscience. I am confident that mankind will never cease to remember this.

Thank you for your attention. Shalom, chaverim.