

**Speech of the President of the French Republic Mr. Nicolas Sarkozy, on the  
occasion of the presentation of the Legion of Honor to Avner Shalev**

Ladies and gentlemen

Dear Friends

Madam Simone Veil

Mr. Avner Shalev

Mr. Shalev, hosting you here today at the Elysee palace for the Legion of Honor award ceremony, I am honoring not only you but also the museum of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. The reputation and importance of Yad Vashem are to a large extent the result of your determined activity, one that is suffused with passion and inspiration.

You served in your country's army for many years. You were wounded on the Egyptian front. You joined the Ministry of Education and Culture in the year 1980. These years of constant service to your country have given you the force to make Yad Vashem a place of meditation and momentum, equipped to meet the challenge of making Holocaust commemoration meaningful and relevant in the twenty first century.

There exist at least three different forms of Shoah history. The first is the history of the Shoah itself. The second is the history of the way in which we write about the Shoah and how we impart it to the generations who did not witness it personally. The third form is the history of beyond the Shoah - its consequences for Europe and Israel, for Judaism and the essence of Jewish faith, and its consequences for all of humanity, how man looks upon himself, and the lessons he learns.

In every one of these history forms, Yad Vashem, with you at the helm, has played a most considerable role.

Yad Vashem has become the primary point of reference on the subject of the Shoah; the memorial to its heroes and martyrs.

All of this did not come about by chance. It is here that the first two forms of history merge: you went in search of testimonies one by one. You unearthed the proof, the documents, the artifacts. All this gives today's world a guarantee that the history of

the Shoah is written down, that it is forever inscribed in the long unfolding narrative of the history of humanity.

Dispersal, separation, night, ashes, fog, silence, anonymous, forgetting: these are the words used by those who went through this indescribable horror. You counter these words with the methodical research of names, identification of photographs, gathering of testimonies, collection of individual histories and an inexorable narrative of the facts.

In the new Holocaust History Museum inaugurated in March 2005, you sought to narrate the history of the Shoah from the perspective of its victims.

This new museum, of which the Hall of Names is an integral part, has been so designed as to give us an understanding of its victims.

You are deeply convinced that the level of awareness triggered by the new museum gives the visitor a deeper experience, which enhances his commitment to higher values. And then, there is “after” the Holocaust, the consequences for the future of the world, humanity and the human spirit.

Yes Mr. Shalev, I said it during my nomination speech on the fourteenth of last January in front of my political family, having decided to run for the Presidency of the Republic. I said: “The visit to Yad Vashem has changed me.” When I heard the thousands of children’s voices - the murmur of innocent souls- I was deeply moved and I wished for the fulfillment of Ezekiel’s prophesy: “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” I realized that a statesman’s most important mission is to put a stop the foolishness of man by refusing to be carried away by it.

Mr. Chairman, directing Yad Vashem is a calling which takes on a special dimension. I know that the Hebrew words “Yad Vashem” come from the Book of Isaiah: "And to them will I give in my house and within my walls a memorial and a name (a "yad vashem")... that shall not be cut off."

In this city of Jerusalem, so permeated with history, art and architecture, religion and drama, but also filled with hope, a city so emblematic of Jewish history, you have met this enormous challenge: you have given a place of refuge to the abandoned souls, you have given the words back to the victims of the Holocaust, you have taken the

dead out of the mist, you have lit up the night, and you have restored humanity to millions of tortured men, women and children.

This morning, I lack the words to express the honor and emotion I feel as President of the French Republic, to be awarding you with this high distinction.