

Official Hour of Commemoration
by the Government on the occasion of the
Holocaust Memorial Day 2006

Speech by
Prime Minister Otmar Hasler

Liechtenstein National Museum
Vaduz, 27 January 2006

Ladies and Gentlemen

On behalf of the Government, I would like to welcome you warmly to today's Hour of Commemoration. Together, we are here to commemorate the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp and, in this way, the victims of the National Socialist regime. For everyone desiring to help shape our future, this Memorial Day is of special significance, since what happened during the period of the Second World War in Europe must never again become part of our future.

61 years ago today, on 27 January 1945, Soviet troops reached the Auschwitz concentration camp and were able to liberate only the 7500 prisoners who remained. What the Soviet troops saw in Auschwitz was almost impossible to bear, even for these troops who had seen great suffering throughout the war. Over the course of 1689 days between 1940 and 1945, more than a million people died in Auschwitz according to what we know today. These people were gassed, tortured, abused for horrendous "medical" experiments, or they died of illness and hunger. Most of these victims were Jews, but also Poles, Sinti and Roma, Soviet prisoners of war, and inmates of other nationalities. Today, we commemorate them – and above all, we commemorate the total of over six million victims of the National Socialist racial insanity who died in countless internment, concentration, and annihilation camps.

The author and Nobel Prize Laureate Elie Wiesel once said, "To forget the victims is to kill them a second time." To fight this forgetting, the 27th of January has been proclaimed a Holocaust Memorial Day throughout Europe, on the recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. The Government of Liechtenstein has followed this recommendation and has declared the 27th of January to be a nationwide Holocaust Memorial Day in Liechtenstein as well.

Like no other name, Auschwitz – this German name of a small Polish town to the west of Krakow – today stands for an incomprehensible annihilation industry, for boundless contempt for humanity, and for cruelty that cannot be grasped by the resources of human speech without belittling it. For this reason, the 27th of January gives us the occasion to recall the unspeakable and the indescribable that is manifested in the extreme radicalization of hate. Like no other name, Auschwitz also stands for a guilt that can and must never be forgotten. Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, and the numerous other camps remind us how closely together intolerance, violence against those who think differently, and genocide lie. This experience warns us, therefore, to counter decisively every sign of xenophobia and every attack against human dignity.

For this reason, we bear the responsibility that this part of our past always remains present as a warning and a reminder. Only if we rescue from imminent forgetting what Auschwitz stands for can we ensure that crimes such as those perpetrated by the National Socialists remain a part of the past – and only of the past – forever.

Today more than ever, we must fight against this forgetting, since fewer and fewer people remain who can recall the terror of the National Socialists firsthand, and since this part of European history is fading ever faster in light of our day-to-day problems.

Hannah Arendt once called the 20th century the "cruellest in recorded history". Our hope for the new century is therefore that it will be more humane, peaceful, and just than the last century. Accordingly, our responsibility is not only to cultivate our remembrance of the Nazi atrocities, but especially also to immunize the human spirit through education and upbringing against brutality, xenophobia, ideological ignorance, and the gullibility of the masses. Today, we have a precise historical picture of that era. We know the events, the perpetrators, and the victims. But what allowed them to become perpetrators and victims? How could such an inhuman system evolve, and why did the rights and the dignity of human beings lose all practical significance in such a short time? We have to confront such questions if we want to prevent ignorance and intolerance through education and upbringing.

The Liechtenstein Government has therefore decided to further raise the awareness of the population concerning the sources and conflict potential of xenophobia, through public outreach and continuing education. One project is to update the teaching materials for history classes. Another goal is to improve the integration of foreigners on the basis of a new strategy. Where integration is successful, xenophobia hardly has room to grow. In addition to these and other domestic activities, Liechtenstein will also continue to support foreign projects and institutions.

Last April, the Independent Commission of Historians presented its final report on its research concerning the role of Liechtenstein in the Second World War. After a comprehensive investigation of this period of our history, the report concluded that Liechtenstein was not a hub for Nazi assets, and that neither removal of assets, nor Aryanization, nor forced labor took place. Liechtenstein will take the results of this research as an occasion to raise public awareness, for instance in schools. In this way, Liechtenstein will take responsibility for this period of our history.

Despite all public debates and educational efforts, it will continue to be difficult to grasp how the things could have happened that happened under the Nazi regime. Today, we helplessly speak of barbarianism or a discontinuity in the history of civilization. What caused the Nazi arrogance to "decide who or who not should inhabit this earth", as Hannah Arendt once asked?

We cannot answer this question and we will likely never be able to answer it. Nobel Prize Laureate Elie Wiesel, for instance, has spent his life confronting the Holocaust – and yet, as he has said, he has never been able to truly grasp these events.

This incomprehensibility and inconceivability of extreme cruelty ultimately reveals to us that we can never live up to our responsibility through commemoration and awareness-raising alone. This alone does not banish the danger that the abominations of the past may at some point push their way back into the present.

In view of this, the thinking expressed in the words of the French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas gains new importance. Lévinas, who became a prisoner of war at the hands of the Germans himself, would have turned 100 this January. According to Lévinas, the human self is only established through the encounter with another human being. In the face of my counterpart, I recognize his mortality, which in turn makes me aware of my responsibility for the other. This unusual way of thinking in Western intellectual history makes the self dependent on the other. The self is only established through the other, so that this way of thinking represents a parallel sketch to the culture of the self, in which the human being strives to achieve his goals in competition with the other, with the help of ever more complex means.

This way of thinking, in which the human being only achieves dignity by taking responsibility for other human beings, is an appropriate basis for making the 21st century a peaceful and just century, building on experience and education. If we take the occasion of this Memorial Day to look into the faces of the victims of Auschwitz and of other people who have been and continue to be threatened by intolerance and ignorance, we begin to take responsibility for these people. In this way, we in turn establish the basic values of our own existence.