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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

#599

For Immediate Release

April 30, 1981

REMARKS OF ELIE WIESEL,
CHAIRMAN OF U.S. HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL COUNCIL

The East Room

10:09 A.M. EST

CHAIRMAN WIESEL: Mr. President, distinguished members of the Senate and the House, of the diplomatic corps, honored guests, friends: about sadness later. First some words of gratitude. We thank you, Mr. President, for joining us and for participating in this solemn assembly of remembrance. Your presence here today, Mr. President, so soon after the senseless attack upon your person is a tribute to your understanding and concern for human values and is especially meaningful to us. We all know that your being here, Mr. President, is not a ceremonial gesture, but an expression of your sense of history and your dream of a future with hope and dignity for the American nation and for all mankind.

So, we thank you, Mr. President, and we thank our Father in heaven for having spared you. (Applause.) And now with your permission, Mr. President, I would like to read to you or rather to share with you some lines written first by an old Jewish poet and then by a young Jewish poet. The old Jewish poet was named Leivich(?) and he wrote in Yiddish which was the language of the martyrs--the language of those who were killed in those days.

It reads: (Read in Yiddish). The other poem was written by a young boy in Theresienstadt named Mottele and he wrote in that ghetto in those days of awe and fear and sadness, he wrote a poem that reflects more than his own moods, more than his own fate, and I quote, "From tomorrow on I shall be sad. From tomorrow on, not today. What is the use of sadness, tell me? Because these evil winds begin to blow? Why should I grieve for tomorrow today? Tomorrow may be good. Tomorrow the sun may shine for us again. We shall no longer need to be sad. From tomorrow on I shall be sad. From tomorrow on, not today. No, today I will be glad. And every day, no matter how bitter it may be, I will say from tomorrow on I shall be sad, not today."

Mr. President, how does one commemorate the million Motteles and Shloimeles and Leahles and Soreles? How does one commemorate six million victims all descendants of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob? What words does one use? What metaphors does one invoke to describe the brutal and unprecedented extinctions of a world-- thousands and thousands of flourishing Jewish communities survive the fury of the crusades, the hatred of Pogrom, the afflictions of wars and the misery, the shame, the despair of religious and social oppressions only to be swept away by the Holocaust? In all their chronicles and testaments, memoirs and prayers, litanies and poems, the victims stressed one single theme over and over again -- remember, remember the horror, remember. Bear witness. And that is their legacy to us, the living.

Of course, there may be some who'll be asked, "Why remember at all? Why not allow the dead to bury the dead? Is it not in man's nature to push aside memories that hurt and disturb?" The more cruel the wound, the greater the effort to cover it. The more horrifying the nightmare, the more powerful the desire to exorcise it. Why then would anyone choose to cling to unbearable recollections

of emaciated corpses or violations of every human law? Maybe we have not yet learned to cope with the events, intellectually, socially, philosophically, theologically. Perhaps we never will. The more we know, the less we understand. All we can do is remember. But how does one remember? How does one remember and communicate an event filled with so much fear and darkness and mystery that it negates language and imagination? Auschwitz, Mr. President, and since history marks it with the burning seal. Our century, Mr. President, may well be remembered not only for the monuments it erected, or for the astonishing technological advances it made, but most of all for Treblinka and Majdanek, Belsin and Ponar, Auschwitz and Buchenwald. How is one to explain what happened? It could have been stopped or at least slowed down at various stages. One word, one statement, one move -- it was not stopped. Why not?

I'm a teacher, Mr. President. And my students, young, fervent, compassionate American students, often express their puzzlement in my classroom -- why the complacency? Why the tacit acquiescence? Why weren't the Hungarian Jews, for example, warned about their fate? When they arrived in Auschwitz at midnight they mistook it for a peaceful village. Why weren't the railways to Birkenau bombed by either the allies or the Russians? And the Russians were so close.

The calculated viciousness of the executioner, the helplessness of the doomed, the passivity of the bystander -- all these lie beyond our comprehension-- the killers' fascination with death, the victims with hope, the survivors' testimony. A new vocabulary needs to be invented to describe the event. Can you imagine the silence preceeding a selection in a death count? The feel of a man who suddenly understands that he is the last of his family -- the last of the line? Imagine? No, no one can imagine that kingdom. Only those who were there know what it meant to be there -- theirs was the kingdom that will forever remain forbidden and forbidding.

MORE

And yet, and yet, we must tell the tale, we must bear witness. Not to do so would mean to render meaningless the years and the lives that we, those of us who survived, received as a gift, as an offering to be shared and redeemed.

We must tell the tale, Mr. President, and we want to tell it not to divide people but, on the contrary, to bring them together, not to inflict more suffering but, on the contrary, to diminish it, not to humiliate anyone but, on the contrary, to teach others to humiliate no one. This is why we bear witness, Mr. President and friends, not for the sake of the dead. It is too late for the dead. Not even for our own sake. It may be too late for us as well.

We speak for mankind. The universality of the Jewish tragedy lies in its uniqueness. Only the memory of what was done to the Jewish people and through it to others can save the world from indifference to the ultimate dangers that threaten its very existence.

Mr. President, that the survivors have not lost their sanity, their faith in God, or in man, that they decided to build on ruins in Israel or in the United States of America, that they decided to choose generosity instead of anger, hope instead of despair, is a mystery even to us. They had every reason to give up on life and its promise. They did not. Still at times, Mr. President, they are overcome by doubt and fear. The world has not learned its lesson. Anti-Semitic groups spring up more and more and some shamelessly, viciously, deny that the Holocaust ever occurred. In our lifetime fascist groups increase their membership and parade in the streets. Intolerance, bigotry, fanaticism, mass executions in some places, mass starvation in others, religious wars, quasi-medieval upheavals, and of course, ultimately, the nuclear menace and our indifference to it. What is to be done?

Though Jewish, profoundly Jewish in nature, the Holocaust has universal implications, and I believe, we believe, that the memory of what was done may shield us in the future.

Naturally, other nations were persecuted and even decimated by the Nazis and their allies and their collaborators, and we honor their memory. But the Jewish people represented a different target. For the first time in history being became a crime. Jews were destined for annihilation not because of what they said or proclaimed or did or possessed or created or destroyed, but because of who they were.

Is that why we survivors, we Jews, we human beings, are so concerned? And is that why we are so attached to a land where so many survivors have found a haven, pride and refuge and hope? Please understand us, Mr. President. We believe that the subject of the Holocaust must remain separate from politics, but if we plead so passionately for Israel's right not only to be secure but also to feel secure, it is because of Israel's nightmares which are also our nightmares.

Israel is threatened by a holy war, which means total war, which means total annihilation. Mr. President, some may say that these are words, words -- yes, words. But we are a generation traumatized by experience. We take words seriously. The very idea of another Jewish catastrophe anywhere in our lifetime is quite

simply unbearable to us.

Israel must never feel abandoned. Israel must never feel alone. Israel must never feel expendable, Mr. President. We plead with you because it is the dream of our dreams. It is perhaps the pain of our pain but the hope of our hopes. It's an ancient nation of 4,000 years that should not be judged in categories of one day or one incident. Only in its totality can we understand and perceive and love Israel.

We must believe so because there were times, 40 years ago, when Jewish communities felt abandoned and betrayed. In 1943 on April 16th the gallant, young commander in chief of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, Mordechai Anielewits wrote to a friend, and I quote, "We are fighting. We shall not surrender. But as our last days are approaching remember that we have been betrayed." That is what he felt. That is what we all felt. They were betrayed then. To forget them now would mean to betray them again and we must not allow this to happen.

In the Jewish tradition, Mr. President, when a person dies we appoint him or her as our emissary in heaven to intercede in our behalf. Could it be that they, the 6 million Jews, were messengers? But then, then Mr. President and friends, whose messengers are we?

Thank you. (Applause.)

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