PRESIDENT OBAMA AT THE HOLOCAUST DAYS OF REMEBRANCE CEREMONY

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The White House, 23 April 2009

Thank you. Please be seated. Thank you very much. To Sara Bloomfield, for the wonderful introduction and the outstanding work she's doing; to Fred Zeidman; Joel Geiderman; Mr. Wiesel -- thank you for your wisdom and your witness; Speaker Nancy Pelosi; Senator Dick Durbin; members of Congress; our good friend the Ambassador of Israel; members of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council; and most importantly, the survivors and rescuers and their families who are here today. It is a great honor for me to be here, and I'm grateful that I have the opportunity to address you briefly.

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We gather today to mourn the loss of so many lives, and celebrate those who saved them; honor those who survived, and contemplate the obligations of the living.

It is the grimmest of ironies that one of the most savage, barbaric acts of evil in history began in one of the most modernized societies of its time, where so many markers of human progress became tools of human depravity: science that can heal used to kill; education that can enlighten used to rationalize away basic moral impulses; the bureaucracy that sustains modern life used as the machinery of mass death -- a ruthless, chillingly efficient system where many were responsible for the killing, but few got actual blood on their hands.

While the uniqueness of the Holocaust in scope and in method is truly astounding, the Holocaust was driven by many of the same forces that have fueled atrocities throughout history: the scapegoating that leads to hatred and blinds us to our common humanity; the justifications that replace conscience and allow cruelty to spread; the willingness of those who are neither perpetrators nor victims to accept the assigned role of bystander, believing the lie that good people are ever powerless or alone, the fiction that we do not have a choice.

But while we are here today to bear witness to the human capacity to destroy, we are also here to pay tribute to the human impulse to save. In the moral accounting of the Holocaust, as we reckon with numbers like 6 million, as we recall the horror of numbers etched into arms, we also factor in numbers like these: 7,200 -- the number of Danish Jews ferried to safety, many of whom later returned home to find the neighbors who rescued them had also faithfully tended their homes and

businesses and belongings while they were gone.

We remember the number five -- the five righteous men and women who join us today from Poland. We are awed by your acts of courage and conscience. And your presence today compels each of us to ask ourselves whether we would have done what you did. We can only hope that the answer is yes.

We also remember the number 5,000 -- the number of Jews rescued by the villagers of Le Chambon, France -- one life saved for each of its 5,000 residents. Not a single Jew who came there was turned away, or turned in. But it was not until decades later that the villagers spoke of what they had done -- and even then, only reluctantly. The author of a book on the rescue found that those he interviewed were baffled by his interest. "How could you call us 'good'?" they said. "We were doing what had to be done."

That is the question of the righteous -- those who would do extraordinary good at extraordinary risk not for affirmation or acclaim or to advance their own interests, but because it is what must be done. They remind us that no one is born a savior or a murderer -- these are choices we each have the power to make. They teach us that no one can make us into bystanders without our consent, and that we are never truly alone -- that if we have the courage to heed that "still, small voice" within us, we can form a minyan for righteousness that can span a village, even a nation.

Their legacy is our inheritance. And the question is, how do we honor and preserve it? How do we ensure that "never again" isn't an empty slogan, or merely an aspiration, but also a call to action?

I believe we start by doing what we are doing today -- by bearing witness, by fighting the silence that is evil's greatest co-conspirator.

In the face of horrors that defy comprehension, the impulse to silence is understandable. My own great uncle returned from his service in World War II in a state of shock, saying little, alone with painful memories that would not leave his head. He went up into the attic, according to the stories that I've heard, and wouldn't come down for six months. He was one of the liberators -- someone who at a very tender age had seen the unimaginable. And so some of the liberators who are here today honor us with their presence -- all of whom we honor for their extraordinary service. My great uncle was part of the 89th Infantry Division -- the first Americans to reach a Nazi concentration camp. And they liberated Ohrdruf, part of Buchenwald, where tens of thousands had perished.

The story goes that when the Americans marched in, they discovered the starving survivors and the piles of dead bodies. And General Eisenhower made a decision. He ordered Germans from the nearby town to tour the camp, so they could see what had been done in their name. And he ordered American troops to tour the camp, so they could see the evil they were fighting against. Then he invited congressmen and journalists to bear witness. And he ordered that photographs and films be made. Some of us have seen those same images, whether in the Holocaust Museum or when I visited Yad Vashem, and they never leave you. Eisenhower said that he wanted "to be in a position to

give firsthand evidence of these things, if ever, in the future, there develops a tendency to charge these allegations merely to propaganda."

Eisenhower understood the danger of silence. He understood that if no one knew what had happened, that would be yet another atrocity -- and it would be the perpetrators' ultimate triumph.

What Eisenhower did to record these crimes for history is what we are doing here today. That's what Elie Wiesel and the survivors we honor here do by fighting to make their memories part of our collective memory. That's what the Holocaust Museum does every day on our National Mall, the place where we display for the world our triumphs and failures and the lessons we've learned from our history. It's the very opposite of silence.

But we must also remember that bearing witness is not the end of our obligation -- it's just the beginning. We know that evil has yet to run its course on Earth. We've seen it in this century in the mass graves and the ashes of villages burned to the ground, and children used as soldiers and rape used as a weapon of war. To this day, there are those who insist the Holocaust never happened; who perpetrate every form of intolerance -- racism and anti-Semitism, homophobia, xenophobia, sexism, and more -- hatred that degrades its victim and diminishes us all.

Today, and every day, we have an opportunity, as well as an obligation, to confront these scourges -- to fight the impulse to turn the channel when we see images that disturb us, or wrap ourselves in the false comfort that others' sufferings are not our own. Instead we have the opportunity to make a habit of empathy; to recognize ourselves in each other; to commit ourselves to resisting injustice and intolerance and indifference in whatever forms they may take -- whether confronting those who tell lies about history, or doing everything we can to prevent and end atrocities like those that took place in Rwanda, those taking place in Darfur. That is my commitment as President. I hope that is yours, as well.

It will not be easy. At times, fulfilling these obligations require self-reflection. But in the final analysis, I believe history gives us cause for hope rather than despair -- the hope of a chosen people who have overcome oppression since the days of Exodus; of the nation of Israel rising from the destruction of the Holocaust; of the strong and enduring bonds between our nations.

It is the hope, too, of those who not only survived, but chose to live, teaching us the meaning of courage and resilience and dignity. I'm thinking today of a study conducted after the war that found that Holocaust survivors living in America actually had a higher birthrate than American Jews. What a stunning act of faith -- to bring a child in a world that has shown you so much cruelty; to believe that no matter what you have endured, or how much you have lost, in the end, you have a duty to life.

We find cause for hope as well in Protestant and Catholic children attending school together in Northern Ireland; in Hutus and Tutsis living side by side, forgiving neighbors who have done the unforgivable; in a movement to save Darfur that has thousands of high school and college chapters in 25 countries, and brought 70,000 people to the Washington Mall -- people of every age and faith

and background and race united in common cause with suffering brothers and sisters halfway around the world.

Those numbers can be our future -- our fellow citizens of the world showing us how to make the journey from oppression to survival, from witness to resistance, and ultimately to reconciliation. That is what we mean when we say "never again."

So today, during this season when we celebrate liberation, resurrection, and the possibility of redemption, may each of us renew our resolve to do what must be done. And may we strive each day, both individually and as a nation, to be among the righteous.

Thank you, God bless you, and God bless the United States of America.