

**SPEECH BY PRESIDENT GEORGE VELLA AT THE HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL  
COMMEMORATION  
SANT ANTON PALACE  
5 FEBRUARY 2020**

---

MINISTER FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT  
PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY  
EXCELLENCIES  
DISTINGUISHED GUESTS,

I HAVE JUST RETURNED FROM A VISIT TO POLAND WHERE, ON BEHALF OF THE PEOPLE OF MALTA AND GOZO, I REPRESENTED THEM AT THE COMMEMORATION OF THE 75<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE LIBERATION OF THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS OF AUSCHWITZ AND BIRKENAU.

WHEN I FIRST VISITED THIS COMPLEX IN 1963, I WAS STILL VERY YOUNG AND I CAME BACK, NOT ONLY IMPRESSED BY WHAT I HAD SEEN BUT ALSO DETERMINED TO PUT WHAT LESSONS I HAD LEARNT INTO PRACTICE.

AS TIME WENT BY, I BECAME MORE AND MORE FRUSTRATED TO SEE THAT IN SPITE OF ALL THE CONDEMNATIONS, AGREEMENTS AND SOLEMN OATHS TAKEN AT INTERNATIONAL LEVEL THAT THE LESSONS FROM THE HOLOCAUST HAD BEEN LEARNT, FACTS ON THE GROUND WERE PROVING OTHERWISE.

THIS MADE ME REFLECT ON THE FACT THAT WHAT HAD HAPPENED IN NAZI GERMANY WAS NOT A FLUKE OF HISTORY BUT WAS A RECURRENCE OF WHAT HAD HAPPENED OVER THE MILLENNIA OF HUMAN EXISTENCE UNDER DIFFERENT CIRCUMSTANCES, IN DIFFERENT PROPORTIONS AND EVENTUALLY FOR DIFFERENT REASONS AND EXCUSES.

THE END RESULT WAS HOWEVER - THE SAME.

THE COMMON FACTOR WAS THE HUMAN CHARACTER, WITH ITS DARK SIDES, SHADY CORNERS AND BEHAVIOURAL QUIRKS THAT CANNOT EASILY BE DECIPHERED – LET ALONE COMPLETELY UNDERSTOOD.

AUCSHWITZ-BIRKENAU, TOGETHER WITH ALL THE OTHER CONCENTRATION CAMPS ALL OVER EUROPE, STAND AS EVIDENCE OF THE DEPTHS OF DEPRAVITY TO WHICH HUMAN NATURE CAN DESCEND.

THEY ARE IN THEMSELVES WARNINGS TO ALL OF US THAT WHAT HAD HAPPENED IN SETTING UP EVERYTHING THAT LED TO THEIR NEED, WAS NOT JUST A MOMENTARY THOUGHT, BUT A WELL-PLANNED, ORGANIZED, ORCHESTRATED AND FULLY-EXECUTED PLAN – A DIABOLICAL PLAN THAT GATHERED MOMENTUM THE FURTHER DOWN IT TRICKLED WITH AUTHORITY AMONGST THE MILITARY GRADES THAT OBEYED ORDERS.

IN THE PROCESS, THESE MUST HAVE BECOME INSENSITIVE, UNEMOTIONAL, CALLOUS OPERATORS OF THIS WAR MACHINE AND OF THE POLICIES THAT WERE BEING TAKEN TO PROVE THE SUPERIORITY OF THE REICH AND THE NEED TO CLEANSE CIVILIZATION FROM INFERIOR BEINGS, WHO WERE CONTAMINATING THE SUPERIOR RACE.

I HARBOUR SUCH THOUGHTS TODAY PURELY ON THIS PARTICULAR EPISODE IN HISTORY, AND WITH NO PARTICULAR REFLECTION WHATSOEVER ON TODAY'S POLITICAL SCENE.

THIS DARK EPISODE REFLECTS THE WEAKNESS OF HUMAN NATURE.

IT REFLECTS WHAT COULD HAPPEN WHEN INDIVIDUALS LOSE THEIR DETERMINATION TO STAND UP TO WHAT IS MANIFESTLY WRONG. IT SHOWS WHAT COULD HAPPEN WHEN ONE LOSES RESPECT FOR FELLOW HUMAN BEINGS, DENYING THEM THEIR PRIVILEGES, THEN THEIR RIGHTS AND EVENTUALLY EVEN THEIR RIGHT TO LIVE. WHEN THEY ARE IN ACTUAL FACT DE-HUMANISED.

ALL OF THIS SHOULD HAVE PUT US ON THE RIGHT TRACK FOR A BETTER WORLD. THE IMMEDIATE REACTIONS FOLLOWING THE HOLOCAUST POINTED IN THE RIGHT DIRECTIONS.

EVENTUALLY WE SET UP THE UNITED NATIONS WITH ITS SECURITY COUNCIL, AND ALSO INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURTS.

WERE THESE ENOUGH? DEFINITELY NOT.

THE WARNING 'LEST WE FORGET' AND 'NEVER AGAIN' WERE VERY PALPABLE, VISIBLE AND REPEATED IN AUCSHWITZ-BIRKENAU DURING LAST WEEK'S COMMEMORATION IN POLAND.

I ALSO REMEMBER THESE MESSAGES BEING RELAYED LOUD AND CLEAR ON THE OTHER OCCASIONS WHEN I VISITED THE CAMPS IN THE PAST, AS WELL AS ON THE TWO OCCASIONS I VISITED YAD VASHEM IN JERUSALEM.

I ASK MYSELF THIS QUESTION:

WERE THE HORRORS AND THE SHOCKING REALITY OF THE NAZI CONCENTRATION CAMPS THAT WERE REVEALED TO THE CIVILIZED WORLD FOLLOWING THEIR LIBERATION NOT ENOUGH TO IMPRESS ON THE HUMAN PSYCHE THAT LOSS OF RESPECT TOWARDS OTHERS, AND LACK OF VALUES IN THE DEALINGS BETWEEN HUMANS COULD LEAD TO THE TAKING OVER BY ANIMAL INSTINCTS, WHOSE ONLY MEASURES ARE MIGHT, LACK OF RESPECT, LACK OF REMORSE AND SENSE OF DOMINANCE?

UNFORTUNATELY, WE HAVE WITNESSED SUCH EPISODES, SOME BIG, SOME SMALL, ALL HAVING THEIR DIFERENT MOTIVES, AND THEIR JUSTIFICATION EXPLAINED IN CORRECT DIPLOMATIC LANGUAGE, HAPPENING ALL OVER AGAIN, IN VARIOUS PARTS OF THE GLOBE, AT DIFFERENT TIMES SINCE THE HOLOCAUST.

AT THE CEREMONY OF COMMEMORATION IN AUCSHWITZ LAST WEEK, WE LISTENED TO TESTIMONIALS BY SURVIVORS OF THE NAZI EXTERMINATION

PROGRAMME. THESE WERE A FEW OF THE EVER DWINDLING NUMBER OF SURVIVORS STILL AMONGST US. IN A FEW MORE YEARS THERE WILL BE NO MORE PERSONS WHO WERE SURVIVORS OF THE CAMPS TO TELL THEIR STORIES AND RECOUNT THEIR PERSONAL EXPERIENCES.

THEIR ACCOUNTS OF WHAT HAPPENED AND WHAT THEY HAVE BEEN THROUGH, SHOULD NOT BE FORGOTTEN AND SHOULD BE RECORDED FOR POSTERITY.

THEIR MESSAGE WILL HAVE TO BE REPEATED IN THE YEARS TO COME BY SOMEONE ELSE. THE FURTHER AWAY WE MOVE FROM THE SAD EPISODE OF THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS, THE MORE ACUTE WILL BECOME THE NEED FOR 'REMINDERS' TO WARN THE CIVILISED WORLD THAT HISTORY COULD REPEAT ITSELF. THE FURTHER AWAY WE MOVE FROM THE HOLOCAUST YEARS, THE EASIER WILL IT BECOME FOR PEOPLE TO FORGET HOW TO RECOGNISE THE SIGNS AND THE EVENTS THAT LED TO THE DARK EPISODES IN THE HISTORY OF HUMANKIND THAT WE ARE COMMEMORATING TODAY.

TO ACHIEVE THIS, I THINK THAT WE HAVE TO 'EDUCATE' OUR YOUNG GENERATION AND REMIND THAT HE WHO IGNORES OR FORGETS HISTORY, COULD COMMIT THE SAME MISTAKES AND BLUNDERS ALL OVER AGAIN.

EXCELLENCIES,

DURING THE CEREMONY OF THE COMMEMORATION AT AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU, I AM SURE I WAS NOT THE ONLY ONE HARBOURING NEGATIVE THOUGHTS.

THERE WERE AROUND ME, IN THE HUGE TENT PUT UP TO INCLUDE THE RED BRICK ENTRANCE OF THE BIKENAU COMPLEX, THOUSANDS OF GUESTS, LED BY ROYALTY, PRESIDENTS, PRIME MINISTERS, FOREIGN MINISTERS AND OTHER LEADERS.

THE CENTRE OF ATTRACTION HOWEVER WERE THE SIZEABLE NUMBER OF 'SURVIVORS' WITH THEIR WALKING FRAMES, WHEELCHAIRS AND TOTTERING GAITS, AIDED TO WALK TO THE MICROPHONE TO TELL THEIR EXPERIENCES.

IT WAS MOVING TO HEAR WHAT LIFE WAS LIKE IN THE CAMPS.

OUR MEMORIES WERE JOLTED BACK TO REMEMBER WHAT MOST OF US HAD ALREADY HEARD AND KNEW.

WE WERE REMINDED OF THE DE-HUMANISATION OF THE PRISONERS – THE TAKING AWAY OF THEIR PERSONALITIES IN EXCHANGE FOR A NUMBER TATTOOED ON THEIR FOREARM – THE DENIAL OF ANY PRIVACY - THE DISRUPTION OF FAMILY BONDS AND THOSE OF FRIENDS - THE DEPRAVATION OF ANY COMFORT- THE LACK OF FOOD AND BASIC HYGIENE- ABOVE ALL, THE ABSENCE OF RESPECT – LET ALONE LOVE, AND ALL THIS OF COURSE WRAPPED IN A FOREBODING OF DEATH.

THEY EXPLAINED HOW EVENTUALLY, ALL ROADS WOULD HAVE LED EVERYONE TO THE INEVITABLE END, HAD NOT THE ALLIED FORCES ARRIVED.

I REPEAT THAT FOLLOWING PREVIOUS VISITS TO THE CAMPS AND VISITS TO YAD VASHEM IN JERUSALEM, I HAD ALWAYS WONDERED WHAT IT COULD HAVE FELT LIKE FOR PRISONERS WHO ON ARRIVAL AT THE CAMPS, MUST HAVE IMMEDIATELY SENSED THE HORROR OF THE PLACE, AND MUST HAVE ALSO REALIZED THAT ONCE YOUR RAILWAY WAGON ROLLED THROUGH BIRKENAU GATE, THERE WAS NO RETURN TO HOPE FOR.

DURING MY RECENT VISIT FOR THE COMMEMORATION, AS PART OF THE CEREMONY TOGETHER WITH OTHER HEADS OF STATE, WE WERE INVITED TO LEAVE THE HUGE TENT, PASS THROUGH THE SIDE GATE INTO THE CAMP ITSELF AND WALK FOR ABOUT ONE AND A HALF KILOMETERS ALONG THE ICONIC RAILWAY LINE, ON WHICH ARRIVED SO MANY JEWS, ROMA , SINTI,

AND OTHERS DECLARED 'UNDESIREABLES' BY THE NAZI REGIME, TO REACH THE MONUMENTS IN THE DISTANCE, BATHED IN WHITE LIGHT FOR THIS COMMEMORATION, WITH FOCI OF SHIMMERING TOUCHES OF RED ON THE GROUND – REMINISCENT OF THE INFAMOUS FURNACES AND OPEN FIRES.

WALKING IN THE DARK, IN SILENCE, IN A FREEZING TEMPERATURE, CARRYING A LIGHTED CANDLE, FOLLOWING THE RAILWAY TRACK FURTHER INTO THE CAMP, MADE ME FEEL AND IMAGINE MYSELF AS I WERE ONE OF THE MANY THOUSANDS WHOSE LAST JOURNEY WAS PRECISELY THE GROUND I WAS WALKING ON.

THE SAD DIFFERENCE WAS THAT AFTER DEPOSITING THE CANDLE, I WALKED BACK TO THE TENT AND NORMALITY.

FOR THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF THOSE WHO ARRIVED BY TRAIN IN NAZI TIMES IN THIS INFAMOUS LOCATION, IT WAS THEIR LAST WALK, TOWARDS THE GAS CHAMBERS AND THE CREMATORIA, NEVER TO WALK BACK....AS I DID.

THANK YOU.