

Address by H.E. Mr. Dov Segev-Steinberg,
Ambassador of the State of Israel to Finland and Estonia,
at the Dedication of Memorial Plaque in Geislingen on 29th April 2018

Mayor Frank Dehmer,
Consul-General of Israel in Munich Sandra Simovich,
Distinguished guests,
Dear Friends,

It is with a sense of deep-rooted pride that I stand before you today as your honoured guest and, indeed, as someone who has traumatic personal links to Geislingen and the immediate region.

By sharing vital aspects of my personal story with all of you

I shall be making it easier to comprehend the incomprehensible slaughter of millions of people in the name of a demonic ideology that engulfed this continent and dragged the world into a war like no other before it.

My maternal grandmother, Rivka Kaufmann, and her daughter, my aunt Myriam, were among the 800 women and girls whose lives were saved by the American Forces on the 29th of April 1945.

A train, transporting my relatives and hundreds of other inmates from Geislingen towards Allach, was intercepted by American troops.

As a little boy growing up in Israel, I was always greatly distressed by grandmother's weeping at the annual commemoration day for victims of the Holocaust known as Yom HaShoah. It was only as a grown man that I truly understood my grandmother's grief and our collective inability to ever forgive the unforgiveable.

Horror descended on my grandmother, grandfather and three of their six children when they were rounded up in their Carpathian home and transported in one of the infamous trains to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Upon arrival, as the wretched hordes of people were herded into the dreaded queues, my grandfather was forced away from my grandmother.

Then, none other than the greatly feared Dr. Mengele snatched my grandmother's very young son and daughter out of her grasp. Striking her with his baton, he yelled: "Stop wailing! You'll see your children later. They have to go to the showers now!"

Heads shaven bald, and dressed in prison clothes, my grandmother and aunt were marched off to a barrack with dozens of other dazed women and girls.

One prisoner who had clearly already been incarcerated for quite some time, pulled my grandmother aside and harshly warned her: "Stop weeping. Come with me and look outside. See those chimneys? See that smoke? That's where your children are.

Pull yourself together. We are surrounded by electric fences and watchtowers. There is no escape. None!"

My grandmother, choking on fear, wanted to run out to the fences and throw herself on them or be shot. Her daughter Myriam screamed at her: "No! We've got to stay alive. You still have me. You still have three children in Budapest!" One of those three children was my mother, Magda Kaufmann.

After a six-week ordeal in Birkenau, during which my grandmother and aunt were made to lift and drop heavy stones for hours on end in an effort to humiliate and exhaust them and to break their already numb spirits, they were then crammed into another train heading to Geislingen.

This was during the summer of 1944.

My grandmother and aunt were imprisoned there as slave labourers for WMF.

Over the years I heard my grandmother speak in stages of that time. I remember her words that have been stabbed indelibly into my soul: "starvation", "sickness", "hopelessness", "fear" and "the inability to even imagine any kind of future as a free human being".

During the particularly abnormal winter of 1944/45, something extraordinary occurred. My aunt Myriam had contracted tuberculosis and had become so emaciated and weak that she had to be half-carried on the daily march to work from the barracks to WMF in Geislingen. She was dying.

Once the women were at their work stations, standing close to high tables, my grandmother would place Myriam under the table where she would lie motionless during the 12-hour shift.

The continuous factory noise masked her coughing.

One day, one of the supervisors came up to my grandmother and pressed a very small packet into her hand, unseen by the other prisoners.

Back at the barracks, under cloak of darkness, my grandmother opened the packet and found a sandwich. It was clearly meant for my aunt. The same supervisor sustained this courageous act of human decency and compassion, thereby saving my aunt's life. She was only 17 years old at the end of the war.

Living as I now do in Finland where the winters are truly rigorous and long, I have a more acute insight into a particularly dreadful incident involving my grandmother in the barracks adjacent to Geislingen. She, for some reason, had incurred the anger of one of the Kapos, who dragged her outside and made her kneel in the deep snow with her arms raised, forcing her to remain there for several hours. When the inmates of her barrack were eventually allowed to carry my grandmother back inside, she was near death. But she survived.

The end of the war saw my grandmother and her daughter return to Budapest where my mother and her sister Frieda had miraculously survived under dreadful conditions.

My grandmother's elder son had been murdered on the banks of the Danube a mere day before the Russians marched into Budapest.

Her husband, my grandfather Herman Kaufmann, had perished in Ebensee, a satellite camp of Mauthausen, in the Austrian Alps. That was on the 4th of May 1945 – two days before the American troops liberated the camp.

Between then and 1949, my grandmother and her three daughters fled to Prague from Budapest before making their way back to Germany to the Displaced Persons Lager in Heidenheim.

In 1949, after a decade of horror, loss, alienation and despair, my grandmother and her three surviving children settled in Israel.

In this place where unparalleled evil was perpetrated against utterly defenceless, often seriously ill, starving human beings, the ancient words in Aramaic that we pray when someone dies, known as the Kaddish, flow through my soul.

By being here today, I feel I am honouring and remembering all those who perished not only here but in every place where the Nazi venom destroyed lives on a scale unprecedented in recorded history.

The world is witnessing a resurgence of hate and intolerance, especially on this continent. Violent attacks, motivated by poisonous ideologies, have claimed lives and have set off fresh alarm bells, especially among Jewish communities.

The robust support today by a wide spectrum of religious and secular organizations in Geislingen that seek to remember, honour and reconcile concerning the horrific events of the Second World War, is praiseworthy and crucially important.

A people who forget or who deliberately push aside and ignore the past have no future. History is what it is, not what we would like it to have been.

The sincere and laudable actions in Geislingen to face the past, to educate and to bring honour to fellow human beings who suffered here and who perished should be replicated in many other places on this continent.

By remembering, we are defending our humanity and we are warning of the dangers inherent in forgetting, ignoring or even in deliberately denying evil events that engulfed the world.

Since the founding of the modern State of Israel in May 1948, hitherto unimaginable change has embraced the Jewish people.

By returning to their ancestral homeland after two millennia that witnessed their scattering to the four corners of the earth and subjugation to persecution, humiliation,

fear, indiscriminate slaughter and near annihilation, the Jewish people today in the sovereign State of Israel have reclaimed their birth right.

This highly developed, vibrant country is able to nurture and protect all her citizens. She has instilled with fresh vigour the potency of memory and an unmatched purpose of living.

High achievement and excellence have become the hallmarks of Israeli life in every conceivable sphere. The trauma of defencelessness has been consigned to permanent oblivion.

Israel is ready to enhance sound relations with all people of goodwill. Israel's story, which is also my family's personal story, is pre-eminently one of hope and unshakeable faith in the future.

My presence here today is the closing of a circle.

I revere the memory of my grandmother, Rivka Kaufmann, and my aunt Myriam Sobel. I am here today because they and my mother Magda and her sister Frieda defied all odds and survived.

Bertie Fischer-Weiss and her younger sister Zillie Weiss, who came from the same town as did my grandmother and who were also part of the slave labour here, were among the 800 women and girls liberated 73 years ago today. Bertie, who should have been with us today, sadly passed away in Israel earlier this month.

The Holocaust survivors are now all but gone. Our shared goal, therefore, is to ensure that the memory of the Holocaust be upheld and passed on from generation to generation.

My heartfelt thanks to the organizers of this event and to the city of Geislingen for everything you have done to bring this commemoration to fruition as part of this important goal.

Thank you for inviting me. I shall remember this occasion with special pride for the rest of my life.