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Ronald Reagan

Address to the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors

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Thank you very much.

President Meed, Chairman Wiesel, the other distinguished leaders of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, participants in the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, members of the second generation, friends, survivors:

Tonight we stand together to give thanks to America for providing freedom and liberty and, for many here tonight, a second home and a second life.

The opportunity to join with you this evening as a representative of the people of the United States will be for me a cherished memory. I am proud to accept your thanks on behalf of our fellow Americans and also to express our gratitude to you for choosing America, for being the good citizens -- for being the good citizens that you are, and for reminding us of how important it is to remain true to our ideals as individuals and as a nation.



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We are here, first and foremost, to remember. These are the Days of Remembrance, Yom Hashoah.

Ours is the only nation other than Israel that marks this time with an official national observance. For the last two years I've had the privilege of participating personally in the Days of Remembrance commemoration, as President Carter did before me. May we take a moment to pause and contemplate, perhaps in silent prayer, the magnitude of this occasion, the millions of lives, the courage and dignity, the malevolence and hatred, and what it all means to our lives and the decisions that we make more than a generation later.

Would you please join me and stand in a tribute to those who are not with us for a moment of silence.

[Audience stands for a moment of silent prayer.]

Amen.

In the early days of our country, our first President, George Washington, visited a Hebrew congregation in Newport, Rhode Island. In response to their address, he wrote them a now rather famous letter reflecting on the meaning of America's newly won freedom. He wrote:

All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship...for happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens....

Well, certainly our country doesn't have a spotless record, but our fundamental beliefs, the ones that inspired Washington when he penned that letter, are sound. Our whole way of life is based on a compact between good and decent people, a voluntary agreement to live here together in freedom, respecting the rights of others and expecting that our rights in return will be respected.

But the freedom we enjoy carries with it a tremendous responsibility. You, the survivors of the Holocaust, remind us of that. Good and decent people must not close their eyes to evil, must not ignore the suffering of the innocent, and must never remain silent and inactive in times of moral crisis.

A generation ago, the American people felt like many others in the Western World -- that they could simply ignore the expanding power of a totalitarian ideology. Looking back now, we must admit that the warning signs were there, that the world refused to see. The words and ideology of the Nazis were rationalized, explained away as if they had no meaning. Violations



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of religious freedom, the attacks on Jewish property, the censorship, the heavy taxes imposed on those who wished to emigrate, even the first concentration camps -- all this ignored, as was the incredible expansion of Germany's war machine.

A few brave voices tried to warn of the danger. Winston Churchill was driven into the political wilderness for speaking the unpleasant truth. There were also those who in their sincere desire for peace were all too ready to give totalitarians every benefit of the doubt and all too quick to label Churchill a warmonger. Well, time has proven that those who gloss over the brutality of tyrants are no friends of peace or freedom.

Tonight, let us pledge that we will never shut our eyes, never refuse to acknowledge the truth, no matter how unpleasant. If nothing else -- If nothing else, the painful memory we share should strengthen our resolve to do this. Our Founding Fathers believed in certain self-evident truths, but for truth to prevail we must have the courage to proclaim it.

Last week we reaffirmed our belief in the most meaningful truths of our Judeo-Christian heritage -- Passover and Easter. These two religious observances link our faiths and celebrate the liberation of the body and soul. The rites of Passover remind us of the freeing of our common ancestors from the yoke of Pharaoh's bondage and their Exodus to freedom. And today, you bear witness to a modern-day exodus from the darkness of unspeakable horror to the light and refuge of safe heavens [havens] -- the two most important being America and what soon became the State of Israel.

As a man whose heart is with you and as President of a people you are now so much a part of, I promise you that the security of your safe haven here and in Israel will never be compromised. Our most sacred task now is ensuring that the memory of this greatest of human tragedies, the Holocaust, never fades; that its lessons are not forgotten.

Although so much has been written and said, words somehow are never enough. If a young person, the son or daughter of a neighbor or friend should die or suffer a terrible illness, we feel the sorrow and share the pain. But how can we share the agony of a million young people suffering unspeakable deaths? It's almost too great a burden for the human soul. Indeed, its very enormity may make it seem unreal. Simon Weisenthal has said, "When a hundred people die, it's a catastrophe. When a million people die, it's just a statistic."

We must see to it that the immeasurable pain of the Holocaust is not dehumanized, that it is not examined clinically and dispassionately, that its significance is not lost on this generation or any future generation. Though it is now a dry scar, we cannot let the bleeding wound be forgotten. Only when it is personalized will it be real enough to play a role in the decisions we



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make. Those victims who cannot be with us today do a vital service to mankind by being remembered. But we must be their vessel of remembrance. This reunion -- This reunion is part of our duty to them.

Ben Meed, by serving as the catalyst for this historic event, you exemplify the meaning of good citizenship. America is lucky to have you.

Elie Wiesel, you have done so much for so many years now. For all you've done, thank you for your noble effort.

Americans can be proud that with the help of these two men and many others, we're moving forward to build a Holocaust Memorial, a living museum here in the Nation's Capital. And it is being financed, as is this gathering, by voluntary contributions by Jews and Gentiles, by citizens from every walk of life, of every race and creed, who grasp the importance to our soul and to our well-being of seeing, of understanding, and of remembering.

Imparting the message of the Holocaust, using it to reinforce the moral fiber of our society is much more than a Jewish responsibility. It rests upon all of us who, not immobilized by cynicism and negativism, believe that mankind is capable of greater goodness. For just as the genocide of the Holocaust debased civilization, the outcome of the struggle against those who ran the camps and committed the atrocities gives us hope that the brighter side of the human spirit will, in the end, triumph.

During the dark days when terror reigned on the continent of Europe, there were quiet heroes, men and women whose moral fiber held firm. Some of those are called "righteous gentiles." At this solemn time, we remember them also.

Alexander Rozlan and his wife, for example, now live in Clearwater, Florida. But during the war, they lived in Poland, and they hid three Jewish children in their home for more than four years. They knew the terrible risk they were taking. Once, when German soldiers searched their home, the Rozlans kept serving wine and whiskey until the troops were so drunk they forgot what they were looking for. Later -- Later Rozlan's own son was in the hospital with scarlet fever. The boy hid half of the medicine under his pillow so he could give it to the Jewish children his family were hiding, because they, too, had scarlet fever.

There are many such stories. The picturesque town of Assisi, Italy, sheltered and protected 300 Jews. Father Rufino Niccacci organized the effort, hiding people in his monastery and in the homes of parishioners. A slip of the tongue by a single informant could have condemned the entire village to the camps; yet they did not yield.



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And, of course, there was Raoul Wallenberg: one of the moral giants of our time, whose courage saved thousands. He could have remained in his native Sweden, safe from the conflagration that engulfed the continent. He chose to follow his conscience. Yes we remember him, too.

I would affirm, as President of the United States, and if you would permit me, in the names of the survivors, that if those who took him from Budapest would win our trust, let them start by giving us an accounting of Raoul Wallenberg. Wallenberg and others who displayed such bravery did not consider themselves heroes. I understand that some of them, when asked about why they risked so much, often for complete strangers, replied, "It was the right thing to do." And that was that. It was just their way. That kind of moral character, unfortunately, was the exception and not the rule. But for that very reason, its a consciousness we must foster.

Earlier, I described our country as a compact between good and decent people. I believe this, because it is the love of freedom, not nationalistic rituals and symbols, that unites us. And because of this, we are also bound in spirit to all those who yearn to be free and to live without fear. We are the keepers of the flame of liberty.

I understand that in Hebrew, the word for "engraved" is *charut*. It is very similar to the word for "freedom," *cheyrut*. Tonight, we recognize that for freedom to survive and prosper it must be engraved in our character, so that when confronted with fundamental choices we will do what is right -- because that is our way.

Now looking around this room tonight -- looking around this room tonight, I realize that although we come from many lands, we share a wealth of common experiences. Many of us remember the time before the Second World War. How we and our friends reacted to certain events has not faded from our memory. There are also in this room many young people, sons and daughters, maybe even a few grandchildren. Perhaps some of the younger ones can't understand why we're making so much of a fuss. Perhaps some of them think we're too absorbed by the heartaches of the past and should move on.

Well, what we do tonight is not for us: It's for them. We who are old enough to remember must make certain those who take our place understand. So if a youngster should ask you why you're here, just tell that young person, "because I love God, because I love my country, because I love you, Zachor."

I can't close without remembering something else. Some years ago, I was sent on a mission to Denmark. And while there, I heard stories of the war. And I heard how the order had gone out for the Danish people, under the Nazi occupation, to identify the Jews among them. And the next day, every Dane appeared on the street wearing a Star of David.



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Thank you all, and God bless you.