

**Remarks by Mrs. Simone Veil,
President of the Foundation for the Memory of the Shoah,
to the
Task Force for International Cooperation
on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research**

Loy Henderson Auditorium

14 May 2003

Mr. Secretary,

Ambassadors,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would first like to begin by saying, Mr. Secretary, how moved I was by your very fine speech, and your kind words.

Having been deported to Auschwitz at the age of 16 then released from Bergen-Belsen by the Allied armies in April 1945, I thought of the horror-stricken British soldiers as they entered the camp, saw the corpses piled up along the edge of the road and the tottering skeletons we had become. We uttered no cries of joy. There was only silence, then tears of emotion and sadness. We dared not believe, even at the very end, that our executioners had not succeeded in killing us

to erase all trace of their crimes. It had happened to thousands of deportees, who were forced to march to the point of exhaustion, until they died at the roadside, when the war was almost over.

We thought, too, of all those who were no longer with us and never returned home. My mother, as you so kindly recalled, had died of typhus a few weeks earlier, and my sister was dying. She was saved by a miracle when the end was already in sight.

For nearly 60 years I have been conscious of my debt to those who fought the Nazis, especially the Americans who, yet again, though not directly threatened, crossed the Atlantic to defend freedom, our freedom.

There have been many opportunities to speak about this debt, especially when I was invited to New York nearly 30 years ago by Nahum Goldman to speak about the Holocaust to the World Jewish Congress, of which he was president.

I can't talk about it enough, and I'll always do so with the same feeling and gratitude. It's the emotion, indeed, I felt with special intensity on June 6, 1994, at the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Normandy landings. Then, as a Cabinet minister, I had the honor of standing next to Britain's Queen Elizabeth, on the beach at Arromanche, to watch the parade of British veterans who had landed on that beach 50 years earlier. Once again, I couldn't help the tears welling up as the Queen paid tribute to the courage and heroism of the soldiers who had come from all continents, then referred to my presence, saying the enormous sacrifices of the Allies had not been too high a price to liberate people from the yoke of the Nazis and save the last survivors of the concentration camps.

Fifty-eight years have passed since we were liberated. Not a day passes but the surviving deportees think of what they have seen and lived through. The past haunts us. Not so much the

suffering, the exhaustion, the hunger, the cold and lack of sleep. Those are things one can forget, one can even forget the worst humiliations to strip us of all human dignity, treating us not as slaves but as human refuse, “stück,” with no identity other than a number tattooed on an arm. We're haunted by the memory of people who were abruptly separated on arrival in the camps, whom we quickly learned had been sent directly to the gas chambers. What haunts me also is the sight, in May and June 1944, of Hungarians coming in on train after train, most of whom were immediately assigned to be gassed, including young children holding onto the hand of their mother or an older sister. In two months, more than 400,000 Hungarians arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau alone.

More than a million Jews and Gypsies were exterminated at Auschwitz. We were the horrified witnesses. That is the horror, the worst of the tragedies in the history of mankind, which we have no right to forget. Before we die, we feel it is our duty to tell new generations, the public in our countries, and political leaders how six million men, women, and children—one and a half million children—died simply because they were born Jews.

That is why I want to thank the GAIS [Groupe d'action internationale pour la memoire de la Shoah] and the U.S. government for holding the presidency this year with such commitment and efficiency.

This meeting has been an opportunity to review the progress that has been made in teaching about the Holocaust and to consider actions for the future. In the space of a few years, great strides have been made. The measures taken by each of our countries have been strengthened; through new projects, programs were coordinated and harmonized as much as possible given the diversity of the situations.

The GAIS has gradually welcomed to its ranks representatives of the central and eastern European countries, thereby helping to ensure that the history of the Holocaust is at last taught there. More than 90 percent of Jews from Poland, the Baltic countries, the Ukraine, and Belarus were assassinated in the ghettos and the gas chambers or massacred under the open sky by special sections; the few survivors had no means of acting against the oblivion imposed by the Communist regimes that ruled them.

Free at last, these countries, which had been deprived of history and remembrance, are now conscious of the gain to democracy that knowing the truth about its past means for each country. The reinvigorated Jewish communities hope they will finally be given justice.

I'd like now to say a few words about the particular situation of France with regard to that of other European countries occupied by the Nazis. In 1940, there were about 300,000 Jews in France: 78,000 were deported, of whom 75,000 would not come back—75,000, the population of an average town for a country like France, and still the percentage of [French] Jewish victims from the Holocaust is rather low compared to that of other occupied countries.

Upon their return, survivors, often teenagers who had lost their entire family, needed to speak: they came up against a wall of silence that was unbreachable. It took years for the Holocaust to enter the reality of history in our countries.

It is difficult to pinpoint the reasons for this unexpressed rejection of the past; perhaps it stemmed in part from the anguish of loved ones on hearing of the atrocities we'd had to suffer, which even today often break in on us without our realizing it; or from the guilt feelings of those who were more or less aware they might have done more to save Jews; or from incredulity or indifference. Yet the rejection was so powerful that it was the deportees themselves who were

long accused of not speaking out. It would be interesting, I think, to see the GAIS focus on the complex reasons for such a long and heavy silence.

During those years, the former deportees kept the memory intact among themselves since historians themselves rejected the validity of their testimony on the grounds stemming from the victims themselves - they had to be treated carefully.

So long rejected by historians, survivors who neither could nor would forget, if only to keep their word to their friends, assumed the task of remembrance. The Foundation for the Memory of the Shoah, which I head, was established nearly three years ago with an endowment of the reimbursement for confiscated money, whose owners or heirs could not be found; it allows us to initiate or support all kinds of projects that contribute to both the work of remembrance and the work of historians.

Only a short time ago, I couldn't imagine revisionism actually thriving. No historian worthy of the name has ever given it the slightest credence. Trivializing the enormity of the Holocaust, as a result of comparisons with other events that are certainly tragic but completely different, worried me more. It reduced the extermination of the Jews and Gypsies to one war crime among others, without preserving the uniqueness resulting from its ideological specificity and the efficiency with which it was implemented.

I have not changed my opinion as to that real risk. It's happening and is even being scandalously turned, by some, against Israel, itself now accused of crimes against humanity. But I am increasingly worried about the new forms of revisionism. Not just the newspapers and schoolbooks in some countries, which disseminate widely a sickening propaganda, but also their television stations, which flood the entire world with these lies, via satellite.

That is why, in addition to a greater effort to teach about the Holocaust, with a very explicit focus on its ideological, cultural and even religious origins, as much as on the facts themselves, there must be no tolerance for revisionism. Having said that, I am well aware of the respect that one owes to freedom of opinion, but is it admissible for increasingly well-organized movements to be able to use the Internet to spread hate and lies?

I believe measures must be taken, if only to protect young people who now spend many hours in front of their monitors—the pastime and instrument of choice—at the international level to put a stop to such messages of hate and untruths. French courts recently showed no hesitation in banning certain sites.

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This brings me to your concerns about the rise in anti-Semitism. I can hardly leave it out when the French president and government have themselves condemned this situation and taken strong measures to end it.

Contrary to what many people imagine, the phenomenon we're seeing is not traditional anti-Semitism of the far right, nor antagonism between Christianity and Judaism, nor even the xenophobic populism that has been its successor, but an odious offshoot of militant anti-Zionism, often closely associated with small groups on the extreme left.

This quite different phenomenon, which began to emerge a few years ago, is proving more difficult to counteract because it reflects very real political problems and difficulties for

many living in France, particularly young people of immigrant parents. France has had to deal with a profound change in society over the past 30-odd years.

As a country traditionally open to immigration, France has in the past successfully integrated successive waves of men and women from eastern and southern Europe. Today these people are French among others, who have found their place in a society that they have often enriched.

The model has not worked so well with more recent immigrants who came to work in France but not necessarily to live there for good. They were joined by their families, and at this point there are between five and six million Moslems in France; they have borne the brunt of the successive economic crises led to unemployment and discrimination. Integrating them poses problems, and, for them, the social ladder did not work.

Violence in these districts is unfortunately common. Among young Moslems, it is a battle going on among rival gangs, and against Jews, who, today, account for 600.000, taking into consideration those who came from Eastern Europe and North Africa. It takes on an openly anti-Semitic character.

Since September 2000 and the second *intifada*, the climate has greatly deteriorated. Many young Moslems support the Palestinian cause and make little difference between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. In spite of intensified security measures, a few synagogues and Jewish schools were damaged, and Jews threatened or attacked. Though such incidents remain limited, a strong sense of insecurity has developed in the Jewish community.

The French authorities reacted firmly, on one hand prosecuting offenders and on the other increasing security of persons and of all community buildings.

The Minister of Education has taken exemplary measures against those who perpetrated these acts, and all teachers were reminded not to tolerate the slightest infringements in this regard. Schools must be the training ground for learning to “live together” and tolerance.

Still, it is not always easy for teachers to deal with the rise in violence in classes where children come from such diversified ethnic and religious backgrounds and the parents no longer have control over their children.

Paradoxically, at the same time recent opinion polls show no rise in anti-Semitism. In spite of the difficulties encountered in some schools, teaching about the Shoah, which has long been compulsory—three times in the course of a child’s education—is significantly better now than it was a few years ago, and the number of school trips to Auschwitz is continuing to increase. I happen to think, moreover, that everyone has the right to his history and that teaching the Shoah has universal value. We should not exclude from school programs the history of countries that are the birthplaces of many students.

I would like to pay tribute here to the many teachers who voluntarily go beyond their professional obligations and are personally involved in teaching the Shoah in order to pass on a message of tolerance. By the same token, I pay tribute to the many rabbis and imams, priests and ministers, who bring together young people of all faiths to teach them to respect each other, communicate, and live together.

Almost immediately after he was first elected president in 1995, Jacques Chirac acknowledged the responsibility of the French state in these terms: “To transmit the memory of the Jewish people, the suffering and the camps, to bear witness again and again, to acknowledge the faults of the past and the faults committed by the State, to conceal nothing of the dark hours

of our history is quite simply to define an idea of man, his freedom and his dignity. It is to fight the forces of darkness that are always at work.”

The then prime minister, Lionel Jospin, made the decision to allocate, from the budget of the state, a lump-sum payment or life pension to all those whose father or mother had died as a result of deportation, as victims of anti-Semitic persecution.

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Since I have the privilege of addressing you today, I'd like to say just a little more about my country. Many times before, especially in Miami a few years ago at a large Hadassah meeting, I have noted how American Jews or Jewish Americans reconcile their commitment to their country with solidarity with Israel.

The same holds true for Jewish-French. We are French, some of us belong to the Jewish families who were the first in Europe to acquire full citizenship, more than 200 years ago, thanks to the French Revolution. Still, we don't intend to give up our Judaism whether it is religious or cultural in nature. Through these links, we necessarily stand in solidarity with Israel, anxious and attentive to the survival of this tiny country over which loom so many threats. Though we are not citizens and don't live there, we are, like you, divided as to the solutions that will guarantee peace and security at last, and restore prosperity. And above all, we don't want to see Israel unjustly condemned and accused among nations.

So, referring again to Secretary of State Colin Powell's recent comments to Congress, I hope, earnestly hope, that thanks to your efforts and those of all the democracies involved in this process, that peace will prevail at last in Israel; a peace not founded on the force of arms but on the recognized rights of Israelis and Palestinians to have a homeland where both may live in

security. I'm well aware of the difficulties and the fact that the road ahead is a long one. Concessions will be required on both sides that will be difficult for both. They will not make it without strong support.

As a former president of the European Parliament, I want to tell you, in conclusion, that it was probably no easier reconciling the Germans and the French in 1945.

Yet with American support, through the Marshall Plan, the resolve of a few triumphed, and, for this, too, I am grateful.

Thank you for your attention.