



**Speech by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Paschal Donohoe TD, at the Holocaust Memorial Day Commemoration, Mansion House,**

**29 January 2017**

Good evening everyone.

I would like to thank Holocaust Education Trust Ireland for inviting me to attend this evening. I am honoured to give the keynote address for such an important commemoration.

I am humbled to be speaking before survivors of the Holocaust, whose bravery and resilience I admire and pay tribute to. And before the children and relatives of those who survived - whose families and loved ones suffered terrible atrocities.

It is an honour to speak to you this evening, and I commend and support the work so many people in this room do to commemorate the Holocaust and to educate people of the dangers and consequences of hatred, fear and misinformation.

I became aware of the Holocaust through art and the study of history. The writings of Primo Levi, particularly 'The Drowned and the Saved' and 'The Periodic Table', made me aware of the terrible vista of suffering. The work of the historian Martin Gilbert, particularly his work 'The Holocaust', revealed to me events against which imagination flounders but towards which empathy must always strive. As a student when I thought of and studied the Holocaust it prompted within me efforts to understand infinity in the study of maths – an

event just too big and too outside of my personal experience to comprehend. But it is for these very reasons that this ceremony and your work is so important, is so vital. And the words of Levi, and his life, ring so true to me tonight when he wrote that:

*'Logic and morality made it impossible to accept an illogical and immoral reality; they engendered a rejection of reality which as a rule led the cultivated man rapidly to despair. But the varieties of the man-animal are innumerable, and I saw and have described men of refined culture, especially if young, throw all this overboard, simplify and barbarize themselves, and survive. A simple man, accustomed not to ask questions of himself, was beyond the reach of the useless torment of asking himself why.'*

So we are here today to ask why and to remember all of the victims of the Holocaust. We remember the people who were murdered under the Nazi regime - men, women and children who lived like we do; who worked to provide for their families; and who contributed to society, to culture and to politics in their own countries, as generations of their families had done before them.

We remember the many millions of Jewish people who were victims of a systematic genocide, and all those who were persecuted and murdered because of their ethnicity, their religious beliefs, their political affiliation, their sexual orientation and those who were murdered because of disability or age.

The passage of time can serve to dilute the lessons of history, it can weaken our collective memory and desensitise us to the very real horrors of war and genocide. This is why commemoration is so important.

The Jewish people were declared to be inferior, and an active threat to the German race, its society and culture. The Nazi Government after 1933 began to

regulate the public and private life of Jewish people, it singled them out and marked them as 'other', as 'inferior', as 'not one of us'. It united a country in hatred against people who were citizens of that country. It spread hatred and war throughout Europe, and it destroyed Jewish communities in every country it invaded.

Nazi Germany made anti-Semitism a State policy, but it did not invent it. Anti-Semitism existed before 1933 and Adolf Hitler, it still exists today. It exists alongside other forms of racism and hatred; a corrosive and toxic threat to decency and civil society.

It is the continued existence of racism, of anti-Semitism, of hatred of fellow human beings, that makes days like today so important and what makes the work of the Holocaust Education Trust so essential.

We cannot let the lives of those who died in the Holocaust be forgotten. We must remember the struggle faced by the Jewish people as they were persecuted in their own countries.

And so I would like to commend and praise the Trust for its work in educating our country, through lectures and exhibitions, about the Holocaust and what lead to it and what lead from it. The work of the Trust, with schools and our young people, is of immense value. It engages with young students through the Crocus Project and the Holocaust Narrative; it provides training to teachers on how best to teach the story of the Holocaust in schools; and it reinforces that the Holocaust is an important part of our history as Irish people and as Europeans.

This point, about how we treat history, is something that was to the forefront of my mind in thinking about this evening. We had an inclusive and informative

year of commemoration and celebration last year to mark the centenary of the Easter Rising; a seminal event in the eventual founding of the Irish State. I thought about the experience of those commemorations, of the complexity of history, of the need for honesty in reflecting on our past, of the importance of being true to what happened and of understanding that we cannot afford to celebrate the positive without considering the negative parts of our own history. It cannot be a case of picking and choosing what is comfortable to remember.

In the 1930s, this country was the Free State - it would not become a Republic until 1949 – and at this time Ireland was beginning to separate itself from Britain, and become an Irish nation. Attempts were being made to define what it meant to be Irish as one national identity.

At the same time, the Irish economic policy was one of protectionism, which aimed for self-sufficiency. Ireland turned inward, isolating itself within the boundaries of the 26 counties, and as World War II began, Ireland accepted only a small number of Jewish refugees and denied thousands of others. At the same time the borders of European countries were also being closed to Jews attempting to escape Nazi Germany.

This is a part of our history which we must acknowledge and learn from, and most importantly not repeat.

In the years since the end of World War II, we have grown as a nation and as a people. Today, we are only just emerging from a global recession, and the last few years in particular have brought major challenges for Ireland, for Europe and for the world.

Europe has been marked by terrorism and violence. Fears for security have grown. Many blame Europe. Narratives of fear are once more being invoked.

This fear points to one group more than others, towards immigrants. A rhetoric of us versus them is once again growing. The dangerous allure of division must be resisted.

There are millions of people in the world facing conflict and wars, who have lost their homes and their loved ones. Ireland must look to its past, look to how people left these shores in times of economic and political crisis, and look to do the right thing for those seeking refuge and shelter today.

That is what the Irish Government is seeking to do. In 2015, we began the Irish Refugee Protection Programme in response to the Migrant Crisis, and through this programme Ireland is offering migrants who are seeking international protection a safe haven.

Ireland will provide over 4,000 places to people under the resettlement and relocation elements of the programme.

The Government is committed to welcoming vulnerable refugees.

Ireland can and does make a difference to the lives of immigrants in Europe. The Irish Navy was deployed in the Mediterranean throughout 2016. Their objective was to save lives and alleviate suffering. Irish Naval vessels rescued more than 15,000 migrants in the Mediterranean last year.

It did so throughout a turbulent year.

Ireland must take an active part in European and global affairs.

We cannot afford to turn our back and stay silent as people suffer. We have done this before, in Ireland and in Europe. We cannot do it again. This is why we must remember history, remember all those who suffered persecution, those who lost their homes and their families, and eventually lost their lives. Those who had their citizenship taken from them and sanctuary denied them.

We must remember the Jewish people who lost their lives because they were deemed a threat to the nation in which they lived. We need to remember this and act; to remind ourselves that we are not isolated, that those who do not share our history or our culture are not less important than those who do.

This is not a time for new borders. This is not a time for separation.

We need to support our fellow Member States and embrace what the EU was set up to do: to avoid conflict, to ensure freedoms and to work together for a safer Europe. The heart of Europe is democracy and this must be protected, for everyone. We need to hold the centre, we must be willing to compromise and to find consensus; to make sure everyone is heard not just those who shout the loudest.

And if I began with the words of Primo Levi, may I also end with them. In 'The Drowned and the Saved' he stated simply and powerfully that: 'If we had to and were able to suffer the sufferings of everyone, we could not live.' If he can write this, given his life, given his art and given his experiences then we can only acknowledge this world-changing era of suffering and strive to empathise while always endeavouring never, ever to forget.