

Excerpts from Speech of Simone Veil
President, Foundation Pour la Memoire de la Shoah
July 24, 2002

In September 1951, when your prestigious institution, hand-in-hand with Israel, under the leadership of Nahum Goldmann, started negotiations with Chancellor Adenauer, this unity was an essential element of your success. One year later, on September 10, 1952 it led to this agreement between Germany, Jewish organizations and the new State of Israel on reparations and indemnities for the victims of the Shoah.

"The invisible shades of six million of our people floated over the conference hall," Saul Kagan later recounted.

In my case, these shades still continue to haunt me.

Deported to Auschwitz and then to Bergen-Belsen at the age of 16, the shades of my mother who died of typhus at Bergen-Belsen, and of my father, and my brother, who perished at Kaunas, haunt me. Just like the memory of all those who died while we watched, continues to haunt my comrades, who like me, feel the urgent need to testify, by speaking or writing. As time goes by, this need becomes all the more pressing. Time erases nothing, on the contrary.

Have we been able to transmit, explain, recount, not just the suffering and the humiliation that we endured, but above all, what happened to all those who we loved, our parents and grandparents, children, brothers and sisters, close friends, who perished at Auschwitz or elsewhere, and whose fate remains, sometimes, unknown to this day?

Have we been able to describe and recount the martyrdom of those we knew and who died, wasted by disease, hunger, beatings, lack of sleep, and those who, reduced to a skeleton and a breath of life, hoped for nothing more than our faithful remembrance of them?

We tried to communicate to others this "nameless place" which we had been so close to, this "nameless place" from which no one returned: no one can fully grasp its horror. Just as no one can understand how this tragedy, unique in the history of mankind, could have occurred.

We tried to explain this phenomenon, exceptional and specific, both unique and monstrous, which was the Shoah: the extermination of millions of people, babies and the elderly included. We tried to explain how, as soon as they arrived and got off the trains, our parents and our friends, one after the other, pushed to one side because they were too young, too old, too fat, too thin, were selected to be sent to the gas chambers.

We, who had promised those we knew, if by miracle, any of us were to survive, to recount what we saw, yes, we have testified, recounted.

But for a long period of time, no one wanted to, or was able to listen to us. The facts were too atrocious to believe or to bear listening to. It took years before, in each of our countries, according to different circumstances, people accepted to listen. Only recently, in the countries under Communist regimes where silence was imposed, have people started to speak.

Nevertheless, it was not until the 1990s that consideration was given to how the Jews in France had been victims of spoliations and that the government realized that it had to recognize its responsibility for what had been committed in the past.

In July 1995, at the ceremony in commemoration of the "Round-up of the Winter Velodrome" of 1942, which is considered to be the beginning of the major round-ups of the Jewish population, Jacques Chirac, who had just been elected President of the French Republic, made a formal declaration officially recognizing the responsibility of the French State, and the complicity of certain public and private French institutions in the persecution of the Jews of France.

As a direct result of this declaration, certain government agencies which had already been accused of complicity in these crimes, such as the City of Paris and the state bank receiving government deposits called the "Caisse des dépôts et de consignations," initiated meticulous and systematic historical research concerning this period.

Then, the French government decided to set-up an official, independent commission, a task force, whose role was to shed light on all the various spoliations to which Jews were subjected.

The government in office at the time, decided in 2000, to create the Foundation for the Remembrance of the Shoah, and I am honored to be its President. Allow me to add several words about it.

This foundation, endowed with assets from the spoliation of Jewish victims that were unjustly preserved by the State or public or private financial institutions, has been in operation for one year.

Its vocation is to cover different fields devoted to the remembrance of the Shoah in France: history, education, commemoration, assistance to survivors and the development of Jewish culture in all its aspects.

Like the Claims Conference, the Foundation finances projects, evaluated by experts and committees made-up of eminent persons and highly-respected specialists, thanks to the annual interest from its endowment, which averages about 12 million euros.

Hardly a year has gone by, but I can already tell you that the Foundation has made specific contractual commitments for five extensive projects, not to mention the large financial contribution made to the Contemporary Jewish Documentation Center - Memorial, which is to become the largest museum and training institution dedicated to the Shoah in Europe, and which also receives well-deserved contributions from the Claims Conference.

One of the projects concerns the Chief Rabbi of the Ukraine, in cooperation with the Joint Distribution Committee and the support of the Claims Conference, to help build and equip a residence for elderly people, survivors of the Shoah. Another project with the Rothschild Foundation and the French United Jewish Social Fund, will help to make the lives of older French survivors more comfortable. Two other cooperative agreements are related to archives: one signed with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, in order to microfilm relevant documents in the departmental archives more rapidly, and the other, signed with the French National Archives, which concerns the microfilming of all the documents of the former General Commissariat for Jewish Questions. Lastly, the Foundation has brought its financial support to the National Center for Hebrew.

After this rapid assessment of our first year, I can confirm that the money that comes from the reparations paid to compensate wartime spoliations is used for the historical study and the transmission of the remembrance of the Shoah, or for concrete material aid to survivors through

the Jewish social organizations which we finance. I should add that, thanks to the hard work of a small but dynamic administrative team, the operating expenses for the foundation are extremely low.

I'm also quite sure that because of the highly competent intellectuals, university professors and teachers who make-up our committees, or who are in relation with us, our Foundation will be able to stimulate debate and reflection on the lessons to be learned from the study of the Shoah and particularly the teaching methods used to combat racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia.