



Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright

Remarks at Opening of Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets

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SECRETARY ALBRIGHT: Thank you, Stu, very much, for that introduction. On behalf of President Clinton and the American people, I'm pleased to join in welcoming all of you to the Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets. I want to begin by thanking Miles Lerman and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum for co-hosting this event and for their unceasing efforts to keep before us the memory and lessons of history's most monstrous crime.

I also want to thank one of our nation's most accomplished public servants, Judge Abner Mikva, for accepting the role of Conference chairman. And I want to express appreciation to each of you who are participating in our sessions, and especially to those who will chair them, including New York Federal Reserve Bank Chairman Bill McDonough, a good friend; Ambassador Louis Amigues of France; US Representative Ben Gilman; and Congressman Jim Leach; and US Ambassador to Sweden, Lyden Olson.

We're here to chart a course for finishing the job of returning or providing compensation for stolen Holocaust assets to survivors and the families of Holocaust victims. This mission began more than five decades ago, even before the war was over, when Nazi looting was condemned by the London Declaration of 1943.

In the early post-war period, the allies made good faith but incomplete, efforts at restitution. For decades thereafter, the job lingered unfinished, with vital questions unanswered, important documents unexamined and critical issues unresolved.

Then, in just the past few years, as Holocaust survivors aged and the century began drawing to a close, the quest for answers received a fresh burst of energy; and for that, the credit must be widely shared. Certainly, the eyes of the world would have remained averted from this issue if not for the remarkable work of the World Jewish Congress and other Jewish and public interest groups. In the face of daunting obstacles, they've been tireless, creative and very effective.

We are indebted as well to the many governments represented here that have come forward to address this issue with generosity and zeal. I mention particularly Foreign Secretary Robin Cook and the British Government for their insightful publications and statements and for convening last year's landmark conference in London on Nazi gold. And I am very, very proud of Under Secretary of State

Stu Eizenstat and his team for setting out the historical record with rigorous objectivity and exhaustive detail in two US Government reports. Stu, I think we all owe you an incredible debt.

(Applause.)

All this is important work and hard. It requires that painful memories be revisited, easy evasions confronted and inconvenient questions asked and answered. Above all, it demands that we be relentless in our search for truth, despite the fact that in dealing with the Holocaust, the truth is terrible beyond comprehension.

In recent years, the world has done much to retrieve facts from obscurity concerning the secretive handling and pernicious use of Nazi looted gold. No fewer than 17 historical commissions are studying the subject from the perspective of their own countries. The Tripartite Gold Commission has closed out its work; and almost \$60 million has been pledged to the relief fund for the victims of Nazi persecution that was launched at the Conference in London.

We hope that the progress on gold will serve as a catalyst for similar progress in the categories of assets we will focus on this week, which are insurance and art as well as communal property. In each of these areas, the world's experts are here - from governments and non-governmental organizations, corporate boardrooms and university classrooms. We're here to compare views and share knowledge, frame the issues and achieve consensus on ways to move forward as rapidly, thoroughly and fairly as possible.

The historical and legal challenges vary from issue to issue, but whether we're seeking the payment of life insurance to families of those who perished in the camps, researching artwork from the walls of a museum in Warsaw, or weighing compensation for a synagogue reduced to ashes in Czechoslovakia, the moral imperative is the same. I hope, therefore, that we will be able to work together constructively in an atmosphere free from threats to develop specific principles and identify best practices for art, insurance and other topics.

I hope, as well, that our work will be driven by certain overarching imperatives. The first is that our goal must be justice, even though justice in this searing context is a highly relative term. We know well our inability to provide true justice to Holocaust victims. We cannot restore life nor rewrite history. But we can make the ledger slightly less out of balance by devoting our time, energy and resources to the search for answers, the return of property and the payment of just claims.

Our second imperative must be openness. Because the sands of time have obscured so much, we must dig to find the truth. This means that researchers must have access to old archives; and by that, I don't mean partial, sporadic or eventual access - I mean access in full, everywhere, now.

Our third imperative is to understand that the obligation to seek truth and act on it is not the burden of some, but of all; it is universal.

As the United States has recognized by declassifying documents and creating its own presidential advisory commission on Holocaust assets, every nation, every business, every organization and every person able to contribute to the full telling of the story is obliged to do so. In this arena, none of us are mere spectators, none are neutral; for better or worse, we are all actors on history's stage.

The fourth imperative that propels our work is urgency. Remaining Holocaust survivors have reached an advanced stage in life. More than five decades have passed since the Nazis perpetrated their thefts and murders. As records are lost and memories fade, effective restitution becomes more difficult. So let us each vow that by the dawn of the new century, we have done all things possible to conclude the unfinished business of the old.

Finally, we must remember that our efforts here serve a twin purpose. Part one is to forge a common approach to the issues still surrounding Holocaust assets. Part two is to advance Holocaust education, remembrance and research. This is a task that knows no end. It must be renewed as the human race is renewed, generation by generation, so that the reality of the Holocaust is always before us and never ceases to disturb us.

It is encouraging that in the months preceding this conference, we have seen significant strides forward. The American Association of Art Museum Directors has formulated principles and guidelines to govern the handling of tabled Holocaust-Era art. An international commission led by former Secretary of State, Larry Eagleburger, has been formed to resolve unpaid insurance claims. Companies participating in that commission have agreed to establish a \$90 million humanitarian fund and to audit their books to identify unpaid Holocaust-Era claims. And at Sweden's initiative, an unprecedented inter-governmental [effort] to promote Holocaust education around the world is underway. We hope that every country will participate in that effort.

The struggle to reveal and deal with the full truth surrounding the handling of Holocaust-Era assets is wrenching, but also cathartic. Only by knowing and being honest about the past can we gain peace in the present and confidence in the future. That is true for nations and for institutions, and it's true as well for people.

I cannot conclude this statement without addressing briefly a subject for which I have not yet found - and will never find - exactly the right words; and that concerns my grandparents, whom I learned recently were Jewish and died along with aunts, uncles and cousins in the Holocaust.

When I was young, I didn't often think about grandparents; I just knew I didn't have any. I was an infant when I separated from them. Now I, too, have become a grandparent, and I look at my children's children and the love and pride literally overflows. I am sure now that I was once the object of such affection not only from my parents, but from those who gave them life. And as I think of my life now in my 62nd year, I think also of my grandparents' lives in those final years, months and days.

I think of the faces at the Holocaust Museum and Yad Vashem and the long list of names on the wall of the Pynkas Synagogue in

Prague; among them those of my grandparents, Olga and Arnost Korbel and Ruzene Spieglova. I think of the blood that is in my family veins. Does it matter what kind of blood it is? It shouldn't; it is just blood that does its job. But it mattered to Hitler and that matters to us all; because that is why 6 million Jews died. And that is why this obscenity of suffering was visited on so many innocent, irreplaceable people - people who loved and enriched life with their warmth, their smiles and the embrace of their arms; people whose lives ended horribly and far too soon; people whose lives and suffering we must never forget or allow to diminish, even if we must, from time to time, intentionally shock our collective memory.

The peoples of the world differ in language, culture, history and choices of worship. Such differences make life interesting and rich. But as the Holocaust cries out to us, we must never allow these distinctions to obscure the common humanity that binds us all as people. We must never allow pride in us to curdle into hatred of them.

Remembering that lesson is what this effort at research and restitution of Holocaust-Era assets is really all about. For it is about much more than gold and art and insurance; it's about remembering that no one's blood is less or more precious than our own.

There are those who say that we're all prisoners of history and that humankind is doomed to repeat its worst mistakes over and over again. There are those who view the Holocaust as the freakish consequence of a sole demented mind - an accident of history whose repetition we need not fear. Still others point to the passing decades and ask whether it's not time to forget and move on and leave remaining questions unasked and the rest of the truth unknown. And yes, there are still a few who deny the reality that it happened at all.

In reply, we must admit that we're not given perfect wisdom, nor the power to change human character, nor the gift of prophecy. But we do have the power of memory, and can make certain that the dead shall never be forgotten from our hearts. We have the power of reason and can separate right from wrong. We have the power of hope and can pray, in the words of the Psalms, for a time when "truth shall spring out of the Earth and righteousness shall look down from Heaven."

And we have the power to choose. We can contemplate the Holocaust in despair, or we can consider the Holocaust and vow never again to allow complacency or fear or despair to excuse inaction.

We gather here this week not to achieve miracles, but rather to do everything in our power to replace dark with light, injustice with fairness, contention with consensus and falsehood with truth. That is the most we can do. That is the least we must do. It is what we owe to the past; it is our hope for the future; and in the largest sense, it is the hope of the world.

Let me welcome you again to this conference, and may our shared efforts prosper. Thank you all very, very much.

(Applause.)

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