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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

May 07, 2014

Remarks by the President at USC Shoah Foundation Dinner

Hyatt Regency Century Plaza Hotel

Los Angeles, California

9:36 P.M. PDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you so much. (Applause.) Thank you. Thank you so much. Please, please, everybody have a seat.

Well, thank you, Steven, for your incredibly generous words, for this great honor, for your friendship, and most importantly, for the extraordinary work which brings us here all tonight. To Robert Katz and all the members of the board and staff of the Shoah Foundation; to President Max Nikias and everybody at USC; to all the distinguished guests and to all the friends that I see in this audience -- it is an incredible honor to be with you as we pay tribute to a remarkable institution and one that makes claim on our moral imagination.

Being here with you tonight, I'm taken back to the visit to Buchenwald that I took in the very first months of my presidency. And I was there with my dear friend, Elie Wiesel. As most of you know, he who had endured that camp as a teenager. And we walked among the guard towers and the barbed wire. We saw the ovens and the crematorium. We saw the memorial to the prisoners, a steel plate heated to the temperature of the human body, as a reminder of our common humanity. And at the end of our visit, as we stood outside the place where his father and so many other souls had perished, Elie spoke these words -- he said: "Memory has become a sacred duty of all people of goodwill." Memory has become a sacred duty of all people of goodwill.

And that's what brings us here tonight. That's the duty that Steven and all of you embrace -- the sacred duty of memory.

Now, just a few decades ago, many survivors of the Shoah were reluctant to share their stories. But one survivor living here in Los Angeles, a leather goods merchant named Poldek Pfefferberg insisted on telling anybody who would listen about the man who had saved his life -- a man named Oskar Schindler. And thanks to Poldek's persistence, Schindler's story was published as a novel, and the world eventually came to see and understand the Holocaust like never before -- in Steven's remarkable film, *Schindler's List*, brought to life in a masterful way by Liam Neeson. And we were reminded that the Holocaust was not a matter of distant history or abstract horror. The voices -- the memories -- of survivors became immediate, and intimate, became a part of all of us.

I loved what the teacher said in the video about how it entered into our DNA. That's what stories do. We're story-telling animals. That's what Steven does. That's what Bruce does -- tells a story that stitches up our fates with the fates of others. And that film gave us each a stake in that terrible history, and a stake in ensuring such atrocities never happen again.

Now, if the story had ended there, it would have been enough -- dayenu. But Steven didn't stop with Schindler's List, because there were too many other stories to tell. So he created this foundation to undertake what he called "a rescue mission" -- preserving the memories that would otherwise be lost to time.

Over the past two decades, you've recorded tens of thousands of interviews in dozens of countries and languages; documented the experience not only of the Holocaust, but of atrocities before and since. As you heard tonight with Celina's incredible eloquence, you freed voices that could tell their own story in their own way. And as Michelle Clark described so powerfully this evening, you've turned that testimony into tools that can be used by scholars and students all around the world.

Now, Steven, I know that for you -- like so many here -- this is deeply personal. You lost distant relatives in the Holocaust, and heard your mother pass on stories told by survivors. And as you said just a few days ago, the story of the Shoah is the story that you were put on this Earth to tell. So, to you, to everybody at the Shoah Foundation -- and for all that you've done, for setting alight an eternal flame of testimony that can't be extinguished and cannot be denied, we express our deepest gratitude. (Applause.)

Of course, none of these stories could be preserved without the men and women with the courage to tell them. And I think sometimes how hard it must be to return to those moments, to remember those darkest of days, to recount how loved ones -- husbands, wives, sons, daughters -- were taken away. And as Steven mentioned, my great-uncle was a soldier in the 89th Infantry Division, helping to liberate Ohrdruf, a part of Buchenwald. And what he saw during the war left him so shaken that, upon his return to the States, he could not speak of his memories for years to come. We didn't have a word for it back then, but he returned and closed himself off for months, so shaken was he just to witness what had happened, much less experience it.

So I want to say a special word to the survivors who are with us this evening -- not just to the Holocaust, but as Steve noted, survivors of other unimaginable crimes. Every day that you have lived, every child and grandchild that your families have brought into this world has served as the ultimate rebuke to evil, and the ultimate expression of love and hope. And you are an inspiration to every single one of us. And on behalf of all of us, thank you for the example of your lives, and sharing your stories with us and the world. Thank you. (Applause.) We are grateful to you.

Now, let me add that, as Americans, we're proud to be a country that welcomed so many Holocaust survivors in the wake of World War II. As President, I'm proud that we're doing more, as Steven noted, to stand with Holocaust survivors in America. We announced Aviva Sufian as our first-ever special envoy to help support Holocaust survivors living in the United States. I'm pleased that Aviva is here tonight. (Applause.) We've proposed a new Survivor Assistance Fund to help Holocaust

survivors in our country live in dignity and free from poverty. We're already working with members of Congress and many of your organizations on this project, and tonight I invite more of you to join us. We need to keep faith with these survivors who already have given so much.

The work of this foundation, the testimonies of survivors like those with us tonight, also remind us that the purpose of memory is not simply to preserve the past; it is to protect the future.

(Applause.) We tell stories -- we're compelled to tell stories -- they're stories that bring out the best of us, and they're stories that bring out the worst. The voices of those recorded and unrecorded, those who survived and those who perished, call upon us -- implore us and challenge us -- to turn "Never Forget" into "Never Again."

We only need to look at today's headlines -- the devastation of Syria, the murders and kidnappings in Nigeria, sectarian conflict, the tribal conflicts -- to see that we have not yet extinguished man's darkest impulses. There are some bad stories out there that are being told to children, and they're learning to hate early. They're learning to fear those who are not like them early.

And none of the tragedies that we see today may rise to the full horror of the Holocaust -- the individuals who are the victims of such unspeakable cruelty, they make a claim on our conscience. They demand our attention, that we not turn away, that we choose empathy over indifference and that our empathy leads to action. And that's not always easy. One of the powerful things about Schindler's story was recognizing that we have to act even where there is sometimes ambiguity; even when the path is not always clearly lit, we have to try.

And that includes confronting a rising tide of anti-Semitism around the world. We've seen attacks on Jews in the streets of major Western cities, public places marred by swastikas. From some foreign governments we hear the worst kinds of anti-Semitic scapegoating. In Ukraine, as Steven mentioned, we saw those disgusting pamphlets from masked men calling on Jews to register. And tragically, we saw a shooting here at home, in Overland Park in Kansas.

And it would be tempting to dismiss these as isolated incidents, but if the memories of the Shoah survivors teach us anything, it is that silence is evil's greatest co-conspirator. And it's up to us -- each of us, every one of us -- to forcefully condemn any denial of the Holocaust. It's up to us to combat not only anti-Semitism, but racism and bigotry and intolerance in all their forms, here and around the world. It's up to us to speak out against rhetoric that threatens the existence of a Jewish homeland and to sustain America's unshakeable commitment to Israel's security. (Applause.) And it is up to us to search our own hearts -- to search ourselves -- for those stories that have no place in this world. Because it's easy sometimes to project out and worry about others and their hatreds and their bigotries and their blind spots. It's not always as easy for us to examine ourselves.

Standing up to anti-Semitism is not simply about protecting one community or one religious group.

There is no such thing as “targeted” hatred. In Overland Park, a man went to a Jewish Community Center and a nursing home named “Village Shalom” and started shooting -- and none of the people he murdered were Jewish. Two were Methodist. One was Catholic. All were innocent.

We cannot eliminate evil from every heart, or hatred from every mind. But what we can do, and what we must do, is make sure our children and their children learn their history so that they might not repeat it. (Applause.) We can teach our children the hazards of tribalism. We can teach our children to speak out against the casual slur. We can teach them there is no “them,” there’s only “us.” And here in America, we can celebrate a nation in which Christians and Muslims go to Jewish community centers, and where Jews go to Church vigils -- a nation where, through fits and starts, through sacrifice and individual courage, we have struggled to hear the truth and live out the truth that Dr. King described -- that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere, that we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”

By keeping the memories alive, by telling stories, by hearing those stories, we can do our part to fulfill the mitzvah, the commandment of saving a life. I think of Pinchas Gutter, a man who lived through the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and survived the Majdanek death camp. Today he serves as a volunteer educator at the Shoah Foundation. “I tell my story,” he says, “for the purpose of improving humanity, drop by drop by drop. Like a drop of water falls on a stone and erodes it, so, hopefully, by telling my story over and over again I will achieve the purpose of making the world a better place to live in.”

Those are the words of one survivor -- performing that “sacred duty” of memory -- that will echo throughout eternity. Those are good words for all of us to live by.

I have this remarkable title right now -- President of the United States -- and yet every day when I wake up, and I think about young girls in Nigeria or children caught up in the conflict in Syria -- when there are times in which I want to reach out and save those kids -- and having to think through what levers, what power do we have at any given moment, I think, “drop by drop by drop,” that we can erode and wear down these forces that are so destructive; that we can tell a different story.

And because of your work -- because of your work, Steven, and the work of all who supported you -- our children, and their children, and their children’s children will hear from the survivors, but they’ll also hear from the liberators, the Righteous Among the Nations. And because of your work, their stories, years and decades from now, will still be wearing down bigotry, and eroding apathy, and opening hearts, drop by drop by drop.

And as those hearts open, that empowers those of us in positions of power -- because even the President can't do these things alone. Drop by drop by drop. That's the power of stories. And as a consequence, the world will be a better place and the souls will be bound up in the bonds of eternal

life. Their memories will be a blessing and they will help us make real our solemn vow: Never Forget. Never Again.

So thank you, Steven, for your incredible work. God bless you. God bless the United States of America. Thank you. (Applause.)

END

9:55 P.M. PDT



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