

**Speech by Prime Minister
Herman Van Rompuy
to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the
Jewish Secular Community Centre (CCLJ)
Brussels (City Hall), 15 September 2009**

I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to the *Jewish Secular Community Centre* on its 50th anniversary. Any community operating within a multicoloured society such as ours is entitled – indeed, duty-bound - to become organised. Not only for the sake of freedom of association but also for the sake of a responsibility towards those seeking recognition within that community. It is the precisely that community spirit to which democracy owes its existence. A full participation in society is dependent on being able to remain oneself in individual and collective terms.

But that is not all. Your organisation's philosophy features the following line :
"It is vital for us to be part of the continuum of the history of our people." As a non-Jew I have to adopt an attitude of extreme modesty towards the term "history". I have not shared your fate but I, like everyone else in Europe, am also concerned by this history. And not only because Europe owes a great deal to the Jewish people as a result of its scientific, philosophical and cultural contributions to our societies. The poet Heinrich Heine said : *"Ever since the exodus, freedom has always spoken with a Hebrew accent"*. It is important for this accent to continue to resonate.

Your history is in a way our history because we must never forget what your people had to suffer during the previous century. In the epilogue to his autobiography entitled '*Une adolescence perdue dans la nuit des camps*', Henri Kichka, the eminent person that your association elected as "*Mensch of the Year in 2009*", refers to his "*work*", his "*duty towards the Memory of the Shoa*".

Your organisation quite rightly places a great deal of emphasis on education. Your website features the following pronouncement: "*Education is the best weapon for combating all forms of ignorance*". I would add to that: all forms of intolerance. Democracy is of course the key answer to intolerance but the democratic spirit does involve education. Populism and fear are the great enemies of democracy. A democracy cannot hope to survive without social and family assets, without any community spirit, without justice, without a deeply positive attitude, without hope.

Certain events have to remain engraved in our memories. Sometimes we are '*duty-bound*' to remember because we '*are incapable*' of forgetting.

Remembrance is then our '*destiny*'. We sometimes have to bolster the memory because we do '*not have the right*' to forget it. Hence remembrance is our '*duty*'.

The lasting remembrance of the Shoa is both a *destiny* and a *duty*. It is the "destiny" of all those who witnessed it. They are unable to forget it but they are

not the only ones fated to remember the tragedy because it is the fate of every one of us.

We have to be constantly on the alert. The saying "History repeats itself" has to be proved to be a false one. No, it cannot be repeated. Remembrance enables us to bear the burden of the past.

We can never look upon tolerance and respect, the core values of civilisation, as decisively "acquired". In *'Le rapport de Brodeck'*, the novelist Philippe Claudel prompts us to think about the others who may very quickly be associated with strangers and the enemy. Accepting one another is a basis for peace. The characters and setting in Claudel's novel do not have any names, precisely so as to invest his story with a universal character.

In his very moving autobiography *Ich nicht*, Joachim Fest, who was once the editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, spoke of his youth in Nazi Germany. His father said to him one day : " *Even if everybody accepts this barbarism, I never will* ". Fest writes about his solemn pledge never to be a disappointment to his father. Thus he repeated the words: "*I never will!*" and he remained true to them. The real heroes are those individuals who dare to say "no" and bear all the consequences. I often ask myself if I could have been as brave as those people.

We can keep memories alive for two reasons, out of fear, or to hold onto hope. Let us choose hope because hope is synonymous with life. Life or survival is dependent upon hope. Hope compels us to remain ourselves in the midst of a changing society: to keep our identity and not shy away from reality.

Identity and openness are the guiding principles of your organisation, which is Jewish, secular and humanist. I would like to pay tribute to the CCLJ's governing board and its founders, particularly to the Honorary President, Mr David Susskind. From the very outset the aims of the CCLJ were to ensure that your identity is asserted and conveyed in compliance with all the beliefs, to uphold the principles of tolerance, dialogue and openness, to disseminate the Jewish and Israeli culture, to sustain the duty of remembrance and explore the history of the Jewish people, to convey all the initiatives for promoting peace between the State of Israel and its neighbours, to fight any form of anti-Semitism, racism and xenophobia.

You are continuing to pursue these aims. This is why "you are part of the continuum of the history of your people", while also upholding the principles underlying our democracy. I must congratulate you.