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**for dialogue with Jewish Diaspora.**

**Reykjavik, 22nd of January 2020**

I was appointed a Plenipotentiary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs for dialogue with the Jewish Diaspora in August 2018. Although I am aware of the complexity of issues between my country and Jews in diaspora, Israel as well as Jewish community in Poland, every day work demonstrates that in Polish – Jewish relations there is still a lot to learn, new avenues to expIore and potential to benefit from. These relations encompass common heritage and past, both difficult and valuable, present regular contacts and future which offers wide opportunities to further and strengthen ties between countries, societies and cultures.

Over hundreds of years Poland was a home for **the biggest Jewish diaspora in the world**. In Middle Ages and later in XVII and XVIII centuries Jews expelled from the countries they used to live, suffering persecution and discrimination found on Polish soil shelter, a place to live in peace. I am not saying that Poland was anti-Semitism free, nevertheless that time tolerant, open Poland with political system far from absolutism dominating in Europe and religious intolerance, was for Jews the best location for advancing their culture and traditions as well as for spiritual and economic development. Before the outbreak of II World War there were around 3 and half millions Jews living in Poland (the biggest Jewish population in Europe). After the war Jews growing up and educated in Poland built Israel’s statehood. One of them, Dawid Grun, socialist activist born in small Mazovian town of Płońsk, roughly 60 kilometres from Warsaw was the first prime minister of Israel and in fact architect of Jewish state. You may know him as David Ben Gurion. What you might not know is that out of 120 members of the first Knesset, 61 came from Poland.

In the meantime, **the tragedy of the Holocaust** happened

German Nazi machinery of extermination took around 6 million Jewish lives, among them nearly 3 million of Polish Jews. And these 3 million Polish Jews amounted to a half all Polish citizens – victims of II World War. Having that in mind, together with the simple fact that the single most important material evidence of the Genocide of European Jews is located within the present borders of our country, in the areas of former German death and concentration camps and other sites of the crime, it is quite obvious that Poland plays unique role with regard to commemoration and educational activities related to the Holocaust as well as countering Holocaust distortion and denial.

The most important actors involved in commemoration activities are of course state and local museums: Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek together with Belzec and Sobibor, Treblinka, Kulmhof am Ner, Stutthof and more. Each year, tens of millions of euros from the budget of Polish state and budgets of local communities go for the maintenance and preservation of these sites, research and educational activities. Each year, millions of people from Poland, Europe and whole world visit sites of Holocaust in Poland – among them more than two millions Auschwitz-Birkenau (2 152 000 in 2018). There is no exaggeration in saying that this is one of the key elements of the fight against Holocaust denial and Holocaust distortion. We should also remember that apart from the Holocaust, all above-mentioned places are also a sites of the suffering and death of other nations and groups, like Roma and Sinti, Poles, Soviet prisoners of war, various types of political prisoners and many more.

**Holocaust denial** in a strict sense of the word is a marginal phenomenon in Poland. On the other hand, there is still a certain atmosphere of “competition of victims” in regard to the memory of World War II. And there is still a feeling among a major part of Polish society that the memory of many Polish victims of the War and German and Soviet occupation as well as the memory of almost total destruction of huge areas of pre-war and post-war Poland and a vast part of Polish cultural heritage is being overshadowed, if not left totally unknown and ignored due to some kind of a monopolization of WWII memory by the Holocaust. Of course, the picture here is complicated – after all, the largest group of Holocaust victims were Jewish born Polish citizens – nevertheless this atmosphere almost naturally creates a context which may foster interpretations of historical facts that amount to Holocaust distortion or come very close to it. In my opinion this is the most important source of the risks in that regard.

Polish government, Polish diplomacy and various institutions like Auschwitz-Birkenau state museum among other examples of Holocaust distortion, try to counter the use of the phrase “Polish concentration camps”, “**Polish death camps”** and similar phrases in various media throughout the world. They’re not only historically incorrect, but first and foremost an insult of the feelings of still living Polish prisoners and victims of German camps and their families, as well as the memory of those, who already died. Polish embassies throughout the whole world protest officially in each case of the usage of such phrase, and request correction.

Evidently the issue of **accomplices and collaborators** is a complex one. I believe that each state whose authorities collaborated with German Nazi regime or was directly occupied (the latter is the case of Poland) should exercises its individual examination on its attitude toward Shoah. In Poland, where the debate on the matter is open and extremely lively, we do not question that there were, documented cases of individual involvement of some Poles in extermination of Jews, organised and executed by Nazi Germany. These attitudes were not however dominant or typical for Polish society.

It worth underlining that over six thousand Poles were granted the title of “Righteous Among the Nations” by the Yad Vashem Committee. Among them was consul Rokicki, member of so called **“The Ładoś Group”,** consisted of four diplomats from the Polish Legation in Bern (a diplomatic representation), and eminent representatives of two Jewish organisations: the RELICO Assistance Committee for the Jewish Victims of the War, established by the World Jewish Congress, and the Agudat Yisrael (Orthodox Jewish political party). During the Second World War they developed a secret cooperation scheme aimed at issuing false passports and citizenship certificates of Latin American states (mainly of Paraguay, but also of Honduras, Haiti and Peru) for European Jews. I am recalling this today, since the activity of Ładoś Group has been revealed relatively recently and it quite less known cases of actions taken to rescue Jews, while still being one of the most significant examples of human dedication and self-sacrificing efforts during Holocaust.

The year 2020 is special due to anniversaries related to the memory of victims of Holocaust: The 20th anniversary of the adoption of the Stockholm Declaration, under which the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research was established. Today is called **International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance** and as recently as last Sunday adopted, at the level of ministers, message on honoring the victims and survivors of the Holocaust and combating antisemitsm. Then, there is the 15th anniversary of the adoption of 27 January as the International Holocaust Remembrance Day by the United Nations General Assembly and the **75. anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau**. Consequently, the major international commemoration event will be organized next week at the Auschwitz Memorial. We bear in mind that it could very well be the last round anniversaries in which the last living veterans, the last camp survivors are able to participate. In this regard, the Anniversary together with many ceremonies, conferences etc. throughout the whole world in 2020 would be a symbolic mark of one era of Holocaust and World War II remembrance and the beginning of another. The testimonies of survivors will be listened to by the state delegations from around the world. the message we’ll hear, will be of enormous importance.

Let me recall a quote that has been chosen by Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum as a motto of the 75. Anniveresary. The words that were written in secret by Załmen Gradowski, one of the leaders of the uprising of the Sonderkommando in Death Camp Birkeanu on the 7th October 1944: “We have a dark premonition, because we know”.

Let me turn now to the **question of anti - Semitism**. It goes without saying that Polish Society and State are sensitive to the issue and strongly oppose to this phenomena, inter alia due to historical reasons - about 3 million Jewish born Polish citizens were exterminated as a result of the implementation in Europe of murderous anti-Semitic ideology of German Nazism.

At the same time, as Polish Prime Minister reiterated clearly in a letter to Mr. Isaac Herzog Chairman of the Executive of The Jewish Agency for Israel: “We are proud that Poland remains a safe home for our Jewish compatriots.” There is significant difference regarding the level of threat (danger or anxiety) realistically perceived by the Jewish communities residing in Western and Eastern Europe, in favor of Eastern region, including Poland. Polish state bodies and legally specific services do not disregard or ignore any case in which the crime of hatred could have occurred. The category of hate crimes is specifically defined by law enforcement agencies. The legally competent institutions are keeping up to date the statistics in order to measure the scale and nature of such crimes. One of the key categories of such crimes in Poland, as in many other countries, is hate speech on the Internet motivated by anti-Semitism.

While the number of Jewish population in Poland is small, we are observing, slowly, but surely, the **animation of Jewish life in Poland**. There are Jewish street festivals, Jewish schools, kosher restaurants and cafeterias. The annual festivals of Jewish culture are taking place, among them the well-known Festiwal Kultury Żydowskiej in Kraków, which is one of the biggest festivals of Jewish culture in the world. This autumn the audience in New York experienced Festival devoted to a writer of three nations: Jewish (he wrote in Yiddish), American, and Polish, Isaac Bashevis Singer. People around the world can take a look at the unique photographs of Polish documentary producer and photographer Ms. Agnieszka Traczewska. In her exhibition called “Bracha. A Blessing” she documents the journeys of the descendants of Jews who once lived in the Polish territories, to the remains of Jewish heritage in Poland: the synagogues, graveyards and the graves of Tzadikim. These and many others projects and institutions and co-financed or co-organized by MFA.

It would undoubtedly be a mistake if I omitted the role that the Museum of the History of Polish Jews POLIN plays in commemorating the common heritage and building understanding between Polish and Jewish societies. Last year it was visited by around 470 000 people and enjoys international recognition due to its modern and original concept and universal message it brings.

The other significant phenomena is a growing and active interest in the Jewish culture and tradition as a part of our shared history. Some Poles are discovering lost common Jewish heritage and history, want to study and feel it with the mixture of fascination, nostalgia and sorrow. What is more, in a country which was the graveyard of three million Jews during the war we are witnessing the grassroots, spontaneous efforts by some individual Poles and local communities to commemorate the Jewish past.

We know that for an ordinary Jew the first association with Poland is the land where the Shoah occurred. But our goal is not only to put this association in the proper context of German Nazi occupation, but perhaps most importantly to ensure that other positive connotations appear in mind of young Jewish people, when they hear the name of my country. So, in shaping our relations appropriate balance between the past and the future need to found. Nonetheless, as I mentioned at the beginning first of all, we need to be future – oriented, built our relationships on mutual respect and understanding.