



Special Assembly-Remembering the Past, Shaping the Future
Speech by the Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende
March 16, 2005

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Among the many personal papers stored here in Yad Vashem is the photograph album of a Dutch woman named Miep Groenendijk and her foster-daughter Dot.

In 1942, when the mass deportation of Dutch Jews began, Dot was four years old. Her parents – desperate and not knowing what else to do – looked for somewhere to hide her. Miep Groenendijk opened her heart to the little girl.

The photographs show us how all through the dark days of the occupation, Miep tried to give the child a normal life. They show Dot playing with other children. Riding a pony. Having fun. Dot's and Miep's story ended well. The child was not discovered and her parents survived. When they returned, her mother and father could take her in their arms again. But Miep's and Dot's story is one of the very few exceptions.

In 1940, there were 140,000 [one hundred and forty thousand] Jews in the Netherlands. 140,000 people fully integrated into Dutch society. More than 100,000 [one hundred thousand] did not survive the war. They were taken away. To the transit centre in Westerbork from where they were deported. First in old passenger trains and then in cattle wagons. To places set up for anonymous, mechanical destruction: Auschwitz-Birkenau, Sobibor, Bergen-Belsen. Some of them found ways to throw good-bye letters out of the trains.

“To all my friends. We are in a train taking us on a long journey into the unknown.”

So begins a letter found in November 1943 along the railway tracks between Groningen and the German border. The deportation of most of the Dutch Jews during the occupation is a pitch black chapter in the history of my country. A chapter which casts a dark shadow on our post-war history too.

Step after painful step, we have learned to look at what happened in our country with a critical eye. Our Queen, Beatrix, spoke about this in her address to the Knesset in 1995.



Yes, of course, we can point to many examples of courage. And friendship. And solidarity. But of indifference also. And cold-heartedness. And betrayal. To our shame, it took the Second World War and the Shoah to teach us Europeans that there are universal values we must never give up. Freedom. And respect for human dignity. Equality and solidarity.

I say this fully aware that values are not assets or virtues that place us above others. A value is not something that we “possess.”

On the contrary. Values are a task, a mission we must carry through to the end. Not in words alone. But above all in deeds. The Shoah shows how bitterly we need them.

Which means that we must never give up the fight against discrimination and anti-Semitism. Which means that we must call on every fibre of our souls to make sure that no people, no group within our society is ever set apart from the others. Because it was the systematic segregation that formed the basis for the mass persecution and destruction of the Jews during the Second World War.

In her world-famous diary, Anne Frank describes the menace of forced isolation. She describes her life and the lives of the seven others hidden in the Secret Annexe – ‘het Achterhuis’ - in the house in Amsterdam.

Anne wrote:

"I see the eight of us with our 'Secret Annexe' as if we were a little piece of blue heaven, surrounded by heavy black rain clouds.... the clouds gather more closely about us and the circle which separates us from the approaching danger closes more and more tightly.... I can only cry and implore: 'Oh, if only the black circle would recede and open the way for us!'"

After more than 60 years, that plea continues to resound in our ears. Let us listen. And let us act.

And so I say to you here: May there never again be “we” and “they”. Only “we”.

Thank you.