

**Speech given by
Mr. ION ILIESCU, President of Romania,
at the meeting dedicated to the Holocaust Remembrance Day in Romania
- October 12, 2004 -**

*Messrs Presidents of the Legislative Bodies,
Your Holiness, Father Patriarch,
Your Eminence, Chief Rabbi
Honorable religious leaders,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Ambassadors,
Dear guests,*

Having emerged from the darkness of totalitarianism, Romania has embarked on a long and not so easy road to the recovery of memory and assumption of responsibility, in keeping with the moral and political values grounding its new status as a democratic country, a dignified member of the Euro-Atlantic community.

Upon deciding to establish a “Holocaust Remembrance Day,” we intended to bring pious homage to all those who suffered as a result of the discriminatory, antisemitic and racist policies promoted by the Romanian state in a troubled moment of our national history. This dark chapter in our recent past, when the Romanian Jews became victims of the tragedy of the Holocaust, must not be forgotten or minimized. While paying homage to the dead and deported, to those forced to leave the country, to those deprived of their belongings, of their rights and liberties guaranteed by the Constitution, and treated like inferior beings, we search our conscience and try to understand the causes and consequences of our abdication of the values and traditions of our people, of the obligations assumed following the Great Union of 1918.

A critical evaluation of the past is always necessary, so as not to forget it, but also to set with clarity the landmarks of our effort to build ourselves, as part of constructing the future of our nation. Such remembrance is all the more appropriate when it refers to tragic events befallen for so long by an unmotivated silence.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The outbreak of World War II found Romania unprepared to face its multiple challenges. Under the shield of neutrality, proclaimed almost immediately, the Romanian

leadership of the time hoped to be able to prevent the country's involvement in a conflict that was foreign to us and could result in many losses and no gains.

However, the evolution of events brought Romania into the whirl of the war much sooner than expected. In June 1940, under an agreement with Germany, based on the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, the USSR gave Romania an ultimatum, whereby it forced our country, under the threat of hostilities, to surrender Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. Then, on August 30, 1940, under the Vienna Dictate, Germany and Italy forced Romania to surrender Northern Transylvania to Hungary.

Against this background of profound national tragedy, following a coup, a radical change of political regime took place in Romania. General Ion Antonescu came to power, and in a first stage (from September 1940 to January 1941) he relied on the political force of the Legionary movement—an extremist, antisemitic, xenophobic, antidemocratic, and pro-Nazi party. In November 1940 Romania joined the Axis, rallying to the group of states dominated by Hitler's Germany. Antisemitism and the crusade against Bolshevism gradually became the main topics of official propaganda, which attempted to manipulate public opinion.

Germany's war against the USSR, launched in June 1941, which Ion Antonescu joined from the very beginning based on the need to recover the territories abducted by the Soviet Union a year before, enforced this obedience to the political aims and ideological orientations of Hitler's Germany.

Pressure from the pro-fascist organizations in the country, as well as from Hitler's Germany and fascist Italy, led to the promotion of antisemitism as a state policy as early as the time of the Goga-Cuza government (December 1937–February 1938); but it was on August 8, 1940, under the royal dictatorship of Carol II, that a systematic policy of excluding Jews from the life of Romanian society began.

After the instauration of the Antonescu-Legionary dictatorship in September 1940, the antisemitic policy became extremely harsh: laws were adopted that excluded Jews from schools and universities, bars and theatres, the army and the liberal professions; commissions for Romanianization took over Jewish properties; forced labor was imposed on the males of the Jewish population.

During the Legionary rebellion of January 1941, a genuine pogrom took place, in which 120 Jews were killed. After the Legionnaires' removal from power, the antisemitic policy continued at even higher levels. Of the most serious events we mention the pogrom of Iasi, in June 1941, when thousands of Jews perished.

A significant aspect, practically the most important chapter of the Holocaust in Romania, refers to the deportations. Initially, the regime led by Ion Antonescu planned the deportation of all citizens of Jewish origin from Bessarabia and Bukovina, following that later on, the citizens of Jewish origin from other areas of the country would be subjected to the same policy. The place chosen for deportation was Transnistria, the territory between the Dniester and the Bug that came under Romanian administration.

Massive deportations started on October 9, 1941, and continued for a year. Romanian citizens, our fellow men, about 120,000 of them, were taken from their homes and embarked on true death trains or marched through rain and snow tens and hundreds of miles, across the Dniester. On the way, as well as in Transnistria, many thousands Jews died as a result of the inhuman treatment, freezing, illness, or even shooting.

In memory of these people, at the proposal of several organizations of Holocaust survivors and the Federation of Jewish Communities in Romania, as well as from the consciousness of our moral duty to the memory of the Romanian Jews who had to suffer during those terrible years, the government has decided to make October 9 the annual Holocaust Remembrance Day in Romania.

Deportations were not the only component of the Holocaust. I will only mention the retaliations of October 1941 in Odessa, following the explosion of the city's Romanian Military Command. In August 1942 the Romanian side was presented with a plan prepared by the German authorities that aimed to send all Romanian Jews to the Belzec death camp. However, this plan was never put into practice, and Antonescu decided in October 1942 to put a stop to the deportations to Transnistria.

It must be said here that the evolution of the attitude of Ion Antonescu's regime in this regard was determined by the evolution of the war. In the phase of German victories on the Eastern front, repression against the Jewish population reached its height, and the regime's leaders often stated that the so-called Jewish problem was almost solved. As the tides of war changed, the attitude of Ion Antonescu's regime became more nuanced, and measures were taken that limited the number of victims. This resulted in Romania being one of Germany's allies where a significant part of the Jewish population on its territory managed to survive. Moreover, many Jews of Northern Transylvania, under Horthyst occupation at the time, succeeded in saving themselves by fleeing to Romania with the help of Romanian citizens and the tacit agreement of some officials.

The terrible tragedy of the Holocaust was possible due to the complicity of top state institutions—secret services, army, police, et cetera, as well as of those who executed, often overzealously, Marshal Antonescu’s orders.

On this Holocaust Remembrance Day it is also natural to mention the fact that many personalities—politicians, high priests, military officers, writers, journalists, actors, other public figures—intervened with the state authorities to cancel, or at least to ease, certain frustrating and repressive measures. Many Romanians, known or unknown, risked their freedom, and even their lives, to save their Jewish fellow men from death. Those who are known are acknowledged today by the State of Israel as “Righteous among Nations,” and we are certain that many others are going to be found from now on. Recently, a Romanian priest was awarded, at a venerable age, this high distinction for his courage to help his Jewish fellow men in Transnistria. Such deeds ennoble a human being and the community to which he or she belongs. Mention must be also made of other similar acts of human solidarity in support of Jewish compatriots made by many simple Romanians, such as the Transylvanian Romanians who, as we have reminded here, helped many Jews in occupied Transylvania illegally cross the border to Romania.

We bring homage today to the resistance of the Jewish community, which knew how to organize itself so as to oppose the tragedy and ensure its existence and continuity. From the organization of its own educational system under circumstances in which young Jews were forbidden access to state schools, to continuing its specific cultural life, including the functioning of the Barasheum Theater, from the repeated interventions by the authorities to acts of revolt, from the support granted to the deportees by those who had remained in the country to actions designed to help organize the emigration of thousands of Jews to Palestine.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Commemorating for the first time the Holocaust Remembrance Day in Romania, I take the opportunity of this solemn reunion to propose that we all bow down before the memory of the victims of this tragic event, which is part of our past, just as the representatives of the religions living together in Romania have done under our administration. According to the latest research, over 250,000 people were killed during the Holocaust in the territories under Romanian administration for the sole guilt of having been born Jews, destroying people for their origin. To these we must also add the over 12,000 citizens of Roma descent who died in Transnistria in similar circumstances.

The Holocaust was one of those serious historical issues whose approach was avoided both during the communist regime and after 1990. There were attempts to hide the facts, or even distortions of the truth. In not a few cases there was also a transfer of responsibility. The Ion Antonescu regime was credited, for instance, with having saved the approximately 400,000 Jews who were still alive at the end of the war, while the liquidation of the over 250,000 Jews of Romania and the occupied Soviet territories was turned into the responsibility of the German troops in the country and Berlin's orders.

Undoubtedly, Germany's Nazi regime bears the main responsibility for the European Holocaust. But it is Ion Antonescu's regime that is responsible for the initiation and organization of the repressive actions and extermination measures directed against the Jews of Romania and the territories under Romanian administration. Reality cannot, and must not, be concealed. Assumption of one's own past, with its goods and evils, is not just an exercise in honesty but also the proof of a democratic conscience, of the responsibility of the Romanian state's leadership, which, at a turning point in its history, did not manage to rise up to its essential mission, namely, to ensure the security of all its citizens, regardless of their ethnic origins.

The Holocaust tragedy has today a special significance. Such a tragedy must never be repeated, and for that, no effort is too small for the younger generations to know and understand the entire truth. This is the best way to prevent future repetition of the past's tragedies.

An international commission was established for the in-depth study of the Holocaust in Romania, which includes renowned experts led by Professor Elie Wiesel, a native of Romania and winner of the Nobel Prize for Peace. The Commission's report will be presented in a few weeks at a meeting to be held in Bucharest. The document shall provide the basis for a complete activity of future investigation into this tragic phenomenon and informing public opinion, particularly the young generation. In its turn, the Ministry of Education and Research has decided to include in the school curricula an optional course dedicated to the Holocaust in Romania. We also see with satisfaction that the press, radio, and television stations have lately devoted increasing space to this phenomenon, approaching it from objective positions.

These actions are part of a wider program that aims at knowledge of the past and the events related to the Holocaust. This program includes the adoption of legislative measures banning fascist, racist, xenophobic, and antisemitic organizations and symbols as well as the cult of persons guilty of crimes against humanity and peace. The first such measure was taken

by the government in March 2002 and was met with satisfaction by the Jewish organizations and the overwhelming majority of public opinion.

Also as of 2002, the National Defense College has been organizing a course in the history of the Holocaust. All these represent the implementation of the commitments made by Romania when joining the Final Declaration of the International Forum on the Holocaust in Stockholm, a group established in 1998 at the initiative of Prime Minister Goran Persson, with the aim of promoting education meant to remember the tragedy of the Holocaust and stimulate the historical research of this phenomenon.

We sincerely wish to understand why, in a country like Romania, which in 1918 had managed to fulfill its destiny through the Great Union of December 1, which had taken an ascendant course of economic and social development, which had political structures and institutions compatible with the great Western democracies, and which had successfully integrated the values of Western culture and civilization, the development of such a virulent antisemitic trend, which degenerated into the monstrosities of the Holocaust, was possible. The interwar Romanian antisemitism was the result of a democratic failure and of the refusal of the political elite and a large part of the intellectual elite to assume this failure. It also was a serious moral perversion.

When a nation suffers from a trauma of the kind suffered by Romania in the forties, it can lose its way in the absence of a civic spirit and a consciousness of values and moral duty. There is, however, no excuse for those who cynically and cold-bloodedly sent their fellow citizens to death, who discriminated, humiliated, and excluded them from society.

The recent past obligates us to create mechanisms and institutions designed to serve as the society's antibodies against these illnesses of the spirit that are racism, antisemitism, xenophobia.

This time, Romanians and Jews are on the same side of the barricade, a sign that we have learned the lesson of solidarity and mutual respect.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In my opinion, the Holocaust Remembrance Day should lead, first and foremost, to a deeper knowledge of this collective tragedy. Beyond the concrete historical facts, very important are the educational aspects, the change in the perception of an event of such tragic dimensions.

This first commemoration of October 9 should mark the conscious and sincere assumption of a painful episode of our national history, which the public conscience and our collective memory must neither conceal, nor hide, nor relativize in significance.

Looking forward to the future, tenaciously pursuing the objectives that await us as members of the North-Atlantic Alliance and future members of the European Union, we have the duty to understand and assume all the moments and lessons of the past. Holocaust Remembrance Day should be a moment of reflection for all of us, an occasion to meditate on totalitarianism and its tragic consequences, on community relations and values of human solidarity, on the perennality of democracy, legality, and the respect for the fundamental rights and liberties of citizens.