

Speech of prime minister Guy Verhofstadt on the day of the Jewish martyrdom of Belgium

*Mechelen, former Dossin barracks
September 24, 2000*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In these beautifully renovated barracks, it is very difficult to imagine what some 25,000 Jewish fellow citizens and several hundreds of gypsies experienced here just over half a century ago. For them, these barracks were the gateway to hell. It was from here that they were placed on their final transportation by the occupying forces, on a one-way trip to the Nazi extermination camps in Poland. Very few survived these transports and the camps.

For those of us who did not live through this, it is well nigh impossible to understand the tragedy of the thousands of our fellow countrymen who spent their last hours on Belgian soil in this place. Did they know what fate awaited them? Did they instinctively sense what would happen to their parents, their children, their partners and to themselves? Or did they still hold out hopes for a last-minute rescue from the evil that surrounded them here?

In this place, quiet remembrance and wordless respect are appropriate. After all, what happened here cannot be expressed with either the spoken word or the written word. As the great Medieval philosopher Moses Maimonides wrote, "Ce qui est élevé peut être dit dans toutes les langues, mais ce que cela veut dire ne peut être dit dans aucune." Freely translated, I would say: the suffering that was suffered here can be told in every language, but cannot be expressed in words.

Perhaps this paradox explains why, after our liberation in 1944 and after the freeing of the camps in 1945, so many kept silent. The few who returned found a community depleted by half, ransacked homes, missing reminders. Here and there they recovered something, sometimes they were compensated in some way, but it often did not go further than an attempt. It was years before the survivors could speak again and before those who had not experienced it could listen. It goes without saying that the first question that remained was what had happened to the Jews during World War II. It was only much later that the question arose as to possible restitution of stolen or plundered Jewish goods.

By opening archives and under international pressure, it has only become clear in recent years what came of the Jewish estates with no known heirs, and how they mostly ended up in Swiss banks. With that, our country's need to shed some light on that troubled period of persecution and plundering of the Jewish community during the second World War grew. It also then emerged that our knowledge of the systematic plundering of Jewish goods, in contrast to the history of the deportation, remained particularly rudimentary.

In the national and international context of that time, the "Study Group regarding the fate of the possessions of the members of the Jewish Community of Belgium, plundered or left behind during

the war from 1940-1945" was established in 1997. The decision to set up the Study Group was unanimously supported by all democratic parties in this country. Last year the Study Group received the needed personnel and the requisite resources. I know that this Group is carrying out its assignment quickly and accurately. It will present its final report to the government no later than early July of next year.

Through successive orders, the Jewish population was being forced into increasingly oppressive circumstances: first through mandatory registration "as a Jew". Then by the required declaration of "businesses under Jewish influence" and by the registration of Jewish moveable and immovable property. Finally, through the deposit of titles and the transfer of belongings in cash money to banks recognised by the occupier, through the identification of bank accounts, through the registration of securities and through the forced sale of Jewish businesses in a later phase.

The property of Jewish fellow citizens who had either fled or been deported were placed under the control of German curators. Eventually, all Jewish accounts had to be centred at one bank placed under German control - the "Société française de Banque et de Dépôts". From the summer of 1942 onwards, Jewish citizens were then deported on a large scale. A lesser-known fact is that also their furniture and household goods were systematically carried off, and that this act of robbery continued until just before the liberation.

There are a few remarkable aspects of this thieving process which I would like to bring to your attention. Not out of some degree of sympathy for Belgium, but purely out of pragmatic and military-economic considerations, the German military administration opted for a veiled approach here from the very beginning. It came down to having to place as few occupying troops as possible, in order to keep the economy running for the benefit of the war efforts of the State and for that reason to rely on Belgian structures and on the existing Belgian legal establishment to the greatest extent possible. The occupier's choice to make as much use as he could of Belgian institutions and the Belgian legal system, in fact imposed on him a number of limitations that he could not circumvent, or could with do so with only moderate success. This makes me think of the institution created by the occupier to manage "enemy and Jewish capital", the "Brüsseler Treuhandgesellschaft" or BTG. Set up under the provisions of Belgian company law, the BTG was simply and solely authorised to manage the assets entrusted to it, but by no means did it have the right to dispose of those assets. On the basis of Belgian legislation, that difference allowed Belgian banks, in certain cases, to disregard instructions from the BTG.

A second example involves the real estate sector. Jewish immovable goods that were "abandoned" by their owners came to fall under German legal restraint. Research conducted by the Study Group shows that there had been attempts to sell Jewish real estate via these curators on a large scale. "In the absence of the owner", that too was actually not possible pursuant to the Belgian legal system. The German occupier found no other way out other than, by order, authorising German notaries to ratify deeds of sale in Belgium.

I wanted to take a moment to go into these aspects to make it clear that the situation in Belgium during the war years cannot simply be compared to those in our neighbouring countries. In addition to collaboration, there was also passive and active resistance. In many respects, it can be re-iterated that the Belgian population, generally speaking, did not allow itself to be persuaded into out-right anti-Semitism. The fact that many Belgian Jews were able to escape persecution and deportation during the second World War is evidence of this.

But let me be absolutely clear. The total toll of victims in that perspective remains unacceptable and loathsome. It is also unacceptable that, more than fifty years after the facts, this country has still not

fully accounted for a part of its history. The file of the missing Jewish possessions must urgently be openly dealt with in this regard. I know that the Jewish Goods Study Group is investigating a number of leads.

Already it has been determined that unpaid policies with insurance companies have been identified. It is fairly certain that unclaimed accounts held by Jews or Jewish estates without known heirs can be located at banks. It has also already been exposed that unclaimed Jewish balances from the war years found their way to the Treasury via the Sequester or via the Crown Lands Office. That such things happened in accordance with Belgian law does not take away from the reality, nor does it dispense us with the full restoration of rights. I am of the opinion that in this regard, Belgium cannot fall behind other countries where the Jewish Community has in the meantime been compensated for the damages suffered.

For monies that ended up at Belgian banks and insurance companies, ASLK and Post, that is still relatively simple, insofar as archives were kept. For other monies and goods, this is much more difficult. I'm reminded of the 7,000 Jewish businesses in our country that the occupying forces declared "administratively bankrupt". In many cases, the resources of those businesses were transferred to Germany, which makes it more difficult for us to trace them.

The government will draw the necessary conclusions from the findings of the Study Group. It seems to me to be important that we investigate on the basis of concrete files how we can accomplish this redress. That will also be our position in the related file of the Jewish war victims, in which we focus our attention on the files of the surviving rightful claimants.

A concrete possibility for restitution is the transfer of resources, on the basis of concrete files, through a Fund set up by law that will be financed by the government, the financial sector and the insurance companies. In the event of a lack of concrete information, an alternative will be worked out on the basis of the Committee's activities. Monies will be drawn from this Fund for the individual return to rightful claimants who can still be identified and traced. For the other files, for which descendants can no longer be found, the relevant amounts will likewise be paid in to this Fund. The balance of the Fund, after depletion of the allocation for individual restitution, will then form the seed capital of a pro bono publico Foundation. I am referring to the good of the Jewish Community, later to be determined in consultation with Jewish organisations that have been active in this field for many years and are in touch with the social, cultural and religious reality of the community concerned. But I am also referring to the fight against racism, the intolerance and violations of human rights as such.

In the coming months, we will determine how this Foundation will be managed in practice. I believe it would be a good idea to have people who represent the common interest to have a presence in the Executive Board, but it initially falls to the Jewish Community to work out a proposal with regard to this subject.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
all sections in this country and all parties involved in this debate have an interest in finding a solution that is worked out with sound judgement and mutual understanding and in absolute transparency. The great solidarity on this within the Jewish Community of Belgium supports me in my belief that this is possible. Let us work on this together, in the honour of the memory of our dearly departed during the years of the war. I thank you.