



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

REMARKS OF THE HONORABLE JANET RENO
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES
AT CEREMONIES MARKING THE SWEARING IN
OF MEMBERS OF THE U.S. HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL COUNCIL

Hall of Remembrance

U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum

100 Raoul Wallenberg Place, S.W. Washington, D.C.

Tuesday, December 8, 1998

P R O C E E D I N G S

(5:52 p.m.)

GENERAL RENO: Thank you so much, Miles.

I am so privileged to be a part of this very special ceremony today, in this most special place. One cannot set foot in this extraordinary Museum without being overwhelmed, overwhelmed by the exhibits that so graphically and powerfully depict the horrors of Nazi inhumanity, and overwhelmed by the exhibits that tell us about those courageous individuals who risked and sometimes gave their lives to save Jews and others from annihilation.

In the conference room of the Attorney General's office there are two great murals that arch on either end of the great room in which Bobby Kennedy had his office. One is Justice Granted -- an optimistic, hopeful sign of people

coming into a new world with hope, with prosperity, with justice.

On the other end of the room is Justice Denied, and there is a barren slope with people being led off into bondage by brown-shirted troops, violins being taken, papers being torn. At first I resented looking at that mural, and then I realized it is the symbol that every Attorney General should have to warn her or him of what happens when justice is not done.

As remarkable as those murals are, nothing can compare to this institution and what it has done for the world to remind us of how vigilant we all must be.

As an American of Danish descent, I was raised on stories of what the Danes did during the war. In 1943 Danish officials and citizens from virtually every walk of life did something pretty wonderful. They stood up, they were counted, they made a difference. It is a wonderful story, but it is a reminder of what all of us must do, whether we be Attorney General or citizen, in standing up against the forces of hatred, of bigotry, of inhumanity.

A few years ago I had one of the most extraordinary experiences of my time as Attorney General. I was told that Miep Gies wanted to meet me, and she came to the office. She came to about here (indicating) on me. And I stood there in awe and in wonder. We have kept in touch.

Her compassion and her bravery is a further symbol to me. But nothing that she has done can compare with what you have done for the rest of time to make sure that everyone stand up, speak out against bigotry and hatred and terrorism and inhumanity, so that people back down.

We are forced to wonder what could have happened if only more people like Miep Gies, like some of those Danes, hadn't looked the other way, if they hadn't turned their backs on their neighbors and even their neighbors' children. Our own government could have done more to save lives.

At the end of the war, I went to visit an uncle who was with the Allied High Commission forces. I spent a year in Regensburg. We drove past Dachau. It was not opened yet. I was just told what had happened. I came home to my mother and said: You told me all my growing up until these years that when I grow up I should get involved in public service and trying to do something to help other people, to make the world a better place. And I said: The world can't be getting better because this man did these horrible things in this century.

She said: My dear, unless you and others care and speak out and get involved, it's going to get much worse. I have never forgotten her words. Because of what you do here, of what the new Council members will do, this world may not get that much better, but we can keep it from repeating history.

I began to appreciate that day as we drove past Dachau the importance of learning more, about the unimaginable cruelty and brutality that led to the murder of one of every three Jews who had been alive at the time. The challenge that this Museum has embraced is to somehow render the seemingly unimaginable imaginable, the seemingly incomprehensible comprehensible. In accepting appointment by the President to the Holocaust Council, you are committing yourself to leading that noble effort.

And it is also to call to people's attention what happened, for when I came home from Germany and talked to my friends they did not know of what I talked. They did not understand. We have a whole world yet to make sure that everyone, not just some, understand.

The educational mission of this great institution is both unique and uniquely important. Creating a better future for our children and our children's children requires honest and sometimes painful confrontation with history. A world that turns a blind eye to the past deprives itself of the crucial lessons that history alone can teach.

Surely the defining event of the twentieth century is the

Holocaust. That nightmare has profound and universal implications for all peoples. All nations need to reflect on the terrible consequences that can result from intolerance and from indifference to intolerance. In a world that continues to suffer the ravages of ethnic cleansing, mass killings, hate crimes, and other outrages, there are no more important lessons to be learned than the ones that this Museum teaches. Under the guidance of Miles Lerman and Sara Bloomfield, the Museum carries out that role in a wonderful, wonderful way.

The lessons of the Holocaust are so movingly embodied in the post-Holocaust imperatives: never forget and never again. I believe that those words are the charge that I give to the new Council members. They say it better than any words that we can utter.

The Justice Department is committed to doing whatever it can to making sure that we never forget and that never again do we let something like this happen. I came to this institution called the Justice Department not knowing quite what to expect. I have found wonderfully dedicated people. I have a special mission, and that is to let the people of the United States know how many dedicated men and women work with them and for them in the Department of Justice, spending long hours speaking out against hatred, prosecuting, suing, using the law the right way to make sure that it never happens again.

Our Civil Rights Division has played a leading role. They are assisted by a host of other Federal, State, and local agencies. Hate crimes are an especially urgent concern for us and we have implemented important initiatives to prevent them and, when such crimes occur, to identify, apprehend, and prosecute the perpetrator. We have had the wonderful opportunity to work with you in this initiative and I am deeply grateful.

Our Office of Special Investigations continues to seek out and prosecute Nazi criminals. We will not forget. As of this date that small office is prosecuting more Nazi cases than any other government agency or government in the world, and I'm very, very proud of Eli Rosenbaum and OSI's

dedicated staff of prosecutors, historians, and support personnel, who are doing so much to make sure that never ever again is a reality.

The work has earned OSI its international reputation as the most effective and successful Nazi crimes investigation and prosecution unit in the world. I pledge to you tonight with all my heart and soul that the Department of Justice will continue to leave no stone unturned in seeking justice on behalf of Hitler's victims, including the thousands of survivors who made no homes in this country.

I am so grateful for the assistance that OSI has received from this Museum, particularly in facilitating access to the Museum's vast collection of wartime documents. During the past two years OSI's landmark work in tracing the fate of gold and other assets looted by the Nazis provided the key investigative breakthroughs of the inter-agency effort led by Under Secretary of State Stuart Eizenstat.

I salute the Museum for its co-sponsorship of last week's very, very successful international conference on Holocaust era assets. The Justice Department is one of the three agencies that have volunteered to contribute funds for the operation of the newly created Presidential Advisory Commission on Holocaust Assets in the United States, and I have asked one of our most respected and accomplished senior officials, Assistant Attorney General James Robinson, to serve as my representative on the Commission.

Last but not least, I want to mention a truly remarkable program that the Justice Department's Foreign Claims Settlement Commission devised and operated. During the past three years that Commission pursued compensation from Germany for U.S. citizens who were victimized by the Nazi regime. Under a 1995 agreement between the United States and Germany, the Commission, which was ably led by a great Chair, Delissa Ridgway, made an unprecedented effort to locate individuals who were U.S. citizens at the time of their victimization. It helped to assist them in obtaining a measure of financial recompense.

In the end, the Commission overcame daunting investigative and logistical obstacles and a great many people who had been denied justice for more than five decades were at last able to qualify for compensation.

Delissa Ridgway was recently elevated to the bench this past summer, having been appointed by President Clinton to the U.S. Court of International Trade. She's gone off to New York, but she misses Washington. There is probably no one more qualified in America to administer the oath of office here this evening than Judge Delissa Ridgway. She represents what my mother talked about: We all, those who undertake the oath tonight, those who serve, those who look at what goes on, all of us, must engage in public service, speak out, speak out for justice, speak out against hatred and inhumanity, and all of us must do what we can, our part to serve this great institution, which is the most effective advocate of all for the greatness and the wonder of the human spirit.

With that, I'd like now to yield to Judge Ridgway so that she might administer the oath of office. Delissa.

(End of the Attorney General's remarks, at 6:06 p.m.)