

Speech of H. E. Rasim Ljajic, Minister of Labour and Social Policy

Survivors of the holocaust,
Descendants of the victims,
Excellences,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Hilda Deitsch, a Jewish girl, born in Vienna, from where she ran to Belgrade with the members of her family, herself voluntarily surrendered and early in December 1941 became a prisoner of the Staro Sajmiste concentration camp. She believed that she had to help and that she had to put herself at the disposal of all the victims imprisoned there.

From the camp, with her friend she wrote and sent a letter saying:

“At the wire fence, all the philosophy stops. There is only reality that you who are on the other side of the wire cannot even begin to imagine, because it would make you scream from terror.”

Primo Levi – one of the greatest Italian writers of the 20th century, who himself as a Jew survived the terror of the death camps, often said:

“The individual memories make collective memory... in my novels I didn’t want to comment the facts but to stay true to the reality which was unbelievable and indescribable.”

The exhibition “Holocaust in Serbia 1941-1944” showcased with the intention to present the very reality Hilda Deitch and Primo Levi wrote about to the citizens and public to try to make them understand the scope of that terror.

The Republic of Serbia reiterates its undoubted commitment to the memory of the innocent victims of the World War II. Our country is proud of its antifascist past and its role in the process of gaining victory over Nazism and fascism.

In this act, the Republic of Serbia rejects any form of anti-Semitism and xenophobia, together with any attempt to falsely recreate the history and relativise crimes committed between 1941 and 1945.

This Exhibition is an instrument by which this message we are conveying once again to the all today.

In Serbia, in the period between the two wars, there were about 50 Jewish municipalities, among which the biggest in Belgrade. Immediately at the beginning of the WWII in our territory and of the occupation of the country, the Jews were subjected to a systematic persecutions and liquidation.

The scope of the pogrom of the Jews in Serbia during the World War II are such as to rightfully say that an actual genocide occurred. Of 33.500 Jews, settled in different locations, under the administration of the German, Italian, Hungarian and Bulgarian occupational authorities, as well as in the territory ruled by the so called Independent State of Croatia, more than 27.000 Jews were killed, which is over 80 per cent of the total Jewish population.

As many as 6.320 Jews lost their lives in the “Concentration camp for the Jews in Zemun”, known today by the name Staro Sajmiste. Individually, it is one of the biggest locations at which the holocaust was carried out systematically in Serbia. The tragedy of the Jewish communities in the Serbia proper has not been examined from the historical point of view as thoroughly as the pogrom in Belgrade Sajmiste, where the Jews were killed in massive numbers, which is therefore more tragic due to being less visible.

The hands of the Nazis and of their collaborators have eternally been stained with the blood of these victims, killed in the death camps in Staro Sajmiste, Banjica and Topovske šupe (Artillery barracks), sent to Jasenovac or killed in the infamous round-ups in Novi Sad and in the District of Šajkaši. The murderous hands of those who in 1942 reported to Berlin “the Jewish issue is solved” in Serbia. Of those who competed in devising numerous equally atrocious ways to kill a man.

In addition to different methods and ways for systematic exterminations of the Jews, between March and May 1942, a cargo vehicle dubbed “suffocating van” was used to poison to death by carbon-monoxide the Jews, mostly women and children, who were buried in mass graves in Jainci,

which represents one of the most vicious forms of liquidation in human history.

Adolph Hitler himself said that it was not his wish the concentration camps to become homes for the old and weak, but instruments of terror.

Dear friends,

I believe that by gathering at the opening of exhibition “Holocaust in Serbia in the period 1941-1944” we shall once again express our strong commitment to fight against revision and redesigning of the facts, as well as diminishing the atrocities that have been committed.

Holocaust is a warning to what extent under certain conditions and events evil may erode human society, led to believe in dominance of democratic values.

There is no deadline by which it should the truths of the Holocaust should be repeated time and time again – until there is evil there must be a resistance.

The Exhibition “Holocaust in Serbia in the period 1941-1945” is an exceptional event in our country. In a few moments we will have the opportunity to make the rounds of the exhibition consecrated to this tragic phenomenon – the first such that in a comprehensive manner treats this issue from the end of WWII.

The members of the team that designed and prepared this Exhibition include, among others, Momcilo Mitrovic PhD, Aleksej Timofejev PhD, Jelena Petakovic, MSci, the author is an architect Ozarija Markovic-Lasic, graphic designer Nebojsa Vasiljevic, and Rastko Surdic has designed the catalogue.

In particular, I would like to commend the Yugoslav History Museum headed by Director Katarina Zivanovic, and the team of the Institute for Recent History of Serbia.

The Federation of the Jewish Municipalities of Serbia has provided a valuable support, together with its President Ruben Fuks as well as the Jewish Historical Museum.

Also, the Exhibition has been indirectly prepared by participation of over 50 institutions of culture and science in Serbia, Israel, the USA, France, the Netherlands, Poland, Austria and other countries.

Apart from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Ministry of Culture, Information and Information Society, the City of Belgrade and Savski Venac Municipality support the Exhibition.

Therefore this Exhibition represents one of the most prominent and significant research and museum projects that has been carried out in Serbia for decades, of which auspices of the UNESCO and Government of the Republic of Serbia under which it has been organised is an obvious proof.

For the first time, at one place, the visitors will be able to inform themselves of basic aspects of the Holocaust in Serbia, and also to see valuable exhibits. The witnessing exhibits shown at the Exhibition for the first time in our country are the result of the understanding of and cooperation with Steven Spielberg's "Shoa Foundation".

Dear participants,

Expressing the respect and piety for the victims of the Holocaust and commending the team creating this Exhibition I invite you to start our tour of the Exhibition.

I pronounce the Exhibition "Holocaust in Serbia 1941-1945" open.

Thank you.