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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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REMARKS BY PRESIDENT OBAMA, GERMAN CHANCELLOR MERKEL, AND ELIE WIESEL AT BUCHENWALD CONCENTRATION CAMP

Weimar, Germany

3:58 P.M. (Local)

CHANCELLOR MERKEL: (As translated.) Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen. Here in this place a concentration camp was established in 1937. Not far from here lies Weimar, a place where Germans created wonderful works of art, thereby contributing to European culture and civilization. Not far from that place where once artists, poets, and great minds met, terror, violence, and tyranny reigned over this camp.

At the beginning of our joint visit to the Buchenwald memorial the American President and I stood in front of a plaque commemorating all the victims. When you put your hand on the memorial you can feel that it has warmed up -- it is kept at a temperature of 37 degrees, the body temperature of a living human being. This, however, was not a place for living, but a place for dying.

Unimaginable horror, shock -- there are no words to adequately describe what we feel when we look at the suffering inflicted so cruelly upon so many people here and in other concentration and extermination camps under National Socialist terror. I bow my head before the victims.

We, the Germans, are faced with the agonizing question how and why -- how could this happen? How could Germany wreak such havoc in Europe and the world? It is therefore incumbent upon us Germans to show an unshakeable resolve to do everything we can so that something like this never happens again.

On the 25th of January, the presidents of the associations of former inmates at the concentration camps presented their request to the public, and this request closes with the following words: „The last eyewitness appeal to Germany, to all European states, and to the international community to continue preserving and honoring the human gift of remembrance and commemoration into the future. We ask young people to carry on our struggle against Nazi ideology, and for a just, peaceful and tolerant world; a world that has no place for anti-Semitism, racism, xenophobia, and right-wing extremism."

This appeal of the survivors clearly defines the very special responsibility we Germans have to shoulder with regard to our history. And for me, therefore, there are three messages that are important today. First, let me emphasize, we Germans see it as part of our country's raison d'être to keep the everlasting memory alive of the break with civilization that was the Shoah. Only in this way will we be able to shape our future.

I am therefore very grateful that the Buchenwald memorial has always placed great emphasis on the dialogue with younger people, to conversations with eyewitnesses, to documentation, and a broad-based educational program.

Second, it is most important to keep the memory of the great sacrifices alive that had to be made to put an end to the terror of National Socialism and to liberate its victims and to rid all people of its yoke.

This is why I want to say a particular word of gratitude to the President of the United States of America, Barack Obama, for visiting this particular memorial. It gives me an opportunity to align yet again that we Germans shall never forget, and we owe the fact that we were given the opportunity after the war to start anew, to enjoy peace and freedom to the resolve, the strenuous efforts, and indeed to a sacrifice made in blood of the United States of America and of all those who stood by your side as allies or fighters in the resistance.

We were able to find our place again as members of the international community through a forward-looking partnership. And this partnership was finally key to enabling us to overcome the painful

division of our country in 1989, and the division also of our continent. Today we remember the victims of this place. This includes remembering the victims of the so-called Special Camp 2, a detention camp run by the Soviet military administration from 1945 to 1950. Thousands of people perished due to the inhumane conditions of their detention.

Third, here in Buchenwald I would like to highlight an obligation placed on us Germans as a consequence of our past: to stand up for human rights, to stand up for rule of law, and for democracy. We shall fight against terror, extremism, and anti-Semitism. And in the awareness of our responsibility we shall strive for peace and freedom, together with our friends and partners in the United States and all over the world.

Thank you.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Chancellor Merkel and I have just finished our tour here at Buchenwald. I want to thank Dr. Volkhard Knigge, who gave an outstanding account of what we were witnessing. I am particularly grateful to be accompanied by my friend Elie Wiesel, as well as Mr. Bertrand Herz, both of whom are survivors of this place.

We saw the area known as Little Camp where Elie and Bertrand were sent as boys. In fact, at the place that commemorates this camp, there is a photograph in which we can see a 16-year-old Elie in one of the bunks along with the others. We saw the ovens of the crematorium, the guard towers, the barbed wire fences, the foundations of barracks that once held people in the most unimaginable conditions.

We saw the memorial to all the survivors -- a steel plate, as Chancellor Merkel said, that is heated to 37 degrees Celsius, the temperature of the human body; a reminder -- where people were deemed inhuman because of their differences -- of the mark that we all share.

Now these sights have not lost their horror with the passage of time. As we were walking up, Elie said, „if these trees could talk." And there's a certain irony about the beauty of the landscape and the horror that took place here.

More than half a century later, our grief and our outrage over what happened have not diminished. I will not forget what I've seen here today.

I've known about this place since I was a boy, hearing stories about my great uncle, who was a very young man serving in World War II. He was part of the 89th Infantry Division, the first Americans to reach a concentration camp. They liberated Ohrdruf, one of Buchenwald's sub-camps.

And I told this story, he returned from his service in a state of shock saying little and isolating himself for months on end from family and friends, alone with the painful memories that would not leave his head. And as we see -- as we saw some of the images here, it's understandable that someone who witnessed what had taken place here would be in a state of shock.

My great uncle's commander, General Eisenhower, understood this impulse to silence. He had seen the piles of bodies and starving survivors and deplorable conditions that the American soldiers found when they arrived, and he knew that those who witnessed these things might be too stunned to speak about them or be able -- be unable to find the words to describe them; that they might be rendered mute in the way my great uncle had. And he knew that what had happened here was so unthinkable that after the bodies had been taken away, that perhaps no one would believe it.

And that's why he ordered American troops and Germans from the nearby town to tour the camp. He invited congressmen and journalists to bear witness and ordered photographs and films to be made. And he insisted on viewing every corner of these camps so that -- and I quote -- he could „be in a position to give first-hand evidence of these things if ever in the future there develops a tendency to charge these allegations merely to propaganda."

We are here today because we know this work is not yet finished. To this day, there are those who insist that the Holocaust never happened -- a denial of fact and truth that is baseless and ignorant and hateful. This place is the ultimate rebuke to such thoughts; a reminder of our duty to confront those who would tell lies about our history.

Also to this day, there are those who perpetuate every form of intolerance -- racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, xenophobia, sexism, and more -- hatred that degrades its victims and diminishes us all. In this century, we've seen genocide. We've seen mass graves and the ashes of villages burned to the ground; children used as soldiers and rape used as a weapon of war. This places teaches us that we must be ever vigilant about the spread of evil in our own time, that we must reject the false comfort that others' suffering is not our problem and commit ourselves to resisting those who would subjugate others to serve their own interests.

But as we reflect today on the human capacity for evil and our shared obligation to defy it, we're also reminded of the human capacity for good. For amidst the countless acts of cruelty that took place here, we know that there were many acts of courage and kindness, as well. The Jews who insisted on fasting on Yom Kippur. The camp cook who hid potatoes in the lining of his prison uniform and distributed them to his fellow inmates, risking his own life to help save theirs. The prisoners who organized a special effort to pro-

tect the children here, sheltering them from work and giving them extra food. They set up secret classrooms, some of the inmates, and taught history and math and urged the children to think about their future professions. And we were just hearing about the resistance that formed and the irony that the base for the resistance was in the latrine areas because the guards found it so offensive that they wouldn't go there. And so out of the filth, that became a space in which small freedoms could thrive.

When the American GIs arrived they were astonished to find more than 900 children still alive, and the youngest was just three years old. And I'm told that a couple of the prisoners even wrote a Buchenwald song that many here sang. Among the lyrics were these: „... whatever our fate, we will say yes to life, for the day will come when we are free...in our blood we carry the will to live and in our hearts, in our hearts -- faith."

These individuals never could have known the world would one day speak of this place. They could not have known that some of them would live to have children and grandchildren who would grow up hearing their stories and would return here so many years later to find a museum and memorials and the clock tower set permanently to 3:15, the moment of liberation.

They could not have known how the nation of Israel would rise out of the destruction of the Holocaust and the strong, enduring bonds between that great nation and my own. And they could not have known that one day an American President would visit this place and speak of them and that he would do so standing side by side with the German Chancellor in a Germany that is now a vibrant democracy and a valued American ally.

They could not have known these things. But still surrounded by death they willed themselves to hold fast to life. In their hearts they still had faith that evil would not triumph in the end, that while history is unknowable it arches towards progress, and that the world would one day remember them. And it is now up to us, the living, in our work, wherever we are, to resist injustice and intolerance and indifference in whatever forms they may take, and ensure that those who were lost here did not go in vain. It is up to us to redeem that faith. It is up to us to bear witness; to ensure that the world continues to note what happened here; to remember all those who survived and all those who perished, and to remember them not just as victims, but also as individuals who hoped and loved and dreamed just like us.

And just as we identify with the victims, it's also important for us I think to remember that the perpetrators of such evil were human, as well, and that we have to guard against cruelty in ourselves. And I want to express particular thanks to Chancellor Merkel and the German people, because it's not easy to look into the past in this way and acknowledge it and make something of it, make a determination that they will stand guard against acts like this happening again.

Rather than have me end with my remarks I thought it was appropriate to have Elie Wiesel provide some reflection and some thought as he returns here so many years later to the place where his father died.

MR. WIESEL: Mr. President, Chancellor Merkel, Bertrand, ladies and gentlemen. As I came here today it was actually a way of coming and visit my father's grave -- but he had no grave. His grave is somewhere in the sky. This has become in those years the largest cemetery of the Jewish people.

The day he died was one of the darkest in my life. He became sick, weak, and I was there. I was there when he suffered. I was there when he asked for help, for water. I was there to receive his last words. But I was not there when he called for me, although we were in the same block; he on the upper bed and I on the lower bed. He called my name, and I was too afraid to move. All of us were. And then he died. I was there, but I was not there.

And I thought one day I will come back and speak to him, and tell him of the world that has become mine. I speak to him of times in which memory has become a sacred duty of all people of good will -- in America, where I live, or in Europe or in Germany, where you, Chancellor Merkel, are a leader with great courage and moral aspirations.

What can I tell him that the world has learned? I am not so sure. Mr. President, we have such high hopes for you because you, with your moral vision of history, will be able and compelled to change this world into a better place, where people will stop waging war -- every war is absurd and meaningless; where people will stop hating one another; where people will hate the otherness of the other rather than respect it.

But the world hasn't learned. When I was liberated in 1945, April 11, by the American army, somehow many of us were convinced that at least one lesson will have been learned -- that never again will there be war; that hatred is not an option, that racism is stupid; and the will to conquer other people's minds or territories or aspirations, that will is meaningless.

I was so hopeful. Paradoxically, I was so hopeful then. Many of us were, although we had the right to give up on humanity, to give up on culture, to give up on education, to give up on the possibility of living one's life with dignity in a world that has no place for dignity.

We rejected that possibility and we said, no, we must continue be-

lieving in a future, because the world has learned. But again, the world hasn't. Had the world learned, there would have been no Cambodia and no Rwanda and no Darfur and no Bosnia.

Will the world ever learn? I think that is why Buchenwald is so important -- as important, of course, but differently as Auschwitz. It's important because here the large -- the big camp was a kind of international community. People came there from all horizons -- political, economic, culture. The first globalization essay, experiment, were made in Buchenwald. And all that was meant to diminish the humanity of human beings.

You spoke of humanity, Mr. President. Though unto us, in those times, it was human to be inhuman. And now the world has learned, I hope. And of course this hope includes so many of what now would be your vision for the future, Mr. President. A sense of security for Israel, a sense of security for its neighbors, to bring peace in that place. The time must come. It's enough -- enough to go to cemeteries, enough to weep for oceans. It's enough. There must come a moment -- a moment of bringing people together.

And therefore we say anyone who comes here should go back with that resolution. Memory must bring people together rather than set them apart. Memories here not to sow anger in our hearts, but on the contrary, a sense of solidarity that all those who need us. What else can we do except invoke that memory so that people everywhere who say the 21st century is a century of new beginnings, filled with promise and infinite hope, and at times profound gratitude to all those who believe in our task, which is to improve the human condition.

A great man, Camus, wrote at the end of his marvelous novel, The Plague: „After all," he said, „after the tragedy, never the rest...there is more in the human being to celebrate than to denigrate." Even that can be found as truth -- painful as it is -- in Buchenwald.

Thank you, Mr. President, for allowing me to come back to my father's grave, which is still in my heart.

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4:25 P.M. (Local)

Source:

Remarks by President Obama, German Chancellor Merkel, and Elie Wiesel at Buchenwald Concentration Camp. (2009, June 5). Retrieved from http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-President-Obama-German-Chancellor-Merkel-and-Elie-Wiesel-at-Buchenwald-Concentration-Camp-6-5-09/