

Prime Minister Andrus Ansip's speech at the opening of the memorial to the Estonian Jews who died in the Holocaust, the Memory Gallery, at the Estonian Jewish Community Centre

Your excellences,

Dear chairman and members of the Jewish community,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to be among you as the Prime Minister of Estonia and witness the opening of this memory gallery to Estonian Jews who died in the Holocaust. I understand and share the grief and pain caused to your community by the Holocaust. The gallery opened today will keep alive the memory of the 974 victims of monstrous crimes against humanity. That means 974 tragic fates, nearly a thousand of our countrymen and women, an entire community for small Estonia.

The traditions of the Estonian Jewish community saved those people who managed to escape the German occupation during World War II and those few who were able to survive the evil of the Holocaust in Estonia with the help of their fellow citizens.

We all owe them our gratitude.

Today is a day of grief, but not only that. Today is a time to contemplate good and evil. As a small nation, Estonians have always understood the suffering of the Jews and held their friendship dear. We place great value on the contribution of our Jewish community in the story of the birth, rebirth, and success of the Republic of Estonia – starting from Jewish volunteers in the Estonian People's Army in the War of Independence to cultural and economic figures who have brought fame and success to Estonia.

For its part, the independent Estonian state has always striven to make its best efforts to ensure that our Jewish community has all ethnic cultural rights. That principle was written down in 1918 in the birth act of the Republic of Estonia, our Independence Manifesto.

It is a widely known fact that Estonia was the first country in the world to establish cultural autonomy for the Jewish minority. It is interesting to note that on this day, the 27th of January, in 1925, a practical debate was held in the hall of the Riigikogu over the draft of the Cultural Local Governments of Minorities Act. The session was chaired by Riigikogu Chairman Jaan Tõnisson while Konstantin Päts and our later political doyens gave speeches. The act was passed a couple of weeks later, on 12 February. And once the opportunity was granted, our Jewish community made the Jewish Cultural Local Government a reality (in 1926).

The abovementioned act cast into legal language the knowledge that Estonians have always carried inside. Namely that we, as a small nation, understand other cultures. It is a sound understanding that Europe as a whole arrived at gradually only after seeing the destructive impact of totalitarian regimes. When Estonia became free and restored its independence, it also

became possible to restore normal conditions for the cultural autonomy of ethnic minorities. The first sitting of the Riigikogu after Estonia regained independence passed a relevant act in 1993, an act that reopened the possibility of a Jewish cultural local government in Estonia. I would like to express my recognition of the work done by the Jewish Community of Estonia. One of its most significant milestones is definitely the opening of a synagogue – five years ago already – here on Karu Street. Together with the Centre, it has operated with great success and we wish you success in the future as well. I am convinced that success and mutual understanding cannot be overthrown by evil intentions or inconsideration, or by any provocateurs, yellow media, or foreign political forces.

I would like to emphasise that the crimes of totalitarian regimes are indelible and can never be justified, and Estonia has unequivocally condemned them. I assure you that the Estonian Government has no intention to assess a person's services to the Republic of Estonia or award any title of independence fighter on the basis of the uniform that the person wore.

Ladies and gentlemen. Jews and their culture have always had a secure and fundamental place in independent Estonia. We are proud to consider as our own (i.e. Estonian) such a great scientist as semiotician Juri Lotman, Judaist Lazar Gulkowitsch, and honoured folklorist and Orientalist professor Isidor Levin, whose presence today is a great honour for all of us.

I wish the Jewish Community of Estonia much strength in their future activities, for the benefit of our common Republic of Estonia.

I bow my head to 974 human lives.

Thank you for your attention.