**The Address of Michal Klíma**

**On the Occasion of The Day of Commemoration in Memory of Victims of the Holocaust**

**And Prevention of Crimes Against Humanity**

**Senate of the Czech Parliament**

**January 27, 2017**

Many of the well-known people - artists, scientists or politicians - fell victim to Shoa. We remember their names thanks to their renown during their lives. This is not the case of the majority of people whose lives ended in concentration camps. On the occasion of this commemorative assembly, being held at the seat of the highest legislative assembly of our country,

I would like to mention a name of a person coming from a small village in Sumava Mountains. The person I am going to talk about is unknown, like the millions of other murdered people.

Fifteen years ago, my friends and I began to restore a decaying synagogue located in the part of Sumava Mountains (Böhmerwald) inhabited, for centuries, by German speaking inhabitants. Those people were mostly mountain dwellers, farmers, foresters and glass factory workers. Jews constituted a considerable part of the local population –They pursued professions like innkeepers, merchants, and small industrialists. In the restored synagogue, there is a museum, where we installed an exhibition on the coexistence of Germans, Czechs and Jews, the people who had dwelled in the area for centuries.

One day, a man from nearby Bavaria paid us a visit. He introduced himself as a chronicler of German inhabitants expelled from the neighbouring village after WWII. As a present he brought me a plan of his village where he marked all the houses where Jewish inhabitants had lived before WWII. “We lived together in peace”, he remembered. “There were no disputes among us”. He later explained that the Jews from his village had moved in time before the Munich Treaty and the arrival of Nazi armed forces, and continued: “Only one elderly man stayed behind. He did not want to leave his house, neither had he anywhere to go. We, the children of the village, loved him. He was so nice and kind-hearted. All of the children from the village visited him. He played with us and gave us sweets. Even during the war. Then, in September of 1942, they came for him. I remember when he was being driven away on the deck of a military lorry. We, the village children, ran along the lorry till the end of the village and waved him goodbye. This was the last time we saw him.” The old man fell silent. “You know, we all believe,” he added, supposedly speaking for the then children, “that he lived till the end of his life somewhere in the home for elderly. None of us had ever heard of him.” There was a hope in the voice of the German chronicler, the hope he has been living to all his life. He surely has heard of all of the atrocities of Holocaust, though he strongly believed that their kind-hearted neighbour was spared from those acts of violence. He then turned towards me and said: “If you ever managed to find out anything about this man, I would be very interested. His name was Hermann Meister.” He expressed his request and looked at me. His eyes were full of concern from what he might learn.

Searching the archives of Yad Vashem Jerusalem Memorial I found the information about Herman Meister from Kundratice (Kundratitz) that the German chronicler has been afraid to learn. When he paid a visit to Hartmanice (Hartmanitz) Synagogue the next time, I told him: “Unfortunately, I have bad news to tell you.” I assume he immediately had known what I was going to tell him. He took out his notebook and wrote down: the date of the death April 2, 1943, age 77, place of the death: Theresienstadt concentration camp.

Remembering the good things the life brings to us is natural to us; however, we shall also remember the bad events of our lives. Last year a book of memoirs of five Sumava (Böhmerwald) -born German fellow citizens was published. The authors portray the inhumanities from the time when they were expelled from their homes. Their families had been living in Sumava Mountains (Böhmerwald) for centuries; they established profitable farms and homesteads in this inhospitable area. They remember the unfair way they were treated after the war. Czech people took a revenge on innocent them for all the atrocities of war committed by Germans. Although the major part of their memoirs portrays the situation before and during WWII, none of these witnesses mentions the fact that only few years before their tragic fate, their Jewish neighbours had been expelled, too. The Jewish neighbours had also been ripped off the properties they had, for generations, also built and, contrary to them, they never got a second chance to live elsewhere after being expelled – they were murdered. I would not, in any way, attempt to deny the suffering of expelled German natives, violence and injustice they had gone through. I only would like to add that their testimony would portray a bit more authenticity had it not been for their forgetting about their Jewish neighbours.

We do not like to remember, we like to forget. These days we must discuss the shameful course of events that happened in Prostejov (Prossnitz), a town in the Olomouc (Olmütz) region, where Jewish organisations would like to rearrange, in a commemorative way, the place where Jewish municipal cemetery was once located, thousands of local inhabitants signed a petition against such act. One can hardly believe that such demonstration of disrespect and insensitivity would ever be possible. The communist education fundamentally distorted historical events. School curricula depicted WWII as a fight of German imperialism against the Soviet communism and supressed other facts. Sadly, even after the collapse of communist regime, the children in Czech schools have neither been taught in a well-founded way nor comprehensively on the contemporary history. Fortunately, we have projects such as “The Neighbours Who Disappeared” by Prague Jewish Museum, “One World for Schools” by Czech NGO People in Need, “The Stories of Our Neighbour” by the Memory of Nations portal, projects of Post Bellum NGO and many other. There has also been a positive influence of various NGOs using the finances coming from German governmental sources such as Czech-German Fund for the Future. Many of the initiatives are of a regional character – these would include the exhibitions like the Coexistence of Czechs, Germans and Jews in the Sumava Mountains (Böhmerwald), which is presented in the aforementioned Hartmanice Mountain Synagogue (Hartmanitz Bergsynagoge).

Our Foundation for Holocaust Victims, using its best effort and capacities, strives to support projects that shall remind us of our history so that the part of history that constitutes a warning for us, would be remembered and would not allow the atrocities to ever happen again. On the premises of Czech Senate and in the presence of politicians I nevertheless would like to stress that the NGOs shall not play the fundamental role in this respect. The government bears joint responsibility for education of children and youth. The history cannot be changed. But, we all should put our best effort in order that the history does not repeat itself. The essential prerequisite for this is to portray the history truly and teach it in its full extent to our children.