

Israel Briefly Stands Still for Holocaust Remembrance

Israel came to a standstill for two mournful minutes Monday as sirens pierced the air in an annual ritual to remember the six million Jews systematically murdered by German Nazis and their collaborators during the Holocaust in World War II.

Israelis stopped what they were doing and stood in silence as sirens wailed nationwide Monday at 10:00 a.m.

People stood with heads bowed in reflection. Traffic froze as drivers stopped their cars and stepped outside in respect for the solemn day.

In Jerusalem, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, who returned to the region just two weeks after U.S. President Barack Obama's first visit as president, laid a wreath at Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum beside Israel's leadership.

Kerry, who arrived in Israel on Sunday, April 7, as part of a 10-day trip to the Middle East, Europe and Asia, was scheduled to hold talks with Israeli and Palestinian leaders during his three day visit to the region.

International Holocaust Remembrance Day is marked worldwide on Jan. 27, the date of the liberation of the Auschwitz death camp. Israel's annual Holocaust memorial day coincides with the Hebrew date of the Warsaw ghetto uprising.

Israel dedicated its annual memorial day this year to mark 70 years to the Warsaw ghetto uprising, a symbol of Jewish resistance against the Nazis in World War II that resonates deeply in Israel to this day.

The 1943 Warsaw ghetto uprising was the first large-scale rebellion against the Nazis in Europe and the single greatest

act of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust.

Though guaranteed to fail, it became a symbol of struggle against impossible conditions, illustrating a refusal to give in to Nazi atrocities and inspired other acts of uprising and underground resistance by Jews and non-Jews alike.

The annual memorial day is one of the most solemn on Israel's calendar. Restaurants, cafes and places of entertainment are shut down, and radio and TV programming are dedicated almost exclusively to documentaries about the Holocaust, interviews with survivors and somber music.

Never Again

On Sunday, Israel's highest-ranking soldier and the son of Holocaust survivors from Hungary, IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz, led a delegation of IDF soldiers to the Auschwitz camp in Poland.

"The state of Israel is our insurance that this horror will not happen again and the IDF is the defensive wall of our national homeland, a place of shelter for the entire Jewish people," Gantz wrote in the guest book.

On Monday afternoon, the chief of staff was scheduled to lead the traditional March of the Living along the three-kilometer stretch from Auschwitz to Birkenau, at the end of which he will deliver a speech.

Gantz landed in Krakow on Sunday morning and was welcomed in an official ceremony by the Polish military. From there, the chief of staff, his wife Revital, their son Nadav and the Israeli military delegation departed for Auschwitz. As they began their walk through the snowy camp it was clear that even the IDF's top commander had difficulty reining in his emotions.

"The trip has two aspects, a national and an emotional one.

Both are mixed together," Gantz told Israel Hayom. "I am very moved to be here personally and it is also very important from a national point of view."

"Israel can neither live the Holocaust nor forget the Holocaust," said the chief of staff. "This trip, which goes by the name of 'witnesses in uniform,' is the 180th trip by Israeli soldiers and their commanders to Poland. It is very important to continue this tradition."

"My fellow commanders, non-commissioned officers and cadets," Gantz said in a later speech to his delegation, "we have a role. We are military commanders and we have a job, a purpose, we are committed to results. We are also educators. We have to act like human beings. We have to make sure we ask ourselves if we are acting like human beings and if those under our command are behaving like human beings. We always have to weigh the moral considerations."

Regarding his decision to bring his son Nadav, a soldier in the Paratroopers Brigade, along for the trip, the chief of staff said, "He is the next generation. I thought it was important for him to come, and he thought so too. I hope this is not too much for him."

The Greatest Victory

In the heart of Auschwitz, Gantz met with the delegation's eyewitness, Asher Ud, 85, who chose his family name based on the Biblical verse "Like a brand plucked out of the fire" (Zechariah 3:2).

As Ud told his chilling story in a small and freezing barrack in Birkenau, no eye remained dry. He was spared nothing during the Second World War: neither beatings, nor hunger, disease, pain or loss. On more than one occasion, Ud was one step away from death, but managed to survive.

"I am standing here with the chief of staff. Could anything be

more meaningful?" the survivor said emotionally.

Later in the day, Gantz met with Tami Raveh, the daughter of Gideon Hausner, who was the chief prosecutor at the Eichmann trial in the early 1960s.

"It is very moving for me to be here and to see the army and police," she said. Raveh arrived with a delegation from the Justice Ministry, which was also joined by Holocaust survivor Mickey Goldman, an assistant to Hausner in the trial, and one of two police officers who were present at Eichmann's hanging, and scattered his ashes on the sea.

Following their tour, the chief of staff's delegation held a ceremony with the "witnesses in uniform" delegation, commanded by Brig. Gen. Roni Numa. Ud, the Holocaust survivor, also spoke at this ceremony and once tore people's hearts, "Being here is my triumph over evil. The victory of a small boy, whose childhood was cut short by hatred and turned into a travail of suffering and survival," Ud said emotionally, "There is no greater victory than being here, with the chief of staff. It's something divine." The survivor closed his speech with a cry of "Am Yisrael Chai!" (The nation of Israel lives), which echoed throughout the camp.