President Schultz, Dr. Kantor, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We meet to remember the victims of the Shoah.

We remember the Roma, Sinti, Slavs, gay men, disabled persons, Jehovah witnesses and dissidents who were murdered.

And we remember that, as Elie Wiesel teaches us, ‘while not all victims were Jews, all Jews were victims’ (Elie Wiesel, After the Darkness – Reflections on the Holocaust (Schocken Books 2002) p 10). The Nazis intended to erase the European Jewish civilisation from the face of the earth. In the war, they murdered each day, on average, 3000 Jews. And to stamp out the future, they killed a million Jewish children.

Driven by a lethal racist prejudice, they and their collaborators perpetrated cruel, inhuman and degrading acts, slaughtered millions without inhibition, and left many of the survivors feeling that they had outlived their own deaths.

The savage norm in the death camps included beatings, shootings, gassing, hanging, burning, freezing, mutilating for medical research, starvation, untreated disease, exhaustion.

The Shoah was not a matter of abstract numbers. The Mishnah tells us that to kill a single person is to kill a whole world. The Nazis killed a whole world, six million times.

We can find no meaning in the Shoah. Primo Levi writes that shortly after he arrived in Auschwitz, he felt a thirst. When he opened a window and broke off an icicle, a guard snatched it away from him. Levi asked, ‘Why?’ The guard replied, ‘There is no why here’, and assaulted him (Primo Levi, Survival In Auschwitz – If This Is A Man (translated by Stuart Woolf) (BN Publishing 2007) p 18).

We can learn no positive lessons from the Shoah. The Shoah was, self-evidently, a bottomless infinite inexhaustible evil.

We remember the dangers of indifference. We ask, ‘How could the world stand idly by when the Nazis were throwing Jewish children into industrial ovens or leaving children in the queue for the gas chamber standing in ice until their feet stuck to the ground?’
Sadly, indifference was the norm. This year we remember the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto in April 1943 - just seventy years ago. Brave young Jewish fighters battled with only revolvers against German artillery, fire and poison gas. Czeslaw Milosz’s poem ‘Campo dei Fiori’ captures what he calls ‘the loneliness of the dying’. He tells us that neither the ‘sky carousel’ nor the ‘carnival tune’ stopped revolving in Krasinski Square just outside the walled ghetto, and wrote that, ‘The bright melody drowned / The salvos from the Ghetto wall ... and the crowds were laughing / on that beautiful Warsaw Sunday’.

Indifference and inhumanity coexisted side by side on the streets near where the slaughter was taking place.

There was indifference too in the inaction of democratic states when the Nazi murderers and their collaborators began rounding up the Jewish people and when they were told about the death camps; in the failure of those who did not protest against their neighbours being transported to their deaths; in the role of neutral states that refused refuge or who traded with the Nazi government; and, in the flight from responsibility of the leaders at the Evian Conference of 1938 who refused to ease their emigration quotas.

The Nazis took this indifference to be acquiescence and so felt that they could murder the Jewish people with impunity.

We remember the courage of the survivors who had to bear the constantly painful burden of memory. If they had not themselves borne witness we might have had nothing to say to break the Nazi conspiracy of silence.

And we remember the righteous among the nations who risked everything to save the lives of Jewish people. Among the righteous is Raoul Wallenberg who saw evil and chose resistance over indifference. Tonight it is right that we recognise and commemorate his courage in confronting the terror of the Third Reich and saving many thousands of lives.

Today, we also remember the victims of more recent genocides in Bosnia, Cambodia, Rwanda and Darfur.

But it is not enough to remember; we must also remember to act. We must do more under the Rule of Law to end intolerance, racism and anti-Semitism.

We must not ignore the increase in anti-Semitism in Europe, the violence against individuals simply because they are Jewish, and the corrosive rise in racist and anti-Semitic rhetoric by a malign minority of politicians in some EU Member States. It is a moral imperative that we unequivocally repudiate the reprehensible rhetoric of those who seek to contaminate our political discourse and attempt to inflame dangerous prejudice.

The Shoah did not begin in the death camps – it began with words of hate. Those words of hate became weapons of mass murder because good people closed their doors and window shutters and remained silent.

Let us not be under any false and comforting illusion: Civilisation remains threatened by its oldest enemy: fanatical hatred for the Other. So let us this day affirm that the principle of ‘Equal concern and respect for all’ is the only true password for a better future.

Let us unite in our commitment to the victims of the Shoah and the lost generations to do all we can to ensure that the Holocaust of the 20th century will never again be repeated.