

*Address by the Ambassador of the State of Israel Ze'ev Boker
at the ceremony on the occasion of the Slovenia-Israel Friendship Day*

Metlika, 19 July 2023

*Dear President, Your Excellency Dr Nataša Pirc Musar,
Dear Mayor, Mrs Martina Legan Janžekovič,
Honourable guests,
Dear Friends,*

As some of you already know, I started my mission as non-resident ambassador to Slovenia in December last year. During my two working visits to Slovenia in 6 months since my accreditation, I had the privilege to visit not only Ljubljana, but also Maribor, Murska Sobota, Lendava and Nova Gorica. In these cities, we can find some reminders of once rich Jewish life in Slovenia: graves of Jewish families, old synagogues, old Jewish books. Monuments that were built in the last years and decades reflect the fact that the cruelty of the WWII did not spare Jews in Slovenia.

In 2021 the Slovene-Israeli friendship day was celebrated for the first time. The office of the president and the embassy decided together for Bela krajina and we were warmly welcomed by the Municipality of Metlika. Why is that so? Why aren't we celebrating in one of the places named before?

Being under occupation, these cities were witnessing similar tragedy as elsewhere in Europe – persecution, mass deportation and execution of Jews.

As son of holocaust survivors, I feel specially affiliated with the resistance during WWII. I grew up in the presence of two names: Yitzhak Zuckerman – Antek and Zivia Lubetkin. These were two Jewish resistance leaders – leaders of Warsaw Ghetto uprising. In 2001, their granddaughter Roni Zuckerman became the first female fighter pilot in the history of the Israeli Air Force – since 1948 crucial for the defence of the State of Israel and its existence.

If we would have had a Jewish state with its own army and Air Force already during the Nazi time, the WWII would have been less tragic for the European Jews. However, in the given historical circumstances fighters from Erec Israel could only contribute their part joining missions of other countries.

Thirty-seven parachutists among them three women (Surika Braverman, Haviva Reik and Hannah Szenes) were trained by the British with the assignment of helping Jews in the occupied territories and to save pilots. Some of them were sent to their mission to Slovakia, where I later had the honour to become the first resident Israeli ambassador.

Haviva Reik, was a young Jewish woman of Slovak origin, who immigrated to Israel in 1939. In 1944, she returned to Slovakia and helped organizing a Jewish resistance unit. In November 1944, Haviva Reik and other parachutists from her group were captured and killed by the Nazis.

In the same year another seven parachutists, Hannah Szenes being one them, started their well-planned heroic mission here in Bela krajina. While the rest of Slovenia was under occupation, Bela Krajina was at that time a liberated territory under partisan control.

Their story is a story of courage, trust, support and cooperation between strangers, sharing same values and dreams. It was chosen to become the symbol of the friendship between our two states and between our two people.

Allow me to thank the former president of Slovenia Mr Borut Pahor and the former mayor of Metlika Mr Darko Zevnik as well as my predecessor Eyal Sela who organized the first two Slovene-Israeli Friendship Day celebrations and of course I would like to express my sincere thanks to the new president of the Republic of Slovenia H. E. Dr Nataša Pirc Musar, and to the new mayor of Metlika Mrs Martina Legan Janžekovič for their decision to continue this tradition. It shows us that the Slovene-Israeli friendship is stable, based on trust, support and long-term cooperation – values that were also a strong bond between Jewish parachutists and Slovene partisans. Our friendship is a continuity that should help us achieve common goals together.

I am honoured and proud that today we will see a video presentation of Mr Yehuda Wegman from Hannah Szenes House in Israel. While he will explain more about the mission of the parachutists, let me close looking into the future.

Among priority goals that our countries have in common are peace and stability, climate protection, women rights and cyber security. In this context, allow me to congratulate Slovenia for becoming a non-permanent member in the UN Security Council and to express Israel's support in achieving these goals.

I would like to thank everybody, who contributed to today's event, and would specially like to mention the Orchestra of the Slovene Army.

Thank you, Madame President, for being with us today. Thank you Mrs Mayor for hosting us and thank you, distinguished guests and dear friends for celebrating with us.

I hope you will enjoy the event and I wish you a pleasant summer!

Toda raba. Hvala lepa.