

**DRAFT ADDRESS OF THE AMBASSADOR OF ISRAEL,
MS. IRIT BEN-ABBA AT YAD VASHEM AWARD CEREMONY**

(Athens, 15 February 2016)

Excellencies,

Mr. Makis Matsas and the Matsas Family,

Dear Guests,

Tonight, we are presenting the family of Giorgos and Athina Vlachos with the prestigious "Righteous among the Nations" award of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial Museum and Institute established in Jerusalem by the State of Israel in memory of the six million victims of the Shoah. This high honor is bestowed to individuals who risked their lives to save Jews from Nazi persecution. As mentioned in the introductory words, in order to receive the title, an extensive investigation is conducted by Yad Vashem which requires the approval of a special committee in the Israeli Supreme Court.

In a display of great courage, solidarity and humanity, Giorgos and Athina did not hesitate to offer shelter to the family of Minos Matsas, sharing their meager home in a remote village, Dikastro, in the area of Karpenisi, risking their lives and those of their children. Giorgos and Athina decided to risk their lives to defend the right to life of others. Regardless of where they were, the Righteous among Nations have taught us that we should continue to look into our hearts and to teach our children that compassion, empathy and human dignity are supreme values.

The Torah teaches us to love others as you love yourself. The Vlachos are definitely the best demonstration of this humanitarian value. With this Yad Vashem award, their courage and generosity will be recognized and cherished forever.

The Talmud, a huge collection of rabbinical teachings, instructs us that if a person destroys one life, it is as if they have destroyed the entire world. On the other hand, if a person saves one life it is as if they have saved the entire world. The Vlachos are among those who saved the whole world. Tonight the Vlachos family joins the large family of the Righteous among the Nations, 23,000 people, including 328 Greeks from all walks of life who risked their lives to save Jews.

This ceremony is taking place just two weeks after the International Holocaust Remembrance Day events. Every year, these commemorative events remind us of the atrocities that the Jews of Europe and North Africa experienced, including the great tragedy that befell 80,000 members of the magnificent Greek Jewish Community. This community, that was the jewel of the Sephardic world, a center of Jewish academic studies and philosophy, vanished in a few weeks. During the ceremonies, we repeated

the call to “never forget” as we will do today. It is a call not only for remembrance events but for all time.

This year, the Jewish community decided to dedicate the Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremonies to the Greek Righteous among the Nations. A special monument, which has the names of all the 328 Greek Righteous, was unveiled next to the Athens Synagogue. The Hellenic Parliament, first time ever held a special session of the Parliament, on the 27th of January, honoring the Greek awardees. A book co-authored and edited by Ms. Photini Tomai, the Director of Diplomatic Archives at the Hellenic Foreign Ministry, and the special representative for Holocaust issues at the Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, recounting the stories of the Greek rescuers was also launched on the same day. We should keep telling the stories of these brave men and women as much as we should keep recounting those of thousands of other courageous rescuers all over Europe. They are part of the vivid reminders of a dark era in Western civilization that should never be forgotten. Holocaust denial exists everywhere including Greece. And only by making these stories heard every day, only by teaching the Holocaust in every school in Greece, and by exposing the youngsters to historic realities, we will be able to fight the voices that say the Shoah never happened.

The Shoah was a unique crime without any parallel in History. However the seeds of hate that gave rise to it- ignorance and the betrayal of the supreme value of human life- are still with us today. Anti-Semitism is still on the rise. It is the worst expression of evil and has been present throughout human history. Jews are abandoning European countries where they have been living for generations, because they fear for their safety. They are afraid to wear Yarmulkes on the streets of major European cities. We cannot remain silent when Jewish centers, Synagogues and schools are targeted all over the world from Mumbai to Paris. Or when swastikas appear on University campuses, on public buildings, and on Jewish institutions all over the world. They are reminders of the darkest days in human history.

The 23,000 thousand Righteous among the Nations include personalities which have now become world renowned like Chiune Sugihara the Japanese Consul, Oskar Schindler the German industrialist, Raul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat, and others. During the horrors of World War II, they decided to confront evil with virtue. They are our heroes and were beacons of light in the dark era of the Shoah.

Seventy one years after the Second World War, we are proud to still be able to award these rescuers or their family members. How is it that 71 years later awards are still bestowed? In some cases the survivors could not tell their stories for many years. For instance, my father was rescued as an 8 year old child by his nanny, whose family received this prestigious award just five years ago since he refused to share his story till very late age. In other cases, it is still difficult to trace the relatives of the rescuers particularly in some countries where there was a large movement of people.

Tonight is the best reminder to us all: We all have to strive to live up to the noble example of the Righteous, to embrace the humanity that we share and respect our human dignity.

I salute the you the Vlachos family on behalf of the Jewish people and I thank you for saving the wonderful Matsas family.

Thank you