

**Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher
Discusses Jewish Rights in the Soviet Union
18 February 1990**

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Board of Deputies, Ladies and Gentlemen. It is a great pleasure and honour to be invited to address you this morning.

Not very long ago we celebrated the 250th anniversary of one of the great landmarks and institutions of this country—Number 10 Downing Street. The Board of Deputies is hard on our heels. This year is your 230th anniversary. You were set up with a rather temporary purpose, as a Committee to convey loyal greetings to King George III on his accession to the Throne in 1760. But like many temporary bodies, you lasted, and as the Jewish community has grown from 8,000 then to over 300,000 now so your role has also grown.

You give an example in another way. You count seventy-nine among your number, that is more than twice the proportion in the House of Commons, although we do our best to make our presence felt.

The contribution of the Jewish community to our national life has been quite outstanding, whether in the sciences, the arts, business, or the professions. You have also been very active in political life, in particular in my own constituency—Finchley—where I am very pleased to note that the majority there seem to hold my views on very many things.

I would like to pay a particular tribute to the [Immanuel Jakobovits] Chief Rabbi. He is absolutely marvellous and always speaks up fearlessly on everything. He has had a very great influence on many issues and it was a great joy when he agreed to sit in the House of Lords. We all owe a lot to him, not just the Jewish community but the country as a whole.

That leads me to a very important point which once again brings in King George III, with whom your organisation started. You will recall that he and his family were German by origin, but in his first speech from the Throne he said this: "Born and educated in this country, I

glory in the name of Britain." That is just as true of you, the Jewish community of this country. You observe your religion and your customs but you are also British, as loyal, as patriotic, as much a part of our national life and traditions as any other citizen in this country.

You see it, for instance, in the marvellous pride and bearing of Jewish ex-Servicemen at Cenotaph time on Remembrance Sunday and the following one and you see it in countless other ways. In comparison with your numbers, and this of course has been true in many other countries as well, your contribution has been truly remarkable.

What pleases me most is that the qualities which we so admire in Jewish people—the high achievement, the generosity, the sense of community and of helping each other—are those which we have begun to recreate in this country.

More and more people are taking opportunities, welcoming responsibility, showing initiative and enterprise, showing that the basic spirit of the British only needed the right stimulus, the right encouragement, to release it once more.

In one field more than any other your example has been an inspiration and that is in the Jewish duty of "gemilat hasadim" or charitable concern. Throughout its history, the Board of Deputies has supported and encouraged British Jewry's example of voluntary effort for the welfare of our community.

The tradition goes well back into the 19th Century with the great networks of Jewish charitable schools, benevolent and friendly societies, relief work, help for new immigrants, and many other activities. That compassion is just as real today with the work of the Jewish Care Agency under its superb President, David Young.

But your activities go much wider than the Jewish community itself and it is here that you have been both an example and an influence. It will not surprise you if I refer to what everyone knows is one of my favourite companies—Marks and Spencer—which gave over £4 million to the voluntary sector last year. As a proportion of pre-tax profits, that is four times the corporate average. We want more

Marks and Spencers.

Moreover, the Jewish tradition understands first, the importance of creating wealth through one's own efforts and, second, the importance of sharing one's wealth with others, the recognition that with wealth comes responsibility.

What I find very encouraging is that your example is being much more widely followed. You have only to look at the massive increase in charitable giving over the past ten years. Public donations to charities have doubled in real terms since 1979 to £900 million. We are encouraging this trend through tax and other incentives to donors. Indeed the total cost of tax relief for charitable giving in terms of revenues foregone is now about £500 million a year. That is a measure of our wish to encourage voluntary giving.

I would like, if I may, to turn now to a matter to which you referred, Mr. Chairman, that I know is of great concern to you and to the whole Jewish community in Britain and indeed to us all—the issue of alleged Nazi war criminals living in this country.

When the allegations that such people were living in Britain were first made some three years ago, I was naturally very concerned, like most people. I had assumed that the screening procedures applied to those who came to this country from Europe after the end of the last War had been sufficient to ensure that anyone who might have committed such crimes did not come to Britain.

The thought that people who had committed the most terrible of atrocities might have been living amongst us, unpunished, for fifty years is a shocking one. Because of this we set up the War Crimes Inquiry. It was a means of establishing whether the allegations had any substance and, if so, of considering what steps, if any, needed to be taken to bring the matter before the Courts.

A very thorough report was produced by Sir Thomas Hetherington and Mr William Chalmers. The report found evidence to suggest that suspected war criminals were living in Britain and it recommended that the Law should be changed to allow such suspects to be prosecuted in this country.

The reason for this is that under the Law, as it stands at present, people cannot be tried in this country for offences committed abroad during the Second World War if they were not British citizens at the time.

We and the Government were impressed by the force of argument that led the Inquiry to reach their conclusion. But we felt that we needed to hear the views of Parliament before going further. This issue is one that should not and cannot be a party political one.

Debates in both Houses of Parliament took place in December and both were notable for the quality of contributions that were made, including in the House of Lords that of the [Immanuel Jakobovits] Chief Rabbi. He pointed out, quite rightly, that it is not for us to say what the Courts should decide in the case which comes before them. Our only task is to do what we can to ensure that justice can be done.

No vote was taken in the House of Lords but I think it is fair to say from the debate that the majority of those who spoke were opposed to changing our law to give our Courts jurisdiction over these offences.

In the House of Commons, by contrast, the majority were in favour of action along the lines suggested by the Inquiry's report. In a free vote, the Commons voted by 348 to 123 in favour of taking action. Personally, I found the Inquiry's arguments persuasive and I therefore voted for the motion along with the majority in the House.

In the light of the clear expression of opinion in the House of Commons and of the views expressed in both debates, we are now considering what form any legislation might take. In reaching our decision on this, I can assure you that we shall also bear in mind the many letters which we have received on the subject from the Jewish community. We are very much aware of the need to decide on the next steps as soon as possible and the [David Waddington] Home Secretary will shortly be making an announcement about our intentions, which I must not pre-empt today.

Mr. Chairman, another subject to which you referred, the Board of Deputies has never been an introspective organisation. You have

always taken a very lively interest in world events and in the fate of Jewish communities in other parts of the world. And in recent years that has meant particularly the position of Jews in the Soviet Union.

You and your colleagues in the United States, and Canada in particular, have played a very important part in bringing this issue to the attention of governments and people everywhere and thus in achieving the great improvements in the condition of Jews in the Soviet Union which are taking place.

The National Council for Soviet Jewry, which you set up in 1975, and the Women's Campaign for Soviet Jewry have been just two of the organisations which have been absolutely in the front line of this great cause. They have bombarded the Government with letters, both about individual cases and about the broader issues, and quite right too.

We have done our very best to help and particular credit is due, I think, to our Embassy in Moscow and to the Soviet Department of the Foreign Office who have been indefatigable.

But there is no doubt that the improvements we have seen would not have come about but for Mr. Gorbachev. I have discussed the matter with him on several occasions and he has always been very direct with me, which I appreciate. When we last spoke about it in September he was absolutely clear—there are no more obstacles, those who want to can go.

Things are very much better with over a hundred synagogues functioning and emigration at a record level of 70,000 last year. And all of you who have worked for that result can take great pride in it.

But equally, as you mention Mr. Chairman, the problem is not yet finally resolved. Whether because of obstacles in the bureaucracy, or for whatever reason, there are still Jews wrongfully imprisoned, there are still long-term Refusniks who are not allowed to leave the country, the draft Emigration Law which we have seen seems still too restrictive. There are worrying signs, to which you referred, of anti-Semitic propaganda being put out by extremist organisations

which have nothing to do with the Soviet government. Indeed, it is entirely contrary to the spirit of perestroika.

So we shall continue to make our views and concerns known to the Soviet authorities. We shall repeat that we are very grateful for everything that has been done so far. But we cannot rest until all injustices are put right.

The Soviet authorities well know that we have yet to make up our minds about attending the Human Rights Conference in Moscow next year and that we expect the undoubted progress in their human rights record to be sustained.

And that leads me on naturally to say a word about wider developments in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The whole European scene has changed beyond recognition in the last year, change for the better. Of course that has brought forward new problems but we shall have to overcome them.

But let us first of all allow ourselves to feel glad about what has happened, glad about what has happened. It is the essence of the human spirit renewing and demonstrating that it is unbeatable, that it is unquenchable.

And you know it is not so long ago that communism was seen as the way of the future, the irresistible force which would rule the world. Now it lies in ruins, a discredited and bankrupt system, while democracy and the market economy are gaining ground everywhere. We have seen revolutions, for the most part peaceful, sweep through the countries of Eastern Europe, ending the Communist Party's monopoly of power.

And now the Soviet Union is about to take the historic step of accepting a multi-party system. At the same time, the Soviet Union has made substantial unilateral reductions in its forces and the negotiations in Vienna on reducing conventional forces in Europe promise further reductions on both sides, though the Warsaw Pact will have to make greater reductions than NATO—nearly 400,000 Soviet troops as against about 100,000 United States troops.

It is likely that Soviet forces will withdraw altogether from some

Eastern European countries. The Soviet Union's capacity to mount a surprise attack against Western Europe, which has been one of our great fears for more than forty years, will thus be dramatically reduced.

All this is good news and it represents a success for the West, for NATO, for the resolve and determination of its individual members. We should recognise too how much it owes to the vision and courage of Mr. Gorbachev, but above all, it is a triumph for our ideas of democracy, for the rule of law, for the market economy and the free institutions which we have built upon them. It is also a triumph for our resolve always to defend the freedom and justice which are essential to our way of life.

It becomes even more important to maintain the institutions in the new situation which we now face. At best, we are bound to enter a period of great uncertainty. Democracy will take time to put down its roots in Eastern Europe. We are already seeing a renewal of disputes and problems between nationalities, which is reminiscent of the days between the First World War, and we remember how other countries can all too easily be dragged into such disputes.

There is a lot of talk in the West about a peace dividend. Our real dividend is the failure of the communist system and the reduction of the military threat. We should not squander it by allowing the very institutions, above all NATO, which have kept us secure to be undermined. Or by dismantling our defence, when the Soviet Union continues to have vast military capabilities. If we had had something equivalent to NATO in the 1930s, we would never have had a Second World War. We shall always have to keep adequate defences because you never know where the new threat might come from.

One has to bear in mind that twelve countries outside NATO and the Warsaw Pact already have ballistic missiles and many more than now could be in a position to acquire nuclear weapons by the end of the century.

Hopefully there will be an opportunity to make some reductions in our forces as part of balanced reductions by both NATO and the

Warsaw Pact. But we shall not do anything which would put our defence and our security at risk, nor to weaken our capability to undertake out-of-area tasks. That means we shall continue to need our independent nuclear deterrent as well as strong and well equipped conventional forces and no-one should doubt our determination on that score.

One aspect of these developments to which you again referred, Mr Chairman, it seems as if you almost knew what I would say, one aspect of these developments, which is of particular concern to this audience, is German unification. I say unification rather than reunification because we are not talking of Germany with its 1937 borders, but of the coming together of the existing Federal Republic and of the GDR.

There is no doubt that this coming together of the two parts of Germany is going to happen. The Western Allies have always supported the principle of unification, provided that it comes about as a result of the freely expressed choice of the people of the two German States. But it is understandable that, for some, bitter memories of the past should colour their view of the present and the future.

As Chancellor Kohl and Foreign Minister Genscher have themselves acknowledged, German unification must take into account not only the feelings of the two German states, but the sensitivities and interests of others in Europe as well. It must respect existing Treaties and Agreements, including commitments of the Helsinki Final Act which recognises existing borders in Europe. It must respect the rights of the Four Powers in Germany, -after all it is on the basis of the Four Power rights and responsibilities that the Allies have preserved West Berlin's freedom for over forty years. Nor must it make any of us in Eastern or Western Europe or of the Soviet Union feel less secure. That was the point to which you referred, that I made in the House.

That means that we want to see Germany remain part of NATO, with American and other troops stationed there, with some special arrangements for East Germany to meet the Soviet Union's security concerns. Indeed, it would be quite reasonable for some Soviet

troops to remain there, at least for a transitional period.

These are major questions and they need to be thought through and satisfactory answers found. They do not involve Germany and the Four Powers alone. For instance, we understand and indeed fully support Poland's wish to see its Western border guaranteed by Treaty and other neighbouring states will have their particular views too.

Our aim all along has been to see a framework within which the full implications of Germany's unification could be properly worked out. That framework we have now achieved with the agreement at the Open Skies Conference in Ottawa to start meetings of the Four Powers and the two Germanies, and I very much welcome that.

In all this we want to ensure that Germany's unification upholds peace and prosperity in Europe and does not become a new source of instability. Chancellor Kohl and his colleagues share this aim and I am sure they will remain staunch supporters of NATO.

Mr Chairman, you would expect me to say something about the situation in the Middle East. Britain was very much a part of the creation of the State of Israel. Indeed, that was brought home to me in a very personal way two or three years ago when that remarkable lady, Dolly de Rothschild, then well into her nineties, came to a dinner for the [Chaim Herzog] President of Israel at Number 10 Downing Street. As she came along the receiving line she stopped and said, in an entirely natural way: "It is good to see it again, the last time I was here was in Asquith's time." She was historically correct.

She and her family were also, of course, very much concerned with the events surrounding the Balfour Declaration. I believe that most people in this country have a deep and abiding admiration for the Jewish people and for what they have achieved in Israel. I recall the [Immanuel Jakobovits] Chief Rabbi's lecture of some years ago in which he reminded us that the ideals of compassion, equality, freedom and brotherhood have their origins in the moral pioneering of ancient Israel, its face, its prophets, its persistence. It is indeed the Old Testament that taught us respect for the individual,

the concept of human rights, the tradition of unfettered thought, the rule of law and the idea of progress.

These are the Jewish people's contribution to civilisation, they have made Israel the remarkable country that we know. There is not and cannot be any doubt about our admiration for Israel's achievements, our support for her right to exist within secure borders and our utter rejection of such total departure from truth as the United Nations Resolution which sought to equate Zionism with racism.

With so many of the problems which have troubled us around the world now finding solutions, we are desperately anxious to see similar progress made to settle the problems of the Middle East. Israel has made an important proposal for elections in the occupied territories, but it has to involve the Palestinians. And that means Israel needs to talk to representatives of the Palestinian people from inside the occupied territories and from outside. That is the only way progress is going to be made and a solution found to the tragic situation in the occupied territories which is so hurtful to Israel's reputation and standing in the world.

We have always taken the view that land in return for a secure peace should be the basis for such a solution. I know that the problems would become worse still if Israel were to find homes for Jews from the Soviet Union by settling them in the occupied territories.

We have all worked very hard to secure the right for Soviet Jews to emigrate. It would be a very ironic and unjust reward for all our efforts if their freedom were to be at the expense of the rights, the homes and the land of the people of the occupied territories.

We understand Israel's wish for peace with security or, as President Herzog put it on a visit to London: "Her dream of a day when peace will come". But it will only be achieved by understanding the needs and fears of the other side, as well as one's own, and finding ways in which both can reasonably be satisfied.

There is one last issue which I want to mention before I come to my conclusion and that is terrorism. Again, we thought in the same way. No country has suffered more than Israel from terrorism, no

people more than the Jewish people, although we in Britain have had our share.

I know that the Board of Deputies are in regular contact with the Home Office and the Police about the security of the Jewish community and I can assure you that officials and the Police are available at any time to discuss anxieties which you may have on the security front.

The Government, for its part, has been resolute in taking action against international terrorism, whether it be in tracking down those responsible for the appalling tragedy of Pan Am 103 or by refusing to deal with governments such as those of Syria and Libya, which we have reason to believe have given support to terrorism. We have refused to make concessions to those who take hostages, even though no day goes by without remembering the fate of Terry Waite, John McCarthy and other victims of kidnapping in the Lebanon. But to appease terrorists is to concede victory to them and to condemn more people to lose their lives. Our refusal to compromise with terrorism, whether it be in Northern Ireland or the Middle East, will remain absolute because we believe that in the long-run this is the only way to defeat it.

Mr Chairman, thank you for the privilege of addressing this gathering. May I congratulate you on your outstanding and selfless work as Chairman of the Board of Deputies, as well as Mr Pinner, your Secretary-General.

Jewish people have taught us so much. It is your creed that first said: "Love thy neighbour as thyself". It is your creed that taught us that as both individuals and nations we are accountable for our deeds and that as we have received, so we have an obligation to give to the community of which we are a part. We owe you, our Jewish community, a debt of gratitude for your enormous contribution to our national life and our achievements and we wish you continued success in your great endeavours and we thank you for what you have done for our country.