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PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP

**CHILDREN OF THE HOLOCAUST EXHIBITION
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL
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I was deeply honoured to be asked to open this exhibition - and a little daunted by the requirement to speak. To be required to speak about the unspeakable.

One does not have to see these pictures to begin to feel overwhelmed - it is enough to know that one is going to see them. To know that they exist.

To know that because they are children's pictures they will be like other children's pictures, like all children's pictures - like the pictures our own children might have drawn.

To know that they might have been our own children.

That it might have happened to them. That the unspeakable might have happened to us.

Children's pictures are all the same in one sense. No one who looks at these can fail to think of the pictures their own children have drawn, the pictures these days you see stuck on kitchen walls and refrigerators.

But children's pictures are also remarkable because each one is different. We treasure them, display them, find it hard to throw them out years after our children find them an embarrassment because in them we see the first signs of individuality. The first expressions of each child's personality.

We see in them the evidence of their hearts and-minds developing, their innocence and their potential. They contain their hope - and ours.

Even in these drawings, done by children cut off from their parents and families, hungry and afraid in the ghetto of Terezin, there is hope. And innocence, imagination, love - need.

This exhibition is a profound reminder of the appalling betrayal of the good in them, and the good they inspire in us.

Few of us, I suspect, ever expected to see pictures drawn by children who were murdered in the Holocaust. It comes somehow as a surprise that they exist.

Yet, had we thought about it, we might have known that they existed.

We knew that there were children in the ghettos of Europe and children who died in the extermination camps.

We know all children draw pictures.

So we should have known that someone would have hoarded them away, as we hoard away our own children's pictures.

We should have known that there would be pictures which remind us that these terrible events took place, in our century, in our civilisation, in our Europe.

In fact we probably did know. But we simply hadn't thought about it.

And that I believe is the point - we have to think about it. That is the only way those of us who did not experience it will remember the Holocaust.

This exhibition forces us to think - forces us to remember.

It reminds us of how profoundly important it is to keep alive the memory - and forever reaffirm the reality - of the Holocaust.

It reminds us that those people who keep it alive do so for all of us - not just for the Jewish people and the survivors and descendants of the others who were persecuted, but for all of us.

Ladies and gentlemen

These children's drawings were not collected by the parents. They were not re-visited by the kids who drew them.

Most of the parents were killed. And most of the children. Of the 17,000 children under the age of 14 who were sent to Terezin, only 150 survived.

The drawings were collected by people who knew what they would mean to us. Who knew, perhaps, that we might need reminding.

Hidden in suitcases and forgotten about when Terezin was liberated, the drawings were rediscovered and found their way to the State Jewish Museum in Prague.

I understand the Museum values them so highly that today only copies of the drawings are placed on display, and the originals are secured in the Museum's archives.

I also understand that visitors flock to see the display. The collection is internationally famous.

It therefore says much for the generosity of the museum authorities in Prague that they have allowed some of these drawings to come to Australia.

And I take this opportunity to thank the Director of the State Jewish Museum, Dr Kybalova, for the cooperation extended to the Australian War Memorial.

I also want to thank the former Ambassador of the Czech Republic in Canberra, Dr David-Moserova, for her assistance and the staff of the Embassy.

I am pleased to see that the Czech Embassy is represented here tonight and ask that my gratitude be passed on to the authorities in Prague.

And, of course, I must also thank Dr Michael McKernan, the Deputy Director of the Australian War Memorial, for his efforts - for having the wisdom to see the importance of this exhibition to Australia and to the Memorial.

The Australian War Memorial is one of our great national institutions, and its continuing importance to our national life could not have been more amply demonstrated than it was last year at the Ceremony for the Entombment of the Unknown Australian Soldier.

The Memorial was founded by Charles Bean in the belief that we would only understand the realities of war, and the evils of war, by knowing the stories of the people affected by war.

Down the years the Memorial has done this superbly. So long as it is here, and in the hands of wise and imaginative people like Dame Beryl, Brendan Kelson and Michael McKernan, Australians will not forget the sacrifices made in war by their countrymen and women.

But nor should we ever forget the sacrifices made by others, or fail to teach the stories and the lessons of their experience.

This Memorial stands as a permanent reminder of the Australian experience of war. It contains many of the clues to who we are, many of the icons of our identity.

But no conception of what it means to be Australian, or what our experience in war means, can be complete or faithful to the truth and our ideals without an understanding of what others have been through.

We cannot be indifferent to the experience of others - we most certainly cannot be indifferent to the experience of the Jewish people in the Holocaust.

After all, in the end, it was because they were not indifferent, and knew this country was not immune to evil and the suffering of others, that the men and women honoured in this place sacrificed their lives.

In the end, it will only be because we are not indifferent, and do not think ourselves immune, that new holocausts will be averted.

Today, as children die in Bosnia and terms like ethnic cleansing enter the vocabulary of that part of the world, the words we see on this memorial - "Lest We Forget" - surely embrace the children of the Holocaust.

I congratulate all those associated with this exhibition. I understand from here it moves on to the Sydney Jewish Museum and I thank Mr John Saunders, the founder of the Museum, who is with us tonight.

I should also like to thank John Glass for speaking to us about his experiences in Terezin - and the other Holocaust survivors who are here and who will, in the course of the exhibition, give their time freely to speak to visitors.

Let me conclude by saying that I sincerely hope every Australian who has an opportunity to see the Children of Holocaust does see it.

I now declare this exhibition open.