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Speech for the reopening of the Antwerp main synagogue and commemoration of the Antwerp Kristallnacht

Today, Prime Minister Alexander De Croo gave a speech at the reopening of the main synagogue of the Antwerp Israelite Orthodox Congregation, Machsike Hadass. In his speech, he also reflected on Antwerp's Kristallnacht and argued in favour of dialogue and connection.

Dear representatives of the federal and Flemish governments,
Dear Mayor of Antwerp,
Dear representatives of the Jewish community,
Ladies and gentlemen,

We are gathered here today for a ceremony that has special meaning for the Jewish community in our country and especially that of Antwerp.

The great "Osten Shul" is not only a historical monument, it is a Synagogue and therefore a meeting place that is alive and vibrant thanks to the Antwerp Jewish community. The synagogue has existed for more than 100 years and thanks to this fantastic renovation, it is ready for the next 100 years. The understated, timeless style of this building perfectly reflects long-standing Jewish traditions and customs.

I am therefore very grateful to share this special moment of the reopening with you. It is my pleasure to be here at this joyful and proud moment standing in front of the largest Synagogue in Belgium.

One of you (dear Ari, not to mention your name), told me earlier the story of a teacher from Denver, Colorado that I want to share with you because I do think it is appropriate today. It is the story of a certain Mr. Israel, born in the early 20th century in Khust, a town in western Ukraine, right on the Polish and Romanian border. When Israel was 15 years old, the ruthless German Wehrmacht arrived in his town. The Nazis created a ghetto and began deporting all the Jewish inhabitants to the Auschwitz death camp.

A few days before his own deportation, Israel collected a number of personal items. Things that were dear to him. Including a silver, sacred cup that his father used every Sabbath. He dug a deep well in his grandmother's garden and hid the silver cup there. Four days later, his family was deported. Most found a gruesome death in Auschwitz. But miraculously, Israel managed to survive the death camp. Upon returning to Khust, he immediately began digging. He was overjoyed to recover his cup. Soon after, Israel - like so many other European Jews - crossed the Atlantic to start a new life. He took with him his precious family possessions, including, of course, the silver cup that he had had to repair after it had been trampled by the many people crossing his grandmother's garden during his time at Auschwitz.

After restoring the cup, he used it again for all the important and happy moments in his family life: weddings, parties, ceremonies. In the words of Israel: *"This cup symbolizes the Jewish people. It was buried, trampled and considered lost - just as Jews throughout history have been expelled from so many countries and deported, hunted and persecuted, until nothing would remain of them. But look, the cup here is like the Jewish people: stronger than ever!"*

"Stronger than ever. The same can be said about our gathering here today. As the chairman has already mentioned, it has been 105 years since the Antwerp Jewish community first met at this site. Then, too, a

grand ceremony was held to celebrate the opening.

The "Shul", as the beating heart of the Jewish religion and Jewish culture.

The joy we feel as it reopens today is inextricably linked to the joy people felt at its opening in 1918. An unbroken connection thanks to all the wonderful moments of prayer and meeting that have taken place here over the past 105 years.

But alas, as in Khust, in Ukraine, dark clouds gathered over Antwerp in 1941. Shortly after the Germans occupied Belgium, anti-Semitic Flemish groups incited by Nazi propaganda carried out a horrific pogrom in the holy place we find ourselves in today. During this violent attack on the "Osten Shul", Jewish prayer books were burned, and the entire contents of the synagogue were destroyed. Unfortunately, this Antwerp Kristallnacht was not the end but only the beginning of anti-Semitic violence in Antwerp. The pogrom was followed by the mass persecution of Jews that culminated in Antwerp when the Nazi occupiers started transporting Jewish people to the various concentration and extermination camps. Tens of thousands of Belgian Jews were criminally betrayed and then murdered. Not only the darkest page in Jewish history but also in Belgian history. The horror of the Shoah is etched in our collective memory and we must never forget it.

The story of our country is the story of these people. They are the vivid reminder that our Belgian strength lies in our diversity. That we are a country of free people, where difference is not a problem but an asset. That in our country, freedom of opinion and freedom of religion are anchor points. A country where we don't all have to look alike and all think alike, but where we have dialogue and connection.

Jewish history is sadly steeped in persecution and tragic events, but it is precisely the resilience and almost inexhaustible strength of that same Jewish people that has ensured that they have stood up again and again. After World War II, it was no different. As Mark Twain once observed: throughout history, many great empires have tried to subjugate the Jewish people - the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks. But three millennia on, the Jewish people stand stronger than ever. Full of energy.

The unseen resilience is also visible and tangible here in Antwerp. After 1945, the Jewish community slowly recovered. Many buildings, including this "Osten Shul", and other Jewish institutions were rebuilt from the ground up. Slowly but surely, the Jewish community came back to life. Jews were once again visible on Antwerp's streets and reclaiming their place in the city. The voice of prayer could be heard again. On 5 October 1944, barely a month after the liberation of the city of Antwerp, a Jewish school reopened. Nowhere in Europe, Jewish life was so quickly restored as here in Belgium.

It is our Belgian good fortune that - unlike many other places in Europe where the Nazi horror erased Judaism forever - Jewish people returned. That they rebuilt their lives and their community here. In the same streets where they lived before the war. This is how Antwerp's Jewish community grew to become one of the largest in Europe.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is quite a miracle that 82 years after the ruthless pogrom in 1941, we are gathered here again to bless this Shul. The re-consecration marks the symbolic victory of light over darkness. Of good over evil.

And even more important than looking back at the past, is looking forward to the future. Jews have always

been peaceful citizens who have made enormous contributions to our society. Whether in philosophy, the sciences, arts and public discourse. Not only in Belgium, but also far beyond our borders, there are well-known scholars, writers, doctors and philanthropists who were educated at one of Antwerp's many Jewish educational institutions.

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This beautifully renovated "Shul" will continue to serve as a meeting place for the Orthodox Jews of Antwerp in the years to come. As Prime Minister, I am therefore particularly proud to note with you that Belgium will continue to be a warm home for our Jewish community, a cornerstone of our Belgian society both religiously and culturally.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We must give our best every day to fight intolerance and anti-Semitism. We can do this, because we have done it so many times in our history. During the Spanish Inquisition, several towns in Brabant and Flanders opened their gates to fleeing Jews. In 1939, the German ship St. Louis docked in the port of Antwerp with 900 Jewish refugees on board. And after World War II, Belgium opened its doors to Jewish citizens from all over Europe. I am particularly pleased to note that our country, and the city of Antwerp in particular, is doing all it can to be a safe haven for its Jewish residents even today. The Jewish community is an integral part of society in our country. Where Belgians and Jews together, on the basis of great mutual respect, have ensured that the Jewish community can practice its faith here in this magnificent synagogue.

So, I extend my warmest congratulations to the Jewish community on this festive re-consecration and wish you every success in future initiatives.

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