

Hommage to René Cassin –Yom Hashoah – 20 April 2009

On this Place des Nations where we have gathered, a plaque in memory of René Cassin, known as the “Human Rights Man” can be found. We are pleased to welcome his great-niece, Ms. Elisabeth Cassin, present here tonight.

René Cassin, seriously wounded during the First World War, represented France at the League of Nations from 1924 to 1938 where he participated in the creation of a European Union that strove to, and I quote “erase all borders between men, affording each of them the same inalienable rights and the dignity of being.”

Having joined De Gaulle in London in 1940, he was a member of the French government in exile during the Second World War and was the French delegate to UNESCO, for which he served, among others, as one of the principal inspirations.

At the darkest hours of Nazi barbarity, René Cassin strived to construct what later became known as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948.

This French jurist wanted that the lessons of the Shoah to carry forth universal implications to better humanity.

Representing France at the Human Rights Commission, he was asked by President Eleanor Roosevelt to be the Commission’s Vice-President and to draft the Declaration that was first known as the Geneva Declaration because it was first submitted to the Human Rights Commission which was based in Geneva and which in turn sent it to all of the UN’s member states.

The Declaration’s preamble states: “Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.”

The 30 articles of the Declaration which he described as the “Tablets of Human Law” are generally recognized as the international basis of human rights. These in turn inspired a number of international treaties.

It is the first universal acknowledgement of the rights and liberties that are fundamentally inherent to each human being. It permitted, for the first time, that human rights abuses be judged not only by state organisms but also by an international tribunal.

We would thus like to pay particular tribute to René Cassin, recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1968 for his efforts towards the respect for human rights on a global level.

Daniel Treves

Translated from French by David Nachfolger