

Speech on the occasion of human rights walk

Makebaplein - Gent

Henri Heimans - 6 December 2023

Dear People,

For several decades now, the city of Ghent has chosen to name new streets and squares after people with a special connection to human rights. These are often women because their social contribution has all too often remained under the radar in the past. Women's rights and human rights in general receive special attention in the current naming process. Miriam Makeba Square is a tribute to South African anti-apartheid activist Miriam Makeba.

Miriam Makeba, nicknamed Mama Africa, was a South African singer and anti-apartheid activist. Makeba was an active opponent of South African apartheid politics and, after the South African government refused her an entry visa, lived in exile for 30 years. She was one of the first to introduce African music to a Western audience in the 1960s and 1970s. I remember that very well because this street here, the Kuiperskaai was the exit area for May-68 students and so we danced to her rhythms a lot near here. It makes me a bit nostalgic.

My parents -despite their foreigner status- resisted the Nazi military dictatorship during WWII, were arrested, tortured and deported to concentration camps. They survived hell and returned to Belgium badly damaged.

In 1948, my year of birth too, much hope grew on the ruins of WWII with the proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Among this group, I need not elaborate further on the contents of the Universal Declaration, but it is fair to say that from the entire Declaration emanates a deep human spirit.

My mother was born in Middelburg, capital of the province of Zeeland in the Netherlands, just across the border here, with which the City of Ghent has very close ties, mainly because of its port activities.

But did you know that since 1982 Middelburg has awarded the Roosevelt Foundation's Four Freedoms Award, referring to the fundamental freedoms

listed by former US president Franklin Roosevelt in his State of the Union on 6 January 1941. In doing so, he emphasised that each of those freedoms should apply to all inhabitants of the world. With his speech, Roosevelt took a sharp stance against any form of tyranny and dictatorship, a clear reference to Nazi Germany, although the US was not then involved in the war. The president wanted to stress that his country could no longer stand by on the sidelines. Eleven months later, Japan, an ally of Germany, bombed the US fleet at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii and Hitler declared war on the US.

And why is this human rights award being presented in Middelburg? Because Roosevelt's ancestors were from Oud-Vossemeer, a town in Zeeland, near Tholen.

These universal freedoms formed the basis for human rights, which seven years later, under the impetus of his wife Eleanor Roosevelt, were included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948.

No one voted against, eight countries abstained. The Soviet Union felt that individual rights could not exist outside a state and that the UDHR represented an intolerable interference in its internal affairs. Saudi Arabia could not live with equal rights for men and women and the article giving every human being the right to abandon his faith and change religion. South Africa with its apartheid system could not come to terms with everyone being entitled to all rights and freedoms without distinction of race and colour, among others. Finally, in the wake of the Soviet Union, Belarus, Ukraine, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Poland also abstained.

But the spirit of the UDHR translated into more equal treatment of every human being and the duty to help those in need, as provided for in the Geneva Convention. The artificial distinction the extreme right-wing people now makes between its 'own people' and 'foreign people', as happened in Nazi Germany between the 'Aryan people' and the others, is unacceptable. Hence the crucial importance of the right of asylum. But also hence the need to keep fighting inhuman ideas of removing those 'foreigners' from our territory through pushbacks and deportations. The same applies to politicians' proposals to curtail the application of the Geneva Convention, which would inevitably undermine the

legal status of refugees and asylum seekers. The very description 'illegal immigrants' is an immoral label. How can one be 'illegal' as a human being? Some politicians even purposely mix up terms like refugees, migrants, illegals, terrorists and criminals, as if there are citizens who are entitled to be deprived of their fundamental rights. Hannah Arendt pointed out that the 'killing of the legal person in human beings is the first essential step towards total domination.' In the 1930s, it began with the encroachment on the legal personality of the Jews. It ended in one of the greatest tragedies in human history.

Like weeds, racism and xenophobia steadily proliferate, now especially towards people of colour. That is why a horrible image struck me recently: a black boy on a billboard for clothing, on which someone had stuck a sticker saying 'This is Flemish soil'. The sticker is for sale on the website of the youth group of the political party 'Vlaams Belang' and the publisher responsible is Tom Van Grieken. But this action stems from the increasing hate spread by the radical right-wing against foreigners and people of colour for decades. This action is humiliating and dehumanising. People who flee to Europe usually do so because they cannot build a decent life in their own country, because their lives and those of their families are in danger from war, climate change or persecution in their own country because of their origin, gender or religion.

Two years after the Universal Declaration, in November 1950, the European Convention on Human Rights was signed in Rome. The contents of this convention are sufficiently familiar to you.

You know that Belgium is not doing well in terms of human rights. Belgium has been condemned a dozen times by the European Court for the way it treats offenders with psychiatric disorders and for the degrading situation in its prisons. The Belgian State has also been condemned many times in Brussels for the lack of accommodation for asylum seekers. Belgium is also doing badly on the climate front.

The legal battle against the extreme right-wing hate speech in Belgium is now also in full flow.

Members of the Flemish extreme right-wing organisation Schild & Vrienden, headed by ex-parliamentarian Dries Van Langenhove, published a whole series

of *memes* glorifying Hitler and humiliating Jews and people of colour. Even more painful were images minimising or even condoning the extermination of Jews. Above a picture of a shovel scooping up ashes is the text '*How to pick up Jewish chicks*', a picture of a wristwatch in the shape of a gas meter reads '*Jewish Rolex*', an image of an accelerator in the shape of a swastika says '*When you decide to go full gas*', above a photograph of Hitler we read '*You can't be fascist, if there's only one race*', then a historical photograph showing a corpse being shoved into a cremation furnace reads '*Burning things that don't mean anything to you*'.

They also spread gore jokes on their chat channels making fun of the Holocaust and the horror of gas chambers and incinerators such as: '*The difference between Santa Claus and a Jew? Santa goes down the chimney*'; '*The difference between a Jew and a bar of soap? A bar of soap lasts longer than five minutes in the shower*'; '*The difference between a Jew and a Negro Jew? A Negro Jew has to stand in the shower at the back*'. '*What does a Jew have in common with a stiff nipple? After a hot shower, they are both gone*'. And '*What to do with a Jewish child who has ADHD? Send it to a concentration camp*'.

Against this form of negationism, as the son of a Jewish Holocaust survivor, I filed a complaint for violation of the negationism law. Meanwhile, we are now embroiled in a legal joust without end.

But I need to get something off my heart and can no longer remain silent.

After Hamas' barbaric act of terror on 7 October, in which innocent civilians were horribly murdered, kidnapped and taken hostage, we saw -along with the whole world- how a horrific war is being conducted against the Palestinian people in Gaza, although Israel claims they are only waging war against the terror group Hamas.

We can surely speak of grave war crimes and, in fact, ethnic cleansing here. I am deeply shocked and feel so powerless.

I have half-Jewish roots and have never identified with Israel and Zionism.

My father and paternal grandparents were also never Zionist and chose, after fleeing Latvia because of the pogroms, to integrate here in Ghent.

It is beyond my understanding how the descendants of Holocaust dead or Holocaust survivors, try to eliminate or at least make another people displace... but to where then?

Once again, a terrible trauma has emerged among survivors of the Gaza bombings, which will persist through generations.

History cannot be reversed, but the way the state of Israel was established in the famous year 1948 with the support of Western powers is the root cause of the suffering of the Palestinian People. The Nakba is a scar that is never healed again.

And now more than 2 million Palestinians are locked in Gaza's open-air prison, while millions more are discriminated against in other occupied Palestinian territories.

The Jewish state is founded on colonial violence, dispossession and oppression of others. I cannot deal with that....

Zionists act like unadulterated racists and discriminate against Palestinians.

Racism is a world-wide cancer and I would add: anti-Semitism is also a form of racism, not against people of colour but against Jewish people who are different... but it is not 'above' racism, it must be fought like any other form of racism.

Yes, sorry dear listeners, I have not been able to give a joyful message.

All we can do as people of good will, is to do everything we can to stop now the ultra-right-wing propaganda of hate that seeks to curtail universal human rights, each in our neighbourhood.

But people, I keep repeating, stay especially watchful.

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