

The International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation Medal Award to

Karolos Papoulias

President of the Hellenic Republic

Athens, Monday 18 November 2013, at the Presidential Palace

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ADDRESS BY BENJAMIN ALBALAS

PRESIDENT OF THE CENTRAL BOARD OF JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN GREECE

As President of the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece, which represents the Jews of Greece, it is for all them that I speak when I say how moved I am and offer my sincere congratulations to Raoul Wallenberg International Foundation for the great honour, with its hugely meaningful symbolism, that it now confers on President Karolos Papoulias of the Hellenic Republic by awarding him the Special Raoul Wallenberg Medal as a way of paying tribute, through his person and the institution he serves, to the 310 Greek Righteous Among the Nations who risked their lives to save so many of us, the Jews of Greece, during the dark days of the German occupation.

A special exhibition recently opened at the Yad Vashem Foundation for Martyrs and Heroes of the Holocaust in Jerusalem as a tribute to the over 24,800 Righteous from 47 countries, all of whom the foundation has recognised. Among them are those Greeks being honoured here today.

It is very hard for us now to conceive how these people could possibly cast aside all thought of danger and, amid conditions of fear and hunger, muster enough determination and heroism to hide their Jewish compatriots, knowing full well that horrendous torture and certain death awaited them if the Gestapo or the SS ever found out.

And yet, we must do our utmost to imagine – and I speak from personal experience – the lost identity of those saved and their total dependence on those who came to their rescue through a sea of indifference, hostility and the ever-present danger of betrayal that could, at any moment, lead to humiliating death for both the hidden Jews and their saviours.

The Yad Vashem exhibition is entitled '*I Am My Brother's Keeper*', which could be rendered in Greek translation as something close to '*I am my brother's talisman.*'

That is how we persecuted Jews felt, at that time, about those who gave us shelter, protection, food and abundant love. And that is how we still feel and always will.

The clergy, led by the late Archbishop Damaskinos, Metropolitan Bishop Chrysostomos of Zakynthos and Metropolitan Bishop Ioachim of Dimitriada, the police with Chief Superintendent Angelos Evert at their head, and resistance organisations in the mountains, at sea and in towns and cities, supported by scores of ordinary villagers, islanders and townsfolk, along with their families, all gambled their lives for us. And they won because they were all human beings with a capital "H", richly endowed with values and ideals, who gave us and our families the great gift of life; the life that Hitler's paranoid Nazis (and, unfortunately, there are more than just a few like-minded people in this country today) wanted to take from us for no other reason than the fact that we were Jewish.

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen,

Ever since 10 May 2010, when the Memorial to Jewish-Greek Martyrs and Heroes of the Holocaust was unveiled in Athens (the last European capital to acquire such a memorial) a persistent thought, born of duty, obligation, respect and remembrance, has been to the fore in my mind.

As former President of the Jewish Community of Athens and incumbent president of the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece, I believe that in 2014, when 70 years will have gone by since the destruction of most Jewish Communities in Greece, the Jews of Greece and the Greek state should honour their obligation to raise a plaque or memorial in Athens to preserve and protect the names of the Christian-Greek people who risked their lives to save Greek Jews. This memorial or plaque would set an example and be a sacred testament of humanity, self-sacrifice and heroism for generations to come, for our children and our children's children, as well as being a sharp slap in the face for the growing prejudice and anti-Semitism in this country.

We have already discussed this vision and look to you, sir, as President of the Republic, and because of the sensitivity which distinguishes you, for substantial solidarity and support, and the co-operation of the International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation for the timely fulfilment of this sacred duty of honour and remembrance.

It is never too late.

Thank you.

Benjamin Albalas

President

The Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece