INTERNATIONAL HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE ALLIANCE

05 March 2019

Address by IHRA Chair, Ambassador Georges Santer, at the IHRA Handover

Berlin

Excellences,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

and especially here in Berlin I am allowed to say,

dear Friends,

This is an emotional event. Because of the event itself and because I have in front of me so many friends and acquaintances. The IHRA deals with highly emotional subjects and I'm emotionally charged to be back at my former place of work, speaking from a rostrum which I certainly have used more than 150 times in the 5 years I served at this embassy.

Ambassador Graff, dear Jean,

I'm deeply grateful that you are not only hosting us here at the Luxembourg Embassy, but that you have also taken upon you the job to give each and every one the feeling of an all embracing welcome. Indeed, we would not like to be without anyone of you, and on the day I take over this rather delicate job, I would like to express my deep-felt thanks to all of you who fight almost on a daily basis against antisemitism, other racial, sexual orientation and social discriminations, and against the new means of transporting hatred.

These are difficult and often discouraging times. As we feel this fact more than most of our compatriots, we must be in any case the last bastion to resist. And when I write this sentence, I immediately become aware that this might well be a nice image, but it is not fitting for our dangerous times. "Resistance" in military terms carries to a large extent the image that you're firing your last bullets; we instead have to go more and more in the offensive and operational mood to counter the fallacious wrong words and doings of false prophets, prophets we all know from the historic precedents of this continent that was so often stricken in violence and bloodshed.

As a student, I was terribly impressed when one of my professors said that statistically this continent has suffered from a substantial war every 40 years. The action of some influential politicians, and of some xenophobic, populist, and more and more nationalistic political movements, seem to become impatient with a period of peace, prosperity and security that

stretches for now over almost double the time that statistically on an average is reserved to our benefit.

We have to act. We have to mobilize. We have to go against. This requires an energetic counteraction of our societies, especially in the EU where so much is at stake at the upcoming elections to the European Parliament. We cannot run the risk that institutions in our national States and on the European level will be blocked by those whose main aim is to return to the pure nation state with its sacred national interests. And we should take these enemies of our liberties and of our democratic principles seriously, argue with them, but also let prevail the power of the law, and if needed, have new laws adopted to save the fundaments of our liberal democracy.

The expression "illiberal democracy", which is circulating in some countries even of the EU, is an offense to the evolution of the human spirit in our Western hemisphere over a period that now covers more than 200 years. Yes, the manifold national and liberal rebellions since the French revolution, the great democratic achievements decided upon in the aftermath of WWI, the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, they mostly draw their inspiration from the minds of European citizens.

And yet, no continent has also known bigger setbacks over the last century. Too many in the different layers of our society are playing with fire, and here, in the country of Goethe, let's remember the words of the poet: "Die Geister, die ich rief, werd ich nun nicht los" / "Spirits that I have cited my commands ignore".

Sorcerer's apprentices are all over the place and in these times of instability, insecurity – real and felt –, the collapse of social economic, cultural and other certainties acquired and confirmed over long decades, all these phenomena contribute to the success of movements with ghastly programs.

Not so far ago we seriously believed that the so-called "silent majority" will at a given time put the locomotive of democracy back on track. I must say that personally I believe that "silent majorities" did in the course of history not win too many really decisive battles. And this seems to be even more true as today too many citizens have lost their compass and thus the electorate has become extremely volatile. "Silent majorities" have to get their acts together and get mobilized to secure the political and ethical values of our societies.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I digressed; due to my South Luxembourg temperament I was carried away from my original scheme of saying my thanks because next to Ambassador Graff I wanted to express my gratitude to each and every one of his staff – most of them having been my dear colleagues during my term in office. I would also like to salute the artists from Luxembourg who move our hearts with poems written by youngsters and 9-13 year old children of which no one was allowed to survive.

My thanks go to Guy Dockendorf, the president of the international Mauthausen committee and a good friend of mine, who took charge of editing the program, illustrated by aquarelles that equally young human beings had sketched while in the camp of Terezin – Theresienstadt, waiting as we know that the only blossoming life was ended like a candle put out.

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Dear friends,

I had the privilege to be guided through a year of work in the IHRA by Ambassador Sandro de Bernardin, whom I had only got to know and to deeply appreciate in the context of this Organization.

Dear Sandro, your patience, your capacity for listening, your kindness, your delicate humor, but also your readiness for action and leadership will help me find my way over the next 12 months. You were brave, integer and trustworthy in your office time. You acted out of a city, which we all consider to be one of the cradles of our Western civilization, where the fundaments of our legal system are to be found. And we all are aware that democracies are doomed to fail if the legal system comes under attack. This is why we have to react so sharply when attempts in this respect are made also in countries of the IHRA area. The definition of courage is always linked to specific circumstances, and in this context, an Italian president of the IHRA did indeed a marvelous and autonomous job.

Dear Sandro,

Italy will remain a member of the Troika, an organ which has institutional prerogatives in our Organization. The experience you acquired will be an essential contribution to a successful presidency for the benefit of all the IHRA-member countries. As Switzerland leaves today the Troika, let me thank them specifically and mention their contribution in bringing about a consensus in the adoption process of our overarching new strategy.

And I would also like to warmly welcome Germany as the new member of the Troika. In March 2020, we shall pass the torch to Ambassador Michaela Küchler, but until then we are sure to benefit from the valuable contributions of the German delegation. Michaela, we have known and appreciated each other for more than 6 years, where for quite some time you were one of our main interlocutors in the Foreign Ministry, as you had been in charge of the Western European Department, thus covering also my home country.

Dear all,

The outgoing Chair was paying already tribute to the late Romanian President of the IHRA Mihnea Constantinescu. As mentioned by Ambassador De Bernardin, Ambassador Constantinescu led the Organization through the year 2016 with quite some impressive achievements. His recent passing filled us with great sadness. As I pointed out in a speech in Brussels on February 7th, "Mihnea was a talented diplomat and a much respected colleague and friend. He knew what he wanted and he knew how to achieve his aims due to his many diplomatic skills".

The main achievement of the Romanian IHRA presidency and in fact a legacy was the adoption of a legally non-binding working definition on antisemitism during the Bucharest Plenary in Mai 2016. This working definition has meanwhile been adopted by 17 countries and should primarily guide the work of educators and law-enforcement officers.

And Mihnea was also certainly instrumental in the decision of the Romanian authorities to organize their second plenary in Iasi, where plaques were unveiled and monuments restored to commemorate the terrible pogrom that took place there in June 1941. We commend vividly the Romanian authorities for having undertaken this courageous step to assume their part of responsibility. An example to follow. Many of the European States had and have to finally accept a certain part of responsibility in the darkest chapter of the European continent.

Since my first attendance of IHRA fora in 2016 – at that time still as Ambassador in Berlin – then as a member of the Troika, I have learned to highly appreciate the efficiency, the diligence, the loyalty and the extreme dedication of the Permanent Office, headed by Dr. Kathrin Meyer. I look forward to a year of intense work, where the support of the PO will be a major guarantee of success, success meaning ultimately to see a trend reversal in the worrisome developments described earlier.

For those of you who are hearing about the IHRA for the first time, let me take the opportunity to outline briefly our mission.

The IHRA brings together experts and political representatives to strengthen, advance and promote Holocaust education, remembrance and research.

The experts and political representatives come from 32 member Countries, 2 Liaison countries – i.e. countries going through the last steps before joining the Organization – and 8 Observer Countries as well as from 8 international partner organizations, like the UN, the EU, the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) and the Council of Europe. It is this interface between the experts and the political level that makes the IHRA truly exceptional.

The composition of IHRA means it is uniquely well placed to take the lead on issues related to the Holocaust in the international political arena. Our experts have valuable knowledge to share on early warning signs of present-day genocide. This knowledge can help government officials, policy-makers and NGOs active in global initiatives for genocide prevention.

Another unique aspect of the IHRA is the international nature of its network. International political coordination is imperative to combat growing Holocaust denial and distortion.

And such cooperation is needed more than ever at a time where we see phenomena like distortion and antisemitism raise their vicious heads again. We are eager to strengthen in the coming months the cooperation with our Permanent International Partners.

Today we see indeed a rise in antisemitism and thus our democracies are asked to pay closer attention to and take specific steps in order to combat the problem of antisemitism that has in a not yet too distant past engulfed the European Continent in the biggest downfall of humanity.

In this cataclysm were also drawn the members of the Roma and Sinti community and other communities. We will hear from two prominent experts, Dr. Juliane Wetzel and Dr. Brigitte Bailer, what it meant to be a person with a disability in Nazi Germany. Let me assure you that in our work of remembrance education and research we include all these victims of the terror.

Dear Chairman of the *Zentralrat der deutschen Sinti und Roma*, dear Romani Rose,

We are happy that you decided to attend this meeting. Dealing with the ordeals of the Roma and Sinti is now for quite some years part of our mandate. We have a special committee tackling only questions of the murder of the Roma and Sinti.

Education, research, creating dignified memorial sites for the Roma and Sinti compatriots in the IHRA area is part of our daily business and you might know that we have had recently some success stories; however work has to go on. We know that in some countries, Roma and Sinti are still under heavy pressure and we follow these situations always with the aim of alleviating the burden. I am particularly happy to note that both in our internal projects and in our external projects, which involve also outside institutions and associations, there are always projects dealing with the dramatic part of this community and the conditions of existence of today.

Existential questions have been raised about the viability of continued Jewish life in Europe – a community that has existed in Europe for ages. If this were to change, so too would the future of Europe as a democratic and pluralistic society. In the words of Frans Timmermans, First Vice President of the European Commission, "If there's no future for Jews in Europe, there's no future for Europe."

Identity politics and sometimes biased approaches to the history of the Holocaust are used to legitimize national narratives far away from the weight of history.

The IHRA offers a system of "checks and balances" that can ideally help to promote a fact-based approach to the history of the Holocaust because the Member Countries openly talk about difficult developments in their respective countries and the inclusion of international experts ensures that problems are disclosed.

Precisely the past and the contemporary intersect: We remember those who were murdered, we are honoring the victims, but our work is not only about the past. Our role is to contribute to preserving democratic values.

We also promise to do all we can to ensure that Jews can live in safety in Europe and in other member States. The fact that a Jewish compatriot is leaving this continent due to insecurity or a feeling of insecurity is a shame not only for the country he is leaving, but for the entire continent.

Against the backdrop of rising antisemitism, the reaffirmation of our founding document, the Stockholm Declaration, takes on an even greater significance.

This international Alliance is now entering its 20th year and I am honoured to lead the organization during the challenges of our times and in order to achieve this I ask for the precious support of all those active in the fields earlier mentioned.

In our work we refer to the Stockholm Declaration of 2000, which is not only the birth certificate of the IHRA, it is our code of conduct and it will remain so. But given the challenges ahead of us, we must see whether – at a moment where the last survivors will have left us soon – we can foster a culture of remembrance that vigorously stands up to those who deny or distort the Holocaust.

We have to ask ourselves what kind of culture of remembrance we shall need tomorrow; what new efforts we have to make in our pedagogics; how we have to further stimulate research.

So in view of the fact that in less than 12 months we shall commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination and concentration camp and the 20th Anniversary of the adoption of the Stockholm Declaration, the IHRA Member Countries have decided to start crafting a strong message to be adopted in early 2020. It should vigorously reaffirm our traditional commitments, but also deal with new challenges under new forms of populism and nationalism, with the appalling new appearances of hate speech carried out through the new digital means of our age, with the abominable threats against Jews who are our fellow citizens.

Let me conclude with some personal experiences and comments made over the last two weeks, where I had the feeling that the wind was blowing hot and cold.

On Thursday evening, the exhibition "Les enfants de Moissac" opened in Luxembourg, followed by a lecture. More than 500 children were hidden and saved in Moissac, in the Tarn-et-Garonne-Department because of the formidable collective solidarity of a town of around 10.000 inhabitants.

And two days before probably the most prominent Moroccan author writing in French Tahar Ben Jelloun, a Muslim, delivered a fiery advocacy against antisemitism. It is this kind of voices we have to listen to more often. I cannot but recommend to go and dive into his deeply humanistic views; you do not need to agree with every letter by Ben Jelloun, but you will be inspired by a book like "Le racisme expliqué à ma fille / Racism explained to my daughter". And I would like to limit myself to one sentence: "What is new about racism of today is that one speaks again openly about it, but laws have been voted upon to punish incitement to racial hatred to punish the negation of the existence of the gas chambers where millions of Jews have perished – you call them negationists. What is also new is that the racists feel neither any more shame nor fear of being racists. They have been freed of any feeling of guilt by the discourse of the extreme right parties."

In this Saturday's New York Times, I found an article with the title "Jeremy Corbyn's anti-Semitic Labour Party" and the attack was mainly launched by a Jewish member of Labour, Luciana Berger. Mrs. Berger suggested in this article that the leadership has contrived to make British Jews different in some way, a process she qualifies as "othering". Yes, let us not close our eyes: references to a universal conspiracy are back again, arguments on double loyalties and a quest for domination due to their financial means.

Two weeks ago, I spent the week-end in Paris and sitting on a bench in the sunny Luxembourg Garden, I had precisely to listen to these comments from a well-educated English-speaking couple from the southern hemisphere. Neither of them was shocked when I told them that I remember having heard these arguments from the mouth of a certain man called Adolf Hitler.

That Sunday morning left me in distress when on a voiceless English TV broadcast, I could read on a ticker running below the following news: "President Macron has strongly condemned anti-Semitic incidents that have happened the day before". I did not know that among other things Mr. Macron meant the insulting racial behavior against the philosopher Alain Finkielkraut.

I did not feel well. And I was for a moment not sure what to do. Then in a couple of minutes my wife and I had decided and one hour later, we were bowing our heads in the Pantheon in front of one of the most stunning and courageous politicians of the 5th Republic. We had last seen Simone Veil in 2011 at a dinner in the Residence of the Perpetual Secretary of the Académie française, Hélène Carrère d'Encausse.

While at that time I engaged actively in a discussion with Antoine Veil, I was observing this great woman: still beautiful, yes the former sharpness and brilliance of her mind had somewhat suffered, but other qualities were radiating: absolute serenity and then the amazing aura of what I would call "the personification of dignity". This was the woman who had suffered so much, still wearing the infamous number of Auschwitz and yet this was the woman whose mouth did not know the word "hatred". Still today it happens that I have regrets for not having said to her: "Madame, je vous admire".

We moved on, lost in our thoughts. Only to find ourselves shortly afterwards back in a cell where we looked on to the tomb of Alexandre Dumas. How many have forgotten that he was not of white colour, could he soon also come under the process of "othering". On the right behind the door of the cell lies Emile Zola, one of the most prominent uncoverers of latent antisemitism in our societies. And in front of Zola, there was Victor Hugo. "European avant la lettre, the ferocious defender of democratic and liberal values and abolitionist of the death penalty. Hugo, the poet so much revered in my country where he had lived in exile for a short period, I suddenly remembered his very last words: "Je vois une lumière noire" "I see a black light". The light which our fathers have established on the ruins of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes after WWII is still there, but we tread on a thin layer of ice and we have to watch out that the light does not blacken unperceptively, because of the unawareness about the risks our societies are running.

Thank you very much.