



INTERNATIONAL
**HOLOCAUST
REMEMBRANCE**
ALLIANCE

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CHAIRMANSHIP

Mister Chairman,
Ambassadors, Heads of Delegation,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is for me an emotional event not only because of the subject we are dealing with at this Permanent Council dedicated to the commemoration of Holocaust victims - it is also highly emotional to be back in this forum, almost 20 years after I attended my last Permanent Council.

In fact, I started my diplomatic career at the Madrid meeting of the CSCE, then was involved in the negotiations of the Charter of Paris and as Senior Official. I was shortly later confronted with the violent events in Lithuania in January 1991. And finally, in June 1991, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia started to violently break apart while my country held the Presidency of the European Community, as the union was still called in those days. As a member of the Troika, I was sent in July to Belgrade, Ljubljana and Zagreb to negotiate the stationing of what became the European Community Monitoring Mission/ECMM. In this month of July, our government and government officials still had the hope that a long-lasting war and mass killings could be prevented. It is a stain on the history of this continent that at the end of the war more than 100,000 victims had to be deplored and that on the territory of what was then Yugoslavia we also saw policies of violent ethnic cleansing. And this fact links it to a certain extent to this day's commemoration in honor of the innocent victims of a dark period.

Studying the Holocaust, the genocide of the Roma and other crimes of the Nazis, their 'fascist and extreme nationalist partners and other collaborators', and trying to understand the insane and barbaric ideology behind it is not only an act that consists of working up the past and of commemorating. The lessons drawn from it can help us identify early indicators of dangerous phenomena we currently observe in countries and societies and thus they can eventually become instrumental in setting up a tool kit we should use to prevent genocide and mass atrocities.

It is utterly depressing to see that the end of WWII and the Nazi terror did not result in the end of genocide. Millions have been killed since 1945 and still today we follow the initiating of proceedings before the International Criminal Court on the plight of the Rohingya people, persecuted on the basis of racist and religious criteria. Is this not to some extent part of the topic of today?

Mister Chairman,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

75 years after WWII, we still have the privilege to meet survivors of the Holocaust in person. Sadly but naturally, their numbers are dwindling.

When you speak to survivors, two themes often reoccur. First, the fear of being forgotten. This fear is not rooted in a self-centered attitude but those survivors who have the enormous strength to tell their stories feel the responsibility to keep the memory alive. The memory of so many others - family and friends but also the countless unknown victims - who were murdered.

Second, by looking around them and witnessing the rise of discrimination, hatred and antisemitism once again, Holocaust survivors - and by extension, all of us - come to the understanding that the phrase 'Never Again' may have been nothing more than an empty shell.

Considering the unbelievable weight of the responsibility so many survivors took upon themselves to share with us what they had to endure and the terrible agony of the millions of victims, all of us, governments and societies alike, have to understand that we owe it to them to make sure that their suffering will not fade away in our memory.

We owe it to them. But we also owe it to us. Us, the generations who come after them. Antisemitism, antigypsyism and other grave forms of discrimination are not only a problem for those who are the victims of these denigrating mindsets, they are a problem for our democratic societies as a whole.

The protection of minorities and fundamental human rights means that all of us, each of you in this room, is entitled to live a decent life, without the fear of being harmed by others because of belief, ethnicity, political opinion or any other reason.

We all know, however, that antisemitic attacks, including murder, spread in our societies. We know that discriminatory policies are used once again as a tool to attain or to maintain political power.

It is against this background that the Luxembourg Presidency of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), took it upon itself to develop, with all 34 Member Countries, principles by means of which we commit ourselves to remember the Holocaust and to also fight the evils that led to unfathomable sorrows just a few generations ago and that seem to be lurking just under the surface once again - worse, the monsters of the past which often quite openly show their fear-inspiring faces again.

Distinguished delegates,

In these perilous times, we have to ask ourselves what a contemporary culture of remembrance should look like and how its relevance should become evident to our younger generations. This analytical work becomes even more commanding when we all know that the privilege to listen to the voices of the last survivors – as we experienced it in recent days in Jerusalem and in Auschwitz - will not be extended anymore in the foreseeable future. I am convinced that under these circumstances, the preservation of sites of horror, the tangible reminders of the past, as well as of memorials, will tremendously gain in importance. Thus, I have put this subject very high on the agenda of my yearlong presidency.

It gives me great satisfaction to witness the opening of an excellent new museum in Sobibor/Poland and to have received but a couple of days ago the notification that a draft law dealing with the restoration of the concentration camps of Staro Sajmiste and Topovske Supe, situated today in Belgrade, has been introduced before the Serbian parliament. I sincerely hope that it can be adopted over the next weeks, before the close of the legislature and the election of a new parliament.

In Croatia I applaud the declared readiness to have the museum on the former site of the Jasenovac concentration camp undergo, in the foreseeable future, a modernization process which should also see the construction of a building dedicated to educational and didactic purposes. In many other member countries of the IHRA success stories of this kind have been written in recent years (Ghetto Library in Vilnius, removal of a pig farm at the former Roma concentration camp in Lety u Pisku near Prague). In other cases, planning is under way.

The examples mentioned before are all located within member countries of the Alliance, but I would not like to exclude from praise all other States that are present around this table. In this context, I am grateful for the conceptual work undertaken regarding the restoration of the site of Babi Yar in Kiev and I salute the inauguration last year of a Memorial dedicated to the Viennese Jews in Maly Trostinets near Minsk. I thank the respective countries wholeheartedly for their help in preserving the testimonies of the past and the legacy of dehumanizing actions, which serve as a warning tool in raising the awareness of young people to how quickly the fury of a barbaric ideology can make inroads into the human mind. Let us not forget that the eyes of the guards in Buchenwald, upon looking around, would not only see the chimneys of the crematorium inside the camp but also the chimneys on the rooftops of the city of Weimar - the humanistic glory of a great nation.

Distinguished delegates,

It is not without pride that I would like to call your attention to the '2020 IHRA Ministerial Declaration'. On 19 January, Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Education and high-ranking government officials of 34 Member Countries (plus the future Member State North Macedonia) came

to Brussels to solemnly adopt this new declaration, in the company of IHRA's eight Partner Organizations.¹

With this text, governments accept for themselves and their societies the responsibility to not only remember, but to pick up and intensify the fight against the many dangerous developments that threaten the social fabric of our democratic countries and the institutions that were built as reactions to two devastating World Wars and the Holocaust.

The declaration addresses the murder of European Jewry. In addition, our members acknowledge the suffering of the Roma people, who were targeted on racial grounds and doomed to annihilation under German-Nazi rule.

We know too little about the fate of the Roma during the war and we have to understand that our limited knowledge about and the neglect of this genocide have 'contributed to the prejudice and discrimination that many Roma communities still experience today', to quote from the Ministerial Declaration.

Governments pledge to counter hate speech, may it be on- or offline. It is often said that words do not kill. But discrimination and hate always start with words. Words can create a climate of fear and indifference. We cannot idly stand around when members of our societies are attacked. With this new IHRA Declaration, governments can be held accountable for doing this. Domestically and internationally. The Declaration is not legally binding, but it is putting high moral standards on the shoulders of all those who have adopted it.

We should also find encouragement and inspiration in those who defied the Nazis and their collaborators. Those dissidents and resistance fighters were all too often only a minority. Many of them suffered bitterly for their humanity. But their courage is a beacon of light and we need to remember them and their deeds to draw inspiration, strength and determination in our fight against discrimination today.

¹ UN; UNESCO; ODHIR/OSCE; Council of Europe; EU; Fundamental Rights Agency of the EU; Arolsen Archives; Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany

Let me express here the hope that this Declaration might become a source of inspiration and action not limited only to the countries that have negotiated and adopted it. I personally firmly believe that the Declaration carries fundamental values and principles that should guide us all in our endeavors. On our side, the member countries of the IHRA have pledged ‘to work closely with [...] our international partners to further these goals’.

During the Luxembourg Plenary, the IHRA member countries also unanimously adopted new ‘Recommendations on Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust’, aimed at framing the school curriculum of our member States when it comes to dealing with the bloody and dark chapters of the big History Book of our continent. Education is key if we wish to enable younger generations not to repeat the mistakes of the past and to create more just and equal societies. You can approach the Luxembourg Presidency or the IHRA Permanent Office if you wish to learn more about these recommendations.

Let me here mention the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism. I am fully aware that some of the illustrative examples mentioned in the working definition are not unanimously shared. This is not the place to enter into a discussion on possibly critical points. I am deeply convinced that this non-legally binding working definition is one of the big successes of the last years in so far as it has raised awareness to the fact that our countries and societies face the problem of antisemitism. The problem and the related challenge are today not negated anymore.

I wish the upcoming seminar on ‘Combatting Antisemitism’ in Tirana a great success. As I have to attend a colloquium at the Luxembourg University, I will have to be represented in the Albanian capital by the incoming German Presidency of the IHRA.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Over the last few months, I visited many IHRA Member Countries, most recently I was particularly active in southeastern Europe.

No country, including my own, can claim to have found a flawless and perfectly self-reflected way of dealing with the past. But governments and administrations carry a special responsibility to counter distortion of the past, the Holocaust and related crimes. That includes particularly our own national roles or the past roles of our societies during that dark part of our common history.

This is why, during all these visits to IHRA Member Countries, I emphasized the necessity to make archives accessible for research. We can only attain a better and more complete picture of the past if we enable free and unimpeded research. In this context, I commend the decision of the Vatican to open on the 2nd of March the archives of the Pontificate of Pope Pius XII. I am honored to be invited to a meeting on 21 February where the results of the preparation of these archives for public access will be presented. Let me state here quite openly that too many archives related to the bloody period of WWII and the Holocaust remain either closed or are not yet fit for opening. Inventories of these kind of archives should be made and courageous political decisions should be taken so that we can come ever closer to the historical truth.

Better understanding our past and acknowledging our own mistakes and responsibility will help us to overcome sometimes schizophrenic nationalist policies, and in many cases doing so contributes fundamentally to a more serene relationship with geographic neighbors.

In the week in which the world gathered around International Holocaust day to commemorate the millions of victims, it is fair to include in our thanks and thoughts the armies of the liberators and their enormous sacrifices. Thus we remember the Red Army who liberated Auschwitz-Birkenau, the symbol site of terror and barbarism, we remember the Western Allied Powers who thereafter liberated sites from Bergen-Belsen to Mauthausen and Theresienstadt/Terezín. Finally, all the allied armies have liberated the continent from the horrors of a terrifying regime and its partners. Even the great majority of the people in countries that were defeated admit today that they were liberated from despicable dictatorships.

Among the many other IHRA activities during my chairmanship, we held two IHRA Plenary meetings in Mondorf-les-Bains and Luxembourg City in 2019. Mondorf-les-Bains is the small locality where in 1945 some 70 Nazi criminals were first interrogated before their transfer to Nuremberg. We worked on increasing the visibility of the IHRA and concrete project work was done to counter distortion and to remember and protect Holocaust-related sites.

The IHRA Presidency continues to be a valuable experience for my country. Domestically, we organized roundtables, exhibitions, concerts and other activities that enabled us to directly reach out to the citizens of Luxembourg.

For the moment, a fabulous exhibition is still on show in Luxembourg City. It is dedicated to Aristides de Sousa Mendes, the Council General of Portugal in Bordeaux who in one week in July 1940 delivered thousands of visas to people who were persecuted and fleeing from the Nazis, among them a high number of Jews. Thousands of Jews were thus saved. Aristides Sousa Mendes disobeyed the orders of the authoritarian government of Prime Minister Salazar. He bore the consequences: material poverty, exclusion and denigration. I mention his name on this day of tragic remembrance to pay tribute to the many ‘Righteous among the Nations’, those who saved Jewish lives despite dishonoring instructions and the risk of persecution and execution, just to follow the voice of their human conscience. They remain true examples to follow.

Before answering possible questions, I would once more like to recall the importance of the new ‘IHRA 2020 Ministerial Declaration’.

It is no minor task in these times to reach international consensus, and our members should be proud of this. Even more so because it is on such sensitive topics. This gives me hope and inspires me to speak out. This is why I encourage all of you to make use of this Declaration, or parts of it, whenever you may see fit.

The depressing words of Primo Levi, 'it has happened, it can happen again', should not be a source of resignation to anyone of us, but inspire our minds and fortify our determination to act against the evil spirits coming shamelessly out of the hollows of the past. Assuming personal responsibility is the word of the day, passive compassion is not enough anymore. We have to foster a new culture of resistance, to highlight our value system, to preserve the foundations of our democracies.

In Auschwitz last Monday, the Polish survivor Marian Turcki rightly said that the ten commandments constitute one of the texts that have contributed to forge our societies and our civilization. But Turcki expressed the need for an 11th commandment after the horrors that ended 75 years ago. It is also in the light of the terrifying new challenges that this 11th commandment should read: 'Thou shall not be indifferent.'

Esteemed Heads of Delegation, ladies and gentlemen, the challenges ahead of us are worrying and sometimes appear to be overwhelming. But to neglect them or to avoid confronting them will lead our societies to pay a heavy price. As IHRA we are proud to have ODHIR/OSCE as a partner organization. I would like to call on you to federate our energies whenever there is an opportunity to close ranks in the defense and the upholding of societies of conviviality, tolerance and non-discrimination.

I thank you so much for giving me the privilege to share my thoughts with you.