



International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance

As Mass Murder Began: Identifying and Remembering the Killing Sites of Summer-Fall 1941

March 22-23, Vilnius

Welcome Address by Dr. François Wisard, Head of the Swiss Delegation

Mr Vice-Minister

Excellencies,

Dear Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to address you here today on behalf of the Chair of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, Ambassador Benno Bättig of Switzerland. Opening this important conference is one of the first tasks the Swiss Chairmanship has the honour to preside over.

I would like to begin by thanking the Director of the Vilna Gaon Jewish Museum, Mr Markas Zingeris for generously providing the venue for today's international conference and for his support in arranging the event. The IHRA is also extremely grateful to Kamile Rupeikaite who is part of the Lithuanian Delegation to the IHRA and has worked tirelessly on this conference over the last months. What IHRA experts do for this organization they do in their own time, out of conviction and dedication. For that we are truly grateful.

Supporting Kamile is the IHRA Steering Committee on Killing Sites, which is composed of colleagues from Poland, Germany, Israel, and Romania. Dr Piotr Trojanski, a member of the Steering Committee, will address you shortly. I would like to thank him and the Committee's members who attend this conference: Dr Thomas Lutz, Dr. David Silberklang, Dr. Adrian Cioflanca, and of course Dr. Juliane Wetzel who cannot join us today.

The composition of the Steering Committee demonstrates exactly what makes the IHRA so unique. It is an international network of experts, working to strengthen and advance Holocaust research, remembrance, and education worldwide.

Before we begin, I would like to share with you some historical considerations.

Firstly, let us reflect on the pogroms in the former Russian Empire and the mass killings that followed operation Barbarossa in June 1941. The pogroms that spread from the 1880s onward in numerous cities of the then Russian Empire and caused many Jews to emigrate to Palestine and to countries of Western Europe remain in our memories as a vivid example of hatred and

violence against Jews. Even if we should be conscious not to reduce historical events to figures, let us consider the number of victims of these pogroms compared to the victims of the 1941 mass killings.

“On any given day of the second half of 1941 – I quote here Timothy Snyder –, the Germans shot more Jews that had been killed by pogroms in the entire history of the Russian Empire”. “On any given day”: these words remind us all of the tremendous scale of the horror this conference is dealing with.

Unfortunately, those who could and still can testify about these horrors are few. As IHRA Delegate Karel Berkhoff accurately pointed out in the first book published by IHRA entitled “Killing Sites: Research and Remembrance”: *“Whereas survivors of the well-known death camps and their descendants have voiced their views and concerns about the proper ways to commemorate the genocide, in the case of the killing sites [...] these voices were virtually absent. There were few survivors and those who did raise the issue often live in societies disapproving of public debate about private questions”.*

It is my hope that this conference will contribute, within and outside of the IHRA community, to broadening the perspective of the Holocaust from one which is centered on the concentration camps. We must remember that the majority of the Jews killed in the Holocaust never saw a concentration camp.

The mass killings of Summer-Fall 1941 were part of an overall strategy of Nazi Germany at that time, concretely of the *Einsatzgruppen* and security police forces to murder everyone defined as an enemy of the Reich: Jews, but also Roma and Sinti, Soviet partisans, and others.

As a historian, I am especially sensitive to the importance of going beyond memory and of integrating that memory in its historical context. This implies that we must reconstruct the history of the mass killings, and eventually find appropriate ways of transmitting both the history and the memory. To put it briefly: we must ensure a dignified commemoration of the victims, as well as the study of the Holocaust in all its dimensions.

IHRA’s unique value lies in the combination of various fields of expertise – historians, educators, directors of memorials and museums – with governmental representatives. As an IHRA delegate and member of its Memorial and Museums Working Group since 2004, I can assess that historic sites, in particular killing sites have been, and still are high on the IHRA agenda.

The first and the only resolution adopted to this day by IHRA urges its Members Countries to preserve Holocaust related historic sites. This 2007 resolution was conceived and meant as a supplement to the Stockholm Declaration on the Holocaust, which is the founding document of IHRA.

Back in 2010, the Memorial and Museums Working Group of the IHRA – which includes representatives from all Member Countries – commissioned a report on mass graves and killing sites in the Eastern part of Europe. The report, the first one to be commissioned by IHRA, assessed the main challenges and obstacles in the preservation of historic sites of this nature, and provided an overview of the political and historical background of the field and the research yet to be carried out on the international, national and local levels.

Several concrete measures have been undertaken by the IHRA since then. In 2011, the IHRA adopted the International Memorial Museums Charter which is a set of guidelines dealing with

ethics and the main concerns of memorial museums for the victims of the Holocaust. Last year an addendum was added with a clear focus on protecting and preserving sites, urging IHRA Member Countries to define clear responsibility for sites, include victim associations in design, and provide adequate on-site information.

Recognizing the importance of this topic, the IHRA then commissioned a Steering Committee to focus on this issue in 2012. This committee organized a major international conference on the killing sites in 2014 in Cracow. Its proceedings were gathered in the first book published by IHRA, copies of which you find here. In this context, two key benchmarks of IHRA's approach to killing sites were defined:

- IHRA should not and cannot become another of the many active parties marking and preserving sites
- IHRA's goal is to stimulate and bring together those organizations and individuals involved in identification, marking and commemoration, so that they may cooperate better, on an international level.

Today, I am very grateful to open a second IHRA conference on this essential topic. Its time frame is narrower, but the overall approach remains the same, and it is quite fascinating: it brings together experts from various countries and backgrounds and with different fields of expertise. Together they will guide us today and tomorrow on issues related to identifying, marking and remembering sites of mass killings.

I wish once again to thank the organizers of this international conference, particularly Kamile Rupeikaite, for this very interesting program and wish you all fruitful discussions.