



Romanian
Chairmanship
2016

**The message delivered by amb. Mihnea Constantinescu, IHRA Chair, to the
Conference *Virtues of Tolerance***

Lisbon, 22 September 2016

It is such a pleasure to be together with you today for such a significant event dedicated to the **Virtues of Tolerance**. On behalf of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, IHRA, I would like to express our appreciation for your interest to our activities and for accepting the invitation of the Romanian Embassy to Portugal and the Romanian Cultural Institute to attend this conference.

Together with the Executive Secretary of IHRA, dr. Kathrin Meyer and my colleagues representing the Romanian Chairmanship of this organization we are visiting Lisbon these days for promoting IHRA's mission and its main objectives in our discussions with representatives of the Government and of different Portuguese organisations focusing on the memory of the Holocaust.

I am grateful to our host tonight, the respected **Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa**, an institution were almost 90 years ago the great Romanian historian, Nicolae Iorga exposed for the first time the fascinating resemblances between Romanian and Portuguese culture, identity and spirit.

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance is an intergovernmental organisation consisting of a network of political leaders and experts, working together towards advancing education, remembrance and research about the Holocaust.

IHRA includes 31 member states committed to the principles of the Stockholm Declaration adopted in 2000. Even though Portugal is just an observer country, the Portuguese delegation is indeed an active presence in our organization. I commend **Ambassador Luis Barreiros** for his excellent contribution to our activities and for his dedication to advance Portugal's profile in our IHRA family.

In Romania, just one month after we took over the Chairmanship, the Portuguese Embassy together with the **Camões Instituto da Cooperação e da Língua Portuguesa** and the



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National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania 'Elie Wiesel' organized a very interesting conference " *Portugal, a European Harbour during the Holocaust*".

But Portugal can do more in relation to IHRA and we are strongly encouraging these days our hosts to consider a full membership position within IHRA.

For example, Portugal input in terms of refugees' policies can be better heard if it were fully-fledged member. Approaching the topic of the refugees in our context is reality-based. This week, in New York, the first UN Summit for Refugees and Migrants took place and a final Declaration was adopted setting standards in defending the dignity of the refugees and migrants.

This topic takes us back to the virtues of the tolerance, to the human beauty that lies in this attitude. More than ever, we need tolerance nowadays in the sense to curb the raising of extremism, racism, discrimination that can only lead to violence.

Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor whose voice we will always hear, said " *There is divine beauty in learning, just as there is human beauty in tolerance.*"

But tolerance without conscious action and a strong will cannot succeed.

When traveling to Lisbon, I have read passages from the most recent book that IHRA edited – *Bystanders, Rescuers or Perpetrators? The Neutral Countries and the Shoah*. In this book there are 2-3 chapters dedicated to the treatment of the Jews in Portugal during WW2. Most likely **Mrs. Esther Mucznik**, the President of the **Foundation MemoShoah** can tell us more about the fate of the Jews in Portugal and Europe during the war. **Prof. Moshe Idel** will provide us later a thorough explanation on the virtues that tolerance bears.

After reading these chapters, I could say that Lisbon is one of the special places where to speak about the virtues of tolerance. Especially if we think of the Holocaust dark years in Europe.

Portugal has in its history some examples of Portuguese diplomats – such as the **Consul Aristides de Sousa Mendes** who activated in Bordeaux and saved Jews, mostly Portuguese-Jews, by issuing visas and passports to travel to Portugal.

For his courage **Aristides de Sousa Mendes** was the first diplomat ever to be awarded the titled *Righteous among nations* by the Yad Vashem. His courage reminds us of other respected



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diplomats in Europe, including the Romanian Constantin Karadja, who risked their life and rescued Jews stranded under the Nazi regime.

Today Conference focuses on the virtues of Tolerance. But intolerance is the word that I would not associate as an antonym of tolerance, and rather a state of presence that we should be afraid of. Intolerance is a first state in defining prejudice, racism, discrimination or antisemitism.

As IHRA Chair, I consider one of our most pressing duties to decisively call attention to the increasing acts of antisemitism and Holocaust denial in Europe. How is it that in spite of all we know of the Holocaust the disease of antisemitism has not been eradicated? And how is it that other form of prejudice, racism, and intolerance are spreading every day.

I consider our organisation to be an active catalyst in warning about the perils of antisemitism and intolerance. We need to do our best so that these two age-old demons do not infest the mind, the judgement and the soul of the young generations.

We cannot stay indifferent when the history of the Holocaust is rewritten in some countries in Europe to serve the goals of aggressive populism.

We cannot stay indifferent when the roots of unreasoned nationalism, like so many poisonous tentacles, aim to obscure the truth on the responsibility of those who collaborated or participated during Holocaust times.

And we cannot stay indifferent when “special political reasons” or electoral calculations are used as an excuse to avoid openly denouncing present day forms of antisemitism.

Remembering the tragedy of the Holocaust, we ask ourselves what could be more hideous than finding today antisemitic messages mixed into far-right extremist or negationist discourse in the public space, in the media and social media all over Europe.

And what could be more dangerous to the fabric of our societies than to tolerate them spreading hate.

Antisemitism is under the IHRA’s radar as we consider it not only a means to the distortion and denial of the Holocaust. It is not only a threat to the security and life of the Jewish people. But it is also a threat to the fundamental values of our societies, by setting the perverse tone of hate, discrimination, racism or xenophobia which undermines a safe and



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democratic future. It is in this context that the IHRA Plenary in Bucharest adopted a working definition of antisemitism in May this year.

When we in the IHRA are asked why we press to integrate the definitions we adopted on antisemitism and on Holocaust denial within the European framework of standards, our answer is clear: Because the mission of the IHRA is to bring to the attention of the world not just the memory of the past, but also our duty to the present. And therefore we must identify the roots of hate, discrimination and exclusion that led to the tragedy of the Holocaust and eradicate them for good, both on our continent and globally.

Before concluding my remarks, I would like to express my special thanks for being with us tonight to one of my dearest mentors, **dr. Liviu Beris**, the President of the Jewish Holocaust survivors Association in Romania. I am grateful for his effort to travel with us here for sharing his thoughts about the Virtues of Tolerance by understanding the evil as a mean to curb it.