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## **THE HOLOCAUST: A HISTORY OF CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL RELEVANCE**

**Address by Ambassador Mihnea Constantinescu,  
Chair, International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance  
“Connecting Law and Memory” Conference  
Kazerne Dossin, Mechelen, 20 September 2016.**

Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to address you today in my capacity as Chair of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, IHRA.

I would like to thank the Director of Kazerne Dossin, Mr Christophe Busch, for his kind invitation. I would also like to thank Deputy-director Veerle Vanden Daelen, who is an important part of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance where she chairs the IHRA’s Committee on the Holocaust, Genocide and Crimes against Humanity.

It is an honor to meet one of my predecessors as Chair of the IHRA, Ambassador Jan Deboutte. Ambassador Deboutte knows what a privilege and a challenge it is to chair this important organization.

This is my second visit to Kazerne Dossin, one of the most significant places of Holocaust remembrance and education in Europe. This place should become a model to all countries, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, where I discovered with a deep grief many memorial places left in desolation and lack of respect.

Few weeks ago I found here in Kazerne Dossin one of the most touching sections of the dark history, movingly displayed in the exhibition Geborgen Verborgen - Hidden in Silence.

It reminded me of the Hidden Voices conference IHRA organized earlier this year together with the Council of Europe in Bucharest, addressing Roma genocide during Holocaust. I looked here at the smiling faces of the Jewish children, many of them later murdered, some of them hidden for escape, and I felt around me the voice of Anne Frank.

Anyone who is exposed to the tragedies of the Holocaust finds that nothing can be more heart-breaking than a child’s moment of horror in the face of death: the story of the artist André Goezu, originally from Antwerp, whose fears while hidden in silence were expressed in this place. Such memories remind me of Norman Manea, the respected Romanian American writer who at the age of 9 already felt like an old man as his family were deported to Transnistria.

The Geborgen Verborgen exhibition in Kazerne Dossin recounted a dramatic episode of European history. But it also serves as a reminder to the Europe of today of the cruel tragedy of the expelled, unwanted migrants during the Holocaust.

Geborgen Verborgen could represent a call to action to save the lives of children destroyed by racial, ethnic and religious cleansing all over the world today. And it is significant to note that today while we are here, a Leaders' summit is hosted in New York on the margins of the UNGA to address the critical situation of the Global Refugee Crisis, including commitments and practical measures for children in such extreme circumstances.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear friends,

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance is an intergovernmental body, founded in 1998 by then Swedish Prime Minister Goeran Persson. It is also the foremost international network of political leaders and professionals advancing and shaping Holocaust education, remembrance and research.

In January 2000 a historic meeting took place: the Stockholm Forum on the Holocaust. The high level representation at that Forum was recognition that an intergovernmental organization on the topic of the Holocaust was needed; that Holocaust remembrance should not be limited to Jewish communities and civil society organizations of other persecuted groups; and that governments too should bear responsibility for the remembrance of the Holocaust, to fight prejudice and to prevent genocide worldwide.

From this perspective, the focus of my address tonight is the enduring relevance of the lessons of the Holocaust - as seen from IHRA's perspective. Can the IHRA play a significant role in exploring the connections between Holocaust history and the present day? And by doing so, can we do better in uniting the action of governments and experts?

As Chair of this organization, 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 forms of prejudice, racism, and intolerance are spreading every day.

For answering these questions, I believe that we need to boldly confront three vicious temptations that add to the current challenges of this continent: **indifference, hypocrisy and impunity.**

I am deeply convinced that today, everywhere around this world, one of the greatest threats of all to the democratic progress of our society is **indifference.** Absolutely nothing can justify indifference when it is harmful to the life and dignity of other human beings.

History of the Holocaust has shown us that individual acts of courage and responsibility can make the difference between life and death. So it is with fighting antisemitism.

In times of trial, people in positions of influence have stood up against injustice, discrimination and terror. 26,120 people have been recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous among the nations.

Like Oswald Bosko. Born in Vienna, Oswald was a high-ranking police sergeant in the unit assigned to the Krakow ghetto. He was known for turning a blind eye when food was smuggled in from outside the ghetto. Julius Madritsch was a factory-owner and a friend of Oswald Bosko's. He learned at the

end of 1942 that all the children of the Krakow ghetto were to be deported. With Oswald's help, he decided to save his workers' children.

During the night, Oswald smuggled the children and their mothers through holes in the ghetto fence and transferred them to Julius Madritsch's factory. From there, the families escaped to Tarnow. Two days later, those children who remained in the ghetto were sent to Auschwitz, or were shot. In 1944, the Gestapo discovered that Oswald had been helping Jews. He tried to escape but was caught and put on trial. He was executed on September 18<sup>th</sup>, 1944.

The heroic actions of law enforcement officers and civil servants who risked, and indeed lost their lives saving others are not to be underestimated. There are lessons to be learned from their courage to break rules for the right reasons. They are the human confirmation that one person can very much make a difference.

It is easy to want to turn to those rescue stories to assuage the guilt of a dark past. But there is as much to learn from the stories of those who collaborated or who did not speak up. We must take in the full spectrum of human behavior.

The Holocaust is a complex history and people are complex beings. As with any element of the Holocaust, reflecting on the behavior of bystanders and perpetrators is often a painful story: whether the story of a nation, a town, a neighborhood, or a profession. But there are lessons here for us for tackling antisemitism today.

If we are honest with ourselves, we can ensure that the Holocaust does not remain simply a topic of historical research or academic consideration but is a reminder of the dangers of allowing the age-old demons of antisemitism and intolerance to flourish, unchecked and uncommented. 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? What could be more dangerous to the fabric of our societies than to tolerate them spreading hate, to be indifferent to the effect on the minds and souls of our young people?

As IHRA Chair I have had several occasions to tell my countrymen that those who have not seen in Iasi, Podu Iloaiei, Targu Frumos, or Popricani, the long, cold and sinister form of the mass graves of the Jews murdered during the pogroms in Romania, cannot fully understand the enduring imperative of fighting such evil.

We must persist in telling our young people the truth about the history of their country, so that they will not lose courage when they see such history returning. I am addressing this message particularly to our fellows in countries burdened with the dark Communist past, seeking to consolidate their democratic future.

I am convinced that teaching young generations to denounce every form of extremism, intolerance and antisemitism is a greater achievement than one isolated act of courage.

More education for more responsible conduct in confronting these evils will consolidate the future of our society.

On 2 July past, Romania lost a great countryman and the world lost a wonderful historian and moral authority. I find it fitting to mention the wise words of Elie Wiesel who said:

*“There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.”*

This is what IHRA does when it promotes reflection on the roots of the crimes of the Holocaust. We teach the dangers of **indifference** when tolerance of intolerance becomes the norm and spreads like a disease throughout society.

But indifference to antisemitism is not the only danger today. We must also encourage individuals to recognize and speak up against **hypocrisy**, and to demand action. IHRA has demonstrated over the years, through its accumulated record and expertise, not only the risks of remaining indifferent, but also the dangers of not taking action.

We cannot stay indifferent when the history of the Holocaust is rewritten in some countries 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.

I do not believe - and we should not accept - that some sinister ghosts in the history of the Holocaust could still be alluring, to the point of overshadowing the centrality of our democratic values. And I do not believe that there can be any justification in today’s Europe to offer praise and honor for champions of the toxic politics of hatred.

Elie Wiesel’s plea should give us the courage to denounce the political ambiguity questioning the European fundamental values of today. It is also the courage to fight against the viciousness of various forms of antisemitism, racism and xenophobia, using our voices, our networks of human rights protectors, and the law.

Politicians bear an immense responsibility to stay firm on the front line against any discourse of hatred. In Europe, racism and xenophobia are punishable under criminal law. The legislation is there. It just has to be enforced.

So we must eliminate the tendency to tolerate **impunity** when it comes to preventing and punishing such crimes, including antisemitism. As long as we lack a clear commitment to enforce the law, the dissemination of the lessons of the past through commemoration and conferences will remain a mere exercise in public relations. It is sad to learn that, as of this date, only 13 out of 28 EU member States have criminalized Holocaust denial.

We all sit here today because we believe that reflecting on the Holocaust can aid us in strengthening integrity, in building strong networks of engaged leaders, lawmakers, civil servants and law enforcement bodies.

We believe in their capacity to confront boldly the same disease that led to the tragedy of the Holocaust. And we believe in a strong will to better ensure the safety and human rights of our citizens.

Assuming the IHRA membership should be for every country one of the most effective ways to confront history. Taking responsibility for the past teaches us the value of freedom, its power to keep us steadfast on the path of democracy.

It is with such a commitment in mind that the Romanian IHRA Chairmanship made the decision to conduct this year intensive specialized training for Romanian police officers and magistrates, focused on combatting antisemitism, discrimination and xenophobia. We benefitted from the participation of trainers sent by the American Jewish Committee, the Manchester Metropolitan Police and the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights.

We all learned how important it is for our police to be able to respond not only to more conventional acts of antisemitism and Holocaust denial, but also to newer versions of such acts, especially in the digital environment.

We learned about the perverse effects of inherited prejudice in our society. And we learned that its roots have not indeed forever perished.

Our hope is that such programs do not train just one police officer, one lawyer, one civil servant. But rather that these participants will positively influence their colleagues and those whom they serve.

Tragic events in recent years in Europe with antisemitic grounds indicates how important is to prevent them and clearly identify their path. There must be clarity about what antisemitism actually is and how it can manifest itself. There must be clarity, so that ignorance cannot be offered as an excuse for lack of principle and firmness, or jokes presented as a disguised form of hate speech.

Therefore, on May this year the IHRA adopted by consensus a Working Definition of Antisemitism. The definition, which had been requested almost unanimously by IHRA's experts, is a political tool which will serve the cause of clarity and action against antisemitism.

By adopting it, the IHRA is setting an example of responsible conduct to other international fora, and hopes to inspire them to take action in their turn on setting a legally binding framework for addressing this threat.

Allow me to commend in this context the initiative of present German Chairmanship-in-Office of the OSCE, which is seeking the adoption of a working definition of antisemitism based on the IHRA achievement at its ministerial Council in Hamburg in December 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 to eradicate them for good, both on our continent and globally.

Dear friends,

That the Holocaust is of contemporary relevance to human rights and tolerance education is self-evident. But as I have tried to underline in my remarks, its relevance extends beyond the educational to reach far into the present political arena.

The depths of the Holocaust horror and the heights of heroism are touchstones in our understanding of the human capacity for evil and for good. One does not inherit guilt, but responsibility.

The lessons of history can be hard and painful. Still, politics is not expected to obscure those lessons. In a democratic system, it is designed to be conducted for the larger public good, by learning from those lessons.

I thank you for your contribution to preserving the memories of the Holocaust and for educating people to make Europe a more secure and more united place.

And I wish you very productive and fruitful days of discussion.