



INTERNATIONAL
**HOLOCAUST
REMEMBRANCE**
ALLIANCE

05 March 2019

**Address by IHRA Chair, Sandro De Bernardin, at the IHRA Handover
Berlin**

H.E. the Ambassador of Luxembourg to Germany Jean Graff, H.E. the Ambassador of Italy to Germany Luigi Mattiolo, H.E. the Head of the Delegation of Luxembourg to the IHRA and incoming IHRA Chair Georges

Santer,

Excellencies,

Distinguished Guests,

Times change.

Some twenty years ago, then Swedish Prime Minister Goeran Persson was concerned by a poll showing that in his country high school children had little knowledge of the Holocaust. The horrors of Auschwitz, Treblinka, Sobibor were beginning to fade into history, and were at risk of disappearing from collective memory.

At that time, Persson read the signs of the times and took the initiative leading to the creation of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Over the last twenty years his brainchild – the IHRA – has worked hard to revert the trend towards oblivion. It has promoted growing and fruitful international cooperation on research and education about the Holocaust, as well as the conservation of related testimonies and sites.

Does this mean that Persson would be less worried today about the memory of the Holocaust? I think he would not. Maybe he would be less concerned by the risk of mere oblivion. But other threats have now come to the forefront.

True: throughout these years many countries, many societies – in Europe and beyond – have undertaken to revisit their history of XX century and cast light on events that have so far left in



the dark. But – as the Honorary Chairman of the IHRA, Professor Yehuda Bauer, powerfully illustrated in our last Plenary Meeting – parallel to this process, another process developed. That is, the distortion of the narrative of the Holocaust.

Distortion is even more insidious and dangerous than oblivion or denial. Distortion is a malicious interpretation and selective memory, in view of denying responsibility or trivializing the tragic gravity of facts. Distortion and trivialization are the first steps towards the moral acceptance of what happened., towards the *sleep of reason* that can leave room for history to repeat itself.

Moreover, compared to twenty years ago, antisemitism has made a comeback in a more open and dangerous way: it is both antisemitism according to past models, and antisemitism in new forms. A malicious antisemitism, revamping the old tale of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. A murderous antisemitism, hitting on both sides of the Atlantic: from the Paris of Mireille Knoll to the Pittsburgh of the Or L'Simcha Congregation.

“Shomer, Ma Mi-Llailab?” “Watchman, what of the night? The watchman says: Morning is coming, but also the night.” As the watchman in Isaiah chapter 21, we – the watchmen of the history of the Holocaust – recognize a situation with light and dark, the bottom-line being that the night is not yet over.

Since times change, the IHRA is called to adapt to new challenges. I am gratified that I lived intensely – at first as a member of the Chair Troika and, during last year, as the IHRA Chairman – this endeavour of updating IHRA’s presence and approach.

Our effort is not yet over, but I think we made good progress with the adoption of an organizational strategy focusing on safeguarding the historical record and countering distortion. For that, I wish to thank my Romanian and Swiss predecessors, who initiated the process. In particular, I wish to pay tribute today to the memory of Ambassador Mihnea Constantinescu, whose enlightened leadership made it possible to adopt the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism: a tool of paramount relevance for the daily work of educators, security apparatuses and the judiciary.

Since 2016 we have been reflecting on the mission and goals of the IHRA. I wish to recall the crucial contribution provided, to this effect, by Sir Andrew Burns, a former IHRA Chair who coordinated this ambitious exercise. We have revisited our traditional working structure, based on a thematic repartition of competences (education, research, memorials and museum), in view of



best focussing our action and projects. Now our delegates are called to work in an interdisciplinary mode, in projects of political relevance.

But we shall jealously maintain the unique character of the IHRA: to be an organization pooling the skills of governments and civil society, of public officials and experts, of Jews and non-Jews from 32 countries, all united by the commitments spelt in the Stockholm Declaration of the year 2000.

Last November Member Countries, gathered in Ferrara, decided that it would be important for the IHRA to mark adequately the incoming 20th anniversary of this seminal Declaration. In the context of the process of updating the performance of our organization, it would be quite natural to take this opportunity to solemnly reaffirm our founding principles in the light of the latest evolution in our societies. I am grateful to Ambassador Santer for the resolute commitment to implement this decision, that he already started to display.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The *raison d'être* of the IHRA is to ensure remembrance, by which we want to honour the victims – both the *drowned* and the *saved* of the camps – and protect new generations from the repetition of what ended in 1945. That is why the Italian Chairmanship produced a docu-film with testimonies of the last Italian survivors, especially meant to be used in our schools.

Our aspiration is to spread a “culture of the memory”, which serve as an antidote to all forms of intolerance and discrimination. In this spirit, the Italian Chairmanship organized last May an international conference on historical models and practices of racial laws. And I am pleased that, at our Plenary in Rome, IHRA experts began the first systematic survey of all discriminatory regulations adopted in Europe in the 30s. The outcome of this survey can tell us something of relevance for today’s situation as well.

Legal discrimination and persecution come at the end of a slippery slope, the first steps of which are hate speech and harassment. With that in mind, the Italian Chairmanship organized last November in Milan a second international conference under the title “The Innocent Enemy”. You can find printed copies of its proceedings in this room.

One of the goals of the Italian Chairmanship was to increase global visibility and awareness of the IHRA. In that respect I was gratified by the public acknowledgement by the Secretary-General of



the United Nations, last 26 September, that the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism (I quote) *“can serve as a basis for law enforcement, as well as preventive policies”*.

Not less important is the Declaration adopted on 6 December by the Council of the European Union – and welcomed one week later by the EU Heads of State and Government – that called on member states to endorse the IHRA working definition (I quote) *“as a useful guidance tool in education and training, including for law enforcement authorities in their efforts to identify and investigate antisemitic attacks more efficiently and effectively”*.

Gratifying was the invitation I received by the UN Secretary-General to make an address – in my capacity as the IHRA Chair – the UN Holocaust Memorial Ceremony last 28 January in New York. It was an authoritative recognition of the work done so far, and an encouragement to the work still to be done, addressed to all IHRA Member Countries.

Similarly significant is the annual session that the Permanent Council of the OSCE in Vienna devotes – the last one on 31 January 2019 – to hearing and discussing a report by the IHRA Chair. Then, I want to state my satisfaction that, during the Italian Chairmanship, Bulgaria acquired the status of full member of our Alliance, that now counts 32 countries. Australia will join us at the first Luxembourg plenary. Ideally, during this year Portugal too will complete the process towards full membership.

Indeed, the IHRA is now a big reality, and a huge apparatus. You fully realize this only when you see things from the point of view of the Chair. And from the position of Chair you fully realize that you could not carry out your tasks but for the dedicated and loyal support you constantly receive from the IHRA Permanent Office. Thank you Dr Meyer, dear Kathrin, to you and all your wonderful staff. Without you, the IHRA would have not have become what it is today.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The handover of the IHRA Chair is the perpetuation of a relay race, which began some twenty years ago. We still run because we still have a dream: the dream of a world that remembers the Holocaust, a world without genocide.

And – let me add – a world without indifference.

But this dream can come true – I am convinced – only if we run in the light of truth. This is why we must be watchful for persistent attempts to repress free academic research, or to re-write



history, or to overlook hidden parts of history, or to refuse to recognize those parts of history that bother us. In the hidden parts of history, monsters can make their nest from where they can come back.

No country is exempt from these temptations and this danger. No country has the magic formula to solve the problem. In the “global village” that Europe and the world have become, we can find solutions only if we stick together and believe that *“the truth will set you free”*.

This is why I warmly welcome the decision – announced yesterday by Pope Francis – to open the Vatican archives relating to Pius XII’s pontificate on 2 March next year. The IHRA Troika had constructive discussion in the Vatican last October, and we look forward to continuing work with the Holy See on this important issue.

In contrast, I was upset by the news from Paris, where a few days ago a number of Polish researchers – who run the Centre for the Study of the Destruction of the Jews at the Polish Academy of Sciences – tried to present their finding at a branch of the Sorbonne University. But a well-organized group of hecklers made it practically impossible for them to present their study. Things like this cannot be allowed to pass in silence.

Ambassador Santer, dear Georges,

You can rest assured that, after handing over the Chair, Italy will fully support your leadership in the active commitment to stand up for the truth, by safeguarding the record and combatting distorted narrative and trivialization.

I am really pleased to hand you over this gavel, that marked the decisions taken during the Italian Chairmanship. I know it will be in good hands, and hope it will bring you good luck.