

03 March 2020

Handover Speech of Ambassador Georges Santer

Berlin House of Representatives

Honorable President of the House of Representatives of the Land of Berlin, Mr Ralf Wieland, Dear Ralf,

Honorable Minister of State Mr Michael Roth, Dear Michael,

Honorable Vice President of the Bundestag Ms Petra Pau,

Ambassador Michaela Küchler, Dear Michaela,

Let me at the outset wish you and your team all the best for the chairmanship: dynamism, perseverance, inventiveness and persuasiveness

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A very warm welcome to the survivors here today, Mr Franz Michalski and Mr Leon Schwarzbaum. Just last week I had the privilege of meeting with two other survivors: Edith Bruck, the writer and film director in Rome, and in Warsaw with Marjan Turski, whose remarkable speech at the Auschwitz memorial ceremony on 27 January still freshly resonates with us. I find these kinds of meetings, including tonight's event, a tremendous source of enrichment.

Luxembourg's Minister for Foreign Affairs Jean Asselborn began his speech at the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's ministerial conference on 19

January of this year with a quote from Elie Wiesel, and I would like to repeat those words here today.

“We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.”

These words weigh heavily on us, 75 years on from the liberation of Auschwitz at a time when political exclusion and hatred are the source of bloody attacks and murders motivated by racism. Here in Germany, in France, Belgium, the US, Denmark, New Zealand. Anti-Semitism is on open display at carnival celebrations in Belgium and Spain. Statements deliberately intended to discriminate have become acceptable. In political discourse and in parliaments the level of inhibition is falling. We must take sides. We cannot stand idly by and watch minorities being victimised, marginalised, vilified and murdered. Jews, Sinti, Roma, Muslims and others being unable to walk down the street safely and without fear in European countries represents a problem that extends beyond those immediately affected. And we know that Christians in particular are suffering from persecution and discrimination on other continents.

This entire issue concerns us all. It is an attack on the individual freedoms of each and every one of us.

That is why it is our duty – and it is in our own interest as supporters of democracy – to stand by those being targeted by this hatred. We must do this always and everywhere, but we must especially focus on the internet and social media. It is clear that radicalisation has found particularly good breeding ground here. That is why it is so important to exert pressure on the big operators, on those who would be well placed to remove these messages of hate, just as they are able to remove sexualised content.

But it goes beyond deleting and erasing contents. When we encounter hate online, we must not shy away from discussion. We need to be proactive and take action to counteract that hate. We must see to it that when clicking on thematic search boxes and search themes online, there are positive articles popping up, articles that are faithful from an academic point of view.

We know what can happen when we cede the field to demagogues and agitators. “Silence encourages the tormentor.” That is why we need to take action. As

parliamentarians and state representatives, at work, in our everyday lives and sometimes even in private. Each and every one of us shares in this duty.

On 19 January 2020, foreign ministers and other senior representatives of 35 States and eight international organisations met in Brussels at the invitation of the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg to speak out specifically for this purpose.

To that end, they solemnly adopted a Ministerial Declaration at the first meeting of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance held on a political level.

This declaration signals renewed commitment by the participating governments to remember the victims of the Holocaust and to not allow this burdensome legacy to be forgotten.

As IHRA member countries, they also committed to the remembrance of the genocide of the Sinti and Roma and to make greater efforts to address this issue.

The Ministerial Declaration also addresses current issues, including growing anti-Semitism, the opening of archives relevant to the Holocaust, and the freedom of research and science.

All of this is of paramount importance today. We have obviously not done enough and have failed to sufficiently internalise the lessons so tragically deriving from the Holocaust.

It is thus extremely important for all of our countries and societies to be self-critical of our own past, and the ministers of the Alliance countries have declared their commitment to doing so.

This new declaration, the IHRA's most important document alongside the 2000 Stockholm Declaration, represents a commitment by the member countries to meet these challenges. As is the case with all IHRA documents, it is not a legal document, it is however politically and morally binding.

In concert with the organisation's strategy, which was adopted three years ago, the declaration's content represents the actual agenda of the Alliance's work for the years to come. An Alliance that is more relevant today than ever and whose visibility has increased in recent years.

Over the next few years, IHRA will be tasked with ensuring the implementation of the Ministerial Declaration on an international level and in its member countries.

The ministerial conference and the negotiations surrounding the declaration were certainly the central points during Luxembourg's IHRA presidency. I am filled with gratitude and pride that we have managed to achieve by consensus this great outcome on such a highly political and emotional issue. Never did we have to face a breaking test. And this at a time when many international organisations no longer have the strength to draft a joint declaration at their set annual meetings. There are many who have contributed to our success and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them from the bottom of my heart.

At the same time, I would like to appeal to the upcoming German and Greek presidencies to take advantage of the opportunities created by this declaration – an opportunity to take our member countries at their word. This will not always be easy. But after a year as IHRA chair, I can say with certainty that this responsibility also comes with a great sense of fulfilment.

From the outset, it has been my goal to boost the visibility of our Alliance, which now includes 34 member countries after Australia and Portugal joined last year. And North Macedonia is not far behind.

In my own country, Luxembourg, visibility was ensured primarily through large and fascinating exhibitions. Unfortunately, rather less visibility was gained through topical, intellectual debates.

German Minister of State Michael Roth's presence here tonight is a clear signal that Germany's presidency will also play a greater role in the country's domestic affairs, not least as a result of the attacks in Halle and Hanau. However, the IHRA presidency means, above all, internally coordinating the Organisation and ensuring its presence on the international stage.

That is why I was particularly eager to bolster the IHRA's presence in our member countries and with our important international partner organisations. Just last week, our Executive Secretary, Dr Kathrin Meyer, and I were in Rome, in the Vatican and in Poland.

Of course, as the IHRA representative I have attended many important events in remembrance of the Holocaust and Ambassador Küchler and I had the honour of attending the memorial ceremony at Auschwitz as well as representing the Alliance at the World Holocaust Forum in Jerusalem.

South-eastern Europe is a region that is particularly close to my heart, both because of my previous functions that have taken me there and because I believe that IHRA can play an important role in the future.

I visited Serbia and Croatia with a delegation of experts and we met with ministers and high-level government representatives to discuss some difficult issues, including our conceptions on history, revisionism and the importance of Holocaust education.

75 years on from the end of the war, memorials are especially important since there are, unfortunately, so few survivors left to tell us about their tragic lots. Both in terms of academic research and, in particular, to help people deal with this topic emotionally, these sites play a key role in helping future generations understand the horror and sufferings that took place.

This aspect was yet another reason for the trip to Serbia and Croatia, and I am happy to see that the Serbian Parliament passed a law last week providing for the establishment of a memorial at Staro Sajmište, a former concentration camp in Belgrade.

The IHRA has played an active role in this dossier for a long time. It is a perfect illustration of the unique capabilities of this Organisation - made up of government representatives and experts - to provide both the expertise and contribute with some diplomatic skills to the resolution and the implementation of important and delicate issues.

I also had the opportunity to travel to Poland three times, to Hungary twice and to North Macedonia, Romania, Sweden, Germany, Spain, France, Belgium, Israel, Italy and the United Kingdom. As the first IHRA chair, I was granted the honour of speaking at Auschwitz on 2 August to mark the Roma Genocide Remembrance Day.

Not all conversations and the reasons that prompt them are easy to digest, and it is the burden but also the great privilege of any chair to assume this responsibility and to keep the lines of communication open with our partners.

I strongly encourage my successor and her successor to continue this practice of meeting one-on-one with different actors. This often took the form of informal get-togethers, such as a recent dinner at the Luxembourg Embassy in Warsaw. They ultimately lead to greater mutual understanding of and give a new dynamic to difficult negotiations under way.

Personal dialogue with political leaders will also play a key role in our efforts to secure the complete release of all archives relating to the Second World War. Not all information is still available in a way that allows us to gain an even deeper understanding of the Holocaust and the genocide of the Sinti and Roma peoples. The ministerial declaration contains clear support from our member countries to the IHRA's commitment to open up these archives for academic research. We can only powerfully counteract denial, trivialisation and relativisation of the Holocaust if we know the facts.

Just yesterday, the Vatican opened up the archives of Pope Pius XII for research. The IHRA has been in frequent contact with representatives of the Holy See in the past and we encourage all our member countries to follow the Vatican's example.

One major success and a great pleasure for me personally was the adoption of the publication entitled *Recommendations for Teaching and Learning about the Holocaust*, which is supported by UNESCO.

Developed by experts from over 30 countries, these recommendations offer fact-based information and educationally sound concepts for teaching the complex history of the Holocaust.

The recommendations substantiate the relevance of Holocaust education in today's world and serve as a specific example of what critical, historical and political educational work should look like and what topics a curriculum should cover. This makes the publication a helpful resource for schools, curriculum development and teacher training.

While it goes without saying that the Holocaust and the genocide committed against the Sinti and Roma must be viewed in a national and local context, it is now up to national ministries responsible for education to ensure that these recommendations are implemented in national school curricula.

At the plenary session held in early December, our member countries responded very positively to these requirements – a response echoed by many ministers in Brussels on 19 January 2020. Calling for and supporting implementation is important work, and I am delighted that Ambassador Küchler will be continuing this task in the year of her presidency.

In my opinion, the fact that the IHRA is able to provide answers and suggestions in response to these difficult questions is proof of the excellent quality of the expertise of our international network.

At this point I would like to take this opportunity to thank the members of the Permanent Office from the bottom of my heart for their active support on an almost daily basis, for the continuous and enriching dialogue and for their work in compiling untold amounts of background material. My heartfelt thanks also go out to the members of the Luxembourg IHRA team who are here today.

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our societies today are increasingly facing frightening phenomena whose origins are manifold. These phenomena are now claiming victims, leaving people dead and injured, discriminated against and marginalised, abused. Fascist and neo-Nazi ideas often form the foundations of this. Yes, even if we must unreservedly reject all forms of violence, we should still clearly identify right-wing extremism as the greatest source of danger in these worrying times. Racism is the marrow of its ideas, and there is once again talk of white supremacy and the superiority of the white race in many countries. Neo-colonial atavisms and xenophobic obsessions interspersed with fascist and neo- Nazi ideas create an explosive mixture.

We must fight against this denial of the values on which our Western democracy and the European Union as a community of values are built – no ifs or buts. This community of values, its solidarity in interacting with one another but also in its dealings with the weakest in the world stands on incredibly shaky ground as a quick look at the Aegean Sea these days will confirm. The task to confront these tendencies does not only reside with our governments and State agencies. A challenge is being raised against our democratic societies; each of us will have to demonstrate civil courage and personal responsibility.

The civilian population, often the silent majority, is usually able to assert its will through elections. However, during normal stages of public life and political discourse, this silent majority is often drowned out. This is where we have to start. History's greatest misfortunes often occurred because the majority remained silent.

As Ambassador in Paris, it was a great gift to be able to count Stéphane Hessel, originally from Berlin, among my friends. By the time I met him, he had long since become a French citizen, but he always continued to love his old ancestral home country with all his heart. We often spoke German together. And he always had to recite two or three German poems.

If Stéphane had not written his booklet *Indignez-vous* years ago and if he were still with us today, he would surely have reached for his pen and written those famous sentences in a new context with the same familiar calls to action: Take to the streets! Get involved! Time for outrage!

I often think of him and his deeply rooted humanism. Yes, if we want to maintain and defend our system of values, the road to success will not be paved by passivity. So, *indignez-vous!* *Indignons-nous!*