

11 March 2019

Speech by IHRA Chair, Ambassador Georges Santer, in Skopje

Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia I feel privileged to have been invited as the new IHRA Chair to this important and emotional commemoration ceremony. My thanks go to the Government and the organizers who allow me in this way and on behalf of all the 32 IHRA member States to bow my head in front of the 7.341 Jewish citizens – among them 2.300 children – who were deported from Skopje, Stip and Bitola on 11th March 1943. I would like to play also tribute to the few survivors of this disastrous ordeal. Let me state that today I have been offered the possibility to visit for the first time a country that

figured more than once and in a dramatic way on the agenda of organizations I had the honour to represent my country Luxembourg. It gives me great pleasure and satisfaction to see today a country that has now excellent prospects to integrate further into the international community and to guarantee increased peace, security and prosperity to its citizens in the years to come. Let me commend the fact that the highest State authorities grant their auspices to this event. In this context I would also like to express my deep satisfaction for the dynamic role North Macedonia and its active delegation to the IHRA headed by my friend Ambassador Jovan Tegovski play already now as an observer State within the Organization. We sincerely look forward to foster and expand our cooperation over the next months and years. I am honestly overwhelmed by the intensity you deal with one of the pillars of the IHRA namely “Remembrance”. And I would like to add that I am impressed how well preserved your memorial sites are and how much attention is given to Holocaust education, where the initiatives of North Macedonia reach out to the neighbouring States. In this respect your country is today a lighthouse in the entire region. You should know that this record is highly appreciated by the IHRA membership.

Education is a never ending process and when it comes to Holocaust education, it should notably be based on accurate and solid historical facts. I have applauded already to some fruitful initiatives and merits of this country, but let me mention in this context also the Holocaust Memorial Center for the Jews of Macedonia, the actions of which are fully in line with the vectors of activity of the IHRA: remembrance, education and research.

The Holocaust is certainly the biggest downfall of humanity; however it should not be seen only as the cataclysm having happened eighty years ago. In times of rising anti-Semitism especially also in the Western World, the Holocaust is an issue of contemporary political importance. There must be an energetic and efficient counteraction of our peoples based on the consciousness of the risks

our democratic societies are running if they leave the democratic and liberal foundations on which post-war Western societies were built.

To preserve this legacy that has brought stability, an increase in social justice and prosperity to the major part of our continent after WW II, and since the peaceful revolution of 89 to many other European countries, there is an absolute and imperative need for international cooperation. The respectful, historically correct remembrance of the Holocaust must always rank high among the values and principles that sustain the building of our democratic beliefs. They call on us to fight for a world where the evil spirits of the past will not be given a chance to invade and infest our minds. The trends over the last years have not gone into the right direction as – among other proofs – is shown by the recent report on anti-Semitism published by the Fundamental Rights Agency of the EU on 10 December. The Declaration on anti-Semitism issued by the Council of the Union four days earlier has the alarm bells ringing and promotes some concrete measures at least for the 25 EU member States of the IHRA, but the decisions retained in the Declaration are to a large extent of universal value and potentially of a wider geographical application.

Today and in the face of Holocaust denial and distortion, of hate speech propagated mainly by the modern media of our digital age, all the international organizations, like the UN, the Council of Europe, the OSCE – to name only a few – have to foster their cooperation and without the slightest

hesitation fight against these vicious phenomena that rock our societies. The international community shares a solemn responsibility to fight ethnic cleansing, racism, anti-Semitism and other xenophobic current.

Our governments have to look for means that will have positive and sustainable effects. Education is undoubtedly the main vector through which we can achieve our goals.

Members of the Government, of academic and historical institutions, and all those who give their free time for the noble cause of building a society on the basis of values, we would like to thank you for the importance you attach to the remembrance of the past horrors and to the prevention of their recurrence.

We highly appreciate the importance commemoration and historical education are given as part of the school curricula. I was also told that the visit of the capital by school classes most often includes a visit to the Holocaust Memorial Center and to other sites linked to the tragic destiny of the Macedonian Jews.

The IHRA works on the basis of shared knowledge between experts and Government representatives, of best practices and of common points of concern. We hope that the recommendations we formulate are a true source of inspiration for the action of our governments and for the mindset of our societies.

I spoke already about the prospects of this country for the near future. Personal and public life demand often from us to make concessions or to strike a balance in the presence of antagonistic views. Not everybody welcomes wholeheartedly agreements achieved on political considerations because the benefits you will collect from often brave leadership are deferred in time. I personally

am convinced that the resolution of the “name problem” will open beneficial avenues to this country not only in terms of integration in existing international structures but also in relation to the fostering of political and economic stability, nationally and regionally, that will give a new dynamic to the economic structure of the country. We would be delighted to see also closer tied of North Macedonia with the IHRA. The Republic has done a lot to pave the way for a process that should not be strained by too many difficulties.

Let me at the end of my speech express my satisfaction on the extremely positive evolution of the Bulgarian-Macedonian relations when it comes to assess the painful past in the context of the Holocaust. Many of our European States had and have to finally accept their part of responsibility in the darkest chapter of the European continent. I am confident that on the basis of historical truth the relations between States and peoples can infuse a new dynamic to their overall relations to the benefit of all the citizens.

North Macedonia is a country composed of different ethnic groups and the different entities have not been affected in the same way by the Holocaust. We value the fact that all groups gather today to remember the sufferings and the murder of more than 7000 Jews. Such a collective commemoration can doubtlessly be an invaluable contribution to the constitution of a strong and unified nation feeling in a still very young country.

Honoured members of the Government,

Dear guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Standing here at the Metropol Tobacco Factory, I again feel the importance of protecting Holocaust-related sites, especially at a moment when testifying survivors of the Holocaust become fewer from day to day. Let me express again my gratitude for having been invited to attend this moving ceremony.

Thank you so much.