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Beyond Duty – Visas for Life: High Level Diplomatic Event to Commemorate the Year of Sugihara 2020

The diplomacy of remembrance: The role of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance

Chiune Sugihara's story is often told as one of choice. He was, after all, faced with a choice – a difficult one, but a choice nevertheless – of whether to follow the orders of his government or to follow his conscience. Thankfully, he chose the latter. In defiance of his government, he issued thousands of visas to Jews in Lithuania. This allowed them to flee Europe, and travel through Japan to the safety of the Dutch-controlled Caribbean island of Curaçao. In this way, he saved thousands of lives. His story is one of heroism. It is truly inspiring and, without a doubt, honoring his legacy this year is appropriate and welcome.

But Sugihara did not do this alone. His wife, Yukiko, counseled him through what was likely the toughest decision of his life. The Dutch businessman and diplomat Jan Zwartendijk provided the documents needed to travel to the island of Curaçao. Between Zwartendijk and Sugihara, there was a common understanding that what they were bearing witness to was immoral, and, importantly, that by creating an unofficial policy, they could *do* something about it.

Sugihara's act of undeniable consequence was also, undeniably, a product of cooperation. It is on the importance of building cooperation, in the shadow of the Holocaust, in commemoration of Sugihara's legacy, that I would like to speak today.

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) is the only intergovernmental organization whose mandate focuses solely on Holocaust-related issues. It was founded twenty years ago to unite governments and experts to strengthen, advance, and promote Holocaust education, remembrance and research worldwide. The IHRA bridges the gap between the legacy of the Holocaust and the policymaking of today.

Holocaust education, remembrance and research are essential for the development of a world in which the facts of the Holocaust are abundant, in which antisemitism and other forms of discrimination have no place. This is a world that remembers the Holocaust. This is a world without genocide.

The challenges to the advancement of such a world are international in scope. Problems like Holocaust denial and distortion, antisemitism, anti-Roma racism, and the rehabilitation of figures



complicit in Nazi crimes must be addressed by an international collective. The extent of these problems may vary from country to country. Still, history has taught us that, when left unchecked, they can have very real consequences for all.

To paraphrase the 2020 IHRA Ministerial Declaration, policy which is informed by this history relies on a common understanding that Holocaust denial and distortion, antisemitism, and all forms of racism and discrimination undermine fundamental democratic principles. That governments have a responsibility to work together to counter these. That they should do so in close cooperation with experts and civil society.

The development of such a common understanding requires strong cooperation, both within countries between policymakers and experts, and between countries on the diplomatic and policymaking level. The IHRA, of which Lithuania is a valued member, provides a unique and necessary structure to advance this multilateral approach. By uniting experts and policymakers from all over the world, the IHRA encourages communication, providing an opportunity for the development of common understanding around key Holocaust-related issues of contemporary political importance. These issues, which are almost always international in scope, can then be addressed internationally in a cooperative manner.

Let me briefly close by returning to Sugihara's choice. He chose to cooperate. And he chose to do so with those with whom he shared a common understanding of the undeniable dignity of every human life. This formed the basis for the political will that was required for an act of heroism that saved thousands and for which he is still remembered today. It is in this spirit of cooperation that the IHRA works to advance policy that is informed by this history. Policy that strives for a world where such acts of heroism are remembered but are no longer a necessity.