



27 January 2021

## **International Holocaust Remembrance Day 2021**

### **Centre for Holocaust Education and Scholarship (CHES)**

76 years ago, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January 1945, Soviet troops entered the Auschwitz camp complex, liberating the 7,000 prisoners that they found there. Just days prior, those who had been deemed fit enough had been forced to leave the camp on foot. Nearly 60,000 prisoners were forced to march for days under brutal conditions in freezing temperatures. Thousands at a time, they marched through Europe's cities and villages westward to Buchenwald, to Flossenbürg, to Dachau, to Sachsenhausen, and other camps. As many as 15,000 died as a result. Similar forced marches took place all over Nazi Germany. And these would continue right up to the end of the war and Germany's unconditional surrender.

These forced marches, which survivors would call the Death Marches, were being done, in part, because the Nazis did not want prisoners to fall into the hands of Allied forces alive; they did not want them to tell their stories, to testify. That is, they wanted to destroy the evidence. Today, we know that the evidence could not be destroyed. We know that, against all odds, many did tell their stories. Unfortunately, all too often, they were met with disbelief. But nevertheless, many others decided to listen.

Today, on the 76<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, we are reminded of the importance of listening to the evidence, to the facts, to this history. Today, we remember and honor the victims and survivors of the Holocaust, those who resisted the Nazis and those who protected or rescued their persecuted fellow human beings. Remembrance plays a critical role in fighting the stubborn forces of antisemitism and Holocaust denial and distortion. This is because remembrance ties us fundamentally to the facts, to what took place and the people it affected. When we remember, when we strive to reflect upon this suffering, we understand that as unimaginable as it is, it is just as undeniable.

But today, we do so aware that Holocaust remembrance is at a critical juncture. The pandemic has had a great impact: organizations and individuals all over the world are now remembering in a digital context. And sadly, fewer and fewer survivors and eyewitnesses are with us to continue to share their testimony. At the same time, Holocaust denial and distortion are gaining traction, fanning the flames of hate, and allowing antisemitism to inch towards the mainstream.

No one individual or nation or organization can defeat these forces alone. They do not stop at national borders; they are international in scope and require international responses, involving all members of society. To this end, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance – the IHRA – has worked for over twenty years to advance Holocaust education, remembrance and research



worldwide. It does this by uniting governments, civil society, and experts from academia, from memorials and museums and from the education sector, creating a crucial forum for cooperation and exchange. By working together, we are able to help safeguard the record and counter Holocaust distortion.

And Holocaust distortion is a critical threat to the future of Holocaust memory. Allowing distortion invites the erosion of our understanding of the Holocaust and its significance. It helps sustain an environment in which Holocaust denial, antisemitism, conspiracy myths, and dangerous forms of nationalism can thrive. For this reason, the German Presidency of the IHRA has established a Global Task Force Against Holocaust Distortion to identify and promote strategies for countering this phenomenon. As with antisemitism, it is essential that we not only raise awareness of the dangers of distortion, but also that we are able to better identify and respond to it when it appears.

Earlier this month, the IHRA published recommendations to strengthen awareness of distortion and how to address it. Experts have worked on these recommendations intensely for a year together with many organizations. In order to counter Holocaust distortion effectively, action is needed on various levels, involving many different groups, from professionals to policymakers to journalists, and so on. We know that memorials and museums need more support and resources to address Holocaust distortion, as they are often on the front lines. More effort needs to be put into monitoring this issue as well, as more data and research are desperately needed. Countering distortion is not easy and the more knowledge available, the better equipped we will be to address it.

Underpinning this important work and all the work of the IHRA – from its working definitions to its educational recommendations to its support of archives, memorials and museums – is the understanding that all of us have a responsibility to keep the legacy of those we honor today alive.

One year ago, the IHRA's Member and Liaison Countries renewed their pledge to do so with the adoption of the 2020 IHRA Ministerial Declaration. But the Declaration also reminded us that remembering the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust is the responsibility not only of governments but of societies as a whole.

As we reflect upon this history and its enduring effects, we uphold the terrible truth of the Holocaust against those who deny it. As individuals and as societies, we must carry on with this important work. Today, we are reminded to strive for a world that listens to the evidence, for a world that remembers the Holocaust, for a world without genocide.