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OSCE/ODIHR Holocaust remembrance and education

Panel: Challenges and good practices in combating anti-Semitism through Holocaust remembrance and education

Thank you for inviting me to speak as Chair of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). It is certainly an honor to contribute to furthering this important discussion on Holocaust remembrance and education. Indeed, ensuring that the memory of the Holocaust is never forgotten requires continually reflecting upon the history of the Holocaust and its consequences.

Twenty years ago, when the IHRA was founded, Göran Persson made this clear in his opening address to the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust. “It happened once,” he said. “It should not have happened, but it did. It must not happen again, but it could. That is why education about the Holocaust is fundamental.” Today, twenty years later, Holocaust education *remains* fundamental.

The IHRA’s new Recommendations for Teaching and Learning About the Holocaust, released late last year, underline why this is the case. Teaching about the Holocaust can inspire societal awareness and personal growth. It empowers people to reflect upon the moral, political and social questions raised by the Holocaust and their relevance to questions of today. It provides an opportunity to understand some of the mechanisms that lead to genocide. To understand the choices people made to accelerate, observe or resist the process of persecution and murder. It helps students advance their knowledge about this unprecedented destruction and preserve the memory of individuals and specific groups who were persecuted and murdered. In other words, Holocaust education works to advance a world in which the facts of the Holocaust are abundant.

Why is this so important today? For many reasons, we are at a crossroads in the field of Holocaust education, remembrance, and research. Fewer and fewer Holocaust survivors are able to share their testimony with us today. As this generation sadly passes, the duty of imparting the important lessons of the Holocaust must be taken on by others: by teachers in school classrooms, by Holocaust-related institutions, by memorials and museums. But, of course, also by governments and policymakers, upon whose support civil society initiatives and the general education of societies rely.



Of course, this shift is occurring within a larger context. We live in the digital age. How we learn – how we consume information – has changed. The information shared in a classroom now faces competition from outside sources in a way that we have not seen before. Not only are we inundated with content, we are encouraged to consume information in bite-sized pieces, information that all too often seeks to stir up emotions rather than encourage critical reflection and engagement with the truth.

In the context of Holocaust education, remembrance and research, this presents a serious challenge. A recent survey from the Claims Conference showed that approximately half (49 percent) of U.S. Millennials and Gen Z have seen Holocaust denial or distortion posts on social media or elsewhere online. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) recently showed that Facebook’s algorithm actively promotes Holocaust denial pages to people who like similar topics. When these findings are viewed together, the situation appears especially grim.

Unfortunately, online Holocaust denial and distortion do not remain online. We see this today at the anti-coronavirus demonstrations, where measures to help save lives are being compared to the murderous policies of the Nazi regime, and old antisemitic tropes are repurposed to fit this moment. These demonstrations can also expose frustrated and vulnerable people – people in search of easy answers to difficult problems – to these radical ideas. The danger is that Holocaust denial and distortion, whether intentional or not, work hand in hand with antisemitism. They chip away at what we know to be historical truth and allow antisemitism to inch towards the mainstream. This is why the German Presidency of the IHRA has made it a priority to combat these forces.

Holocaust education can help rectify the erosive effect that denial and distortion have on democratic, pluralistic values. But we must begin to view Holocaust education more broadly, more fluidly. Holocaust education does not need to be confined only to the classroom. A person should be confronted with its important lessons throughout their lifetime. It should, for example, be included in professional training, especially of law enforcement, of media professionals, and of the judiciary, all of whom can play a role in combatting Holocaust denial and distortion.

Twenty years after Göran Persson gave his speech at the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, the IHRA adopted the 2020 IHRA Ministerial Declaration. With it, 35 countries underlined the role education plays in countering the influence of historical distortion, hate speech and incitement to violence and hatred. The challenges of this moment – of which there are many – represent a great opportunity as well. To meet these challenges, we must work together to strengthen the tools that we have in our toolbox – of which there are also many.

One of these tools, Holocaust education, is, yes, at a crossroads. We have an opportunity to use it now to help shape the world that emerges from this moment. We can help advance a world in which the facts of the Holocaust are abundant. This is a world in which antisemitism has no place.