

23 January 2023

Holocaust Remembrance Conference: Remembering the Past. Shaping the Future.

IHRA Chair Ambassador Ann Bernes, European Commission/Swedish IHRA Presidency/Swedish Presidency of the Council of the European Union

23 January 2023, 17:00 CET

Distinguished guests,
Excellencies,
Survivors and their families,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is truly an honor to join you here today to mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day and to commemorate and honor the victims and survivors of the Holocaust – and to do it in the presence of survivors.

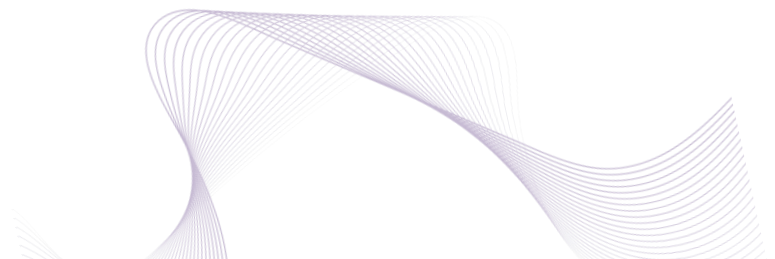
I can only echo the words of Vice President Schinas and Minister Brandberg that we owe you a huge debt. And we are so grateful to you all for your strength to tell your stories, which allows us to build upon them in shaping the future.

I am speaking to you in my capacity as Chair of the Swedish Presidency of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance – the IHRA – which is the only intergovernmental organization with a mandate focused solely on issues related to the Holocaust and the genocide of the Roma.

We gather 35 Member Countries, 10 Observers and 8 Permanent International Partners to promote and enhance education, remembrance, and research of the Holocaust and the genocide of the Roma, as well as to combat Holocaust distortion, antisemitism, and antigypsyism. One our closest and foremost partners is of course the European Union, given its important role in these fields.

For example, the European Commission has been a valued partner in our Protect the Facts campaign which raises awareness of Holocaust distortion.

Joint steps and initiatives like these are essential and warmly welcomed since cooperation built on shared values is really the only way forward.



Dear friends,

We are here today because remembering the Holocaust is the responsibility of each and every one of us.

The IHRA was founded for this exact reason – because governments and political leaders took on the responsibility of ensuring that the victims and survivors of the Holocaust are never forgotten. And our network is now made up of many actors and partners that help one another safeguard the memory and pass it on to younger generations.

Our commitments come in many forms. The EU Strategy on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life, and the many national strategies and measures that have been launched in recent months are heartening examples.

So, too, are commitments like those underlined in the Stockholm Declaration of 2000 and the 2020 IHRA Ministerial Declaration which stress that all of us have a responsibility to remember.

We are also now in the second year of implementing the pledges that 60 delegations made at the Malmö International Forum on Holocaust Remembrance and Combating Antisemitism – Remember-ReAct, held in October 2021.

And our follow-up and reporting from the first year show that the Malmö Forum provided the impetus for multiple policy decisions and strategic initiatives to be set in motion.

The 150 pledges were made by countries, companies, international organizations as well as civil society, and represent a wide range of initiatives and commitments, including the EU strategy just mentioned, but also new government offices, museums, research projects, funding initiatives, training programs, and entire policy frameworks and strategies to counter antisemitism, antigypsyism, and racism.

The motto of our IHRA Presidency is “Together for Impact” and the Malmö Forum Pledges clearly illustrate what we can achieve when we join forces as partners to further enhance our pluralistic democracies, counter incitement to hatred and violence, and safeguard the memory and lessons of the Holocaust.

This joint push brings new hope and momentum but also increased sustainability to our work – since the IHRA, the EU Commission and many other actors will continue to follow the work on the pledges and keep building on the good practices and new efforts that they lead to. And also because many of the initiatives have meant the start of long term, normative processes and to the institutionalization of knowledge and remembrance.

To give an example, one of Sweden's Malmö Forum pledges was to establish a new Holocaust museum. The idea for this museum came from a man named Max Safir.

Max was born into a Jewish family in Poland in 1925. He survived Auschwitz-Birkenau and the concentration camp Ebensee. Max came to Sweden in the middle of the 1950s and settled in Katrineholm, where he worked and started a family. Later on, he started giving – what ended up being – countless lectures in schools about his experiences and he also traveled with young Swedes to Holocaust memorials throughout Europe.

But, in spite of all these efforts, he did not see this as being enough. His vision was to create a place in Sweden where his and other survivors' testimonies could be kept together and preserved.

In other words, Max Safir wanted to make sure these testimonies wouldn't be forgotten.

Max sadly passed away in June 2020 and sadly was not able to attend the opening in June 2022 of the museum that he initiated. But the museum is now there. And it is there to stay.

This museum was a pledge to the Malmö Forum but it began as a promise made to Max. And it has become a promise to all of Swedish society, and to both current and coming generations.

A promise that the Holocaust will be remembered. That the experiences and stories will remain part of the cultural heritage that guides us today and will continue to guide us in the future.

Distinguished guests,

Max's fear that his story could be forgotten is one that we must take very seriously. Preserving it requires that we do so on many fronts. Safeguarding his personal testimony is one important piece of the puzzle.

But what are some of the other pieces?

Here we must turn to physical evidence. To the documents held in archives: those that tell us about Max and those that help us contextualize his experience.

And here we must also turn to the places Max passed through: where he lived, as well as the sites of the many crimes committed against him. In Max's case this would mean Auschwitz-Birkenau and Ebensee, a subcamp of Mauthausen. It would also mean the labor camps and ghettos he survived. And the route of the death march he was forced on.

Preserving these sites is essential and can be done in a variety of ways, depending on the unique situation facing each site. This is an issue that has been taken up by the IHRA through our Safeguarding Sites Project, which is drafting a Charter on good practice to help sites address their different challenges.



And I am pleased to see the attention being given to sites also by the European Commission with its Where the Holocaust Happened network. This initiative exemplifies the importance of international cooperation and we look forward to working together as this network develops.

The aim of preserving Holocaust-related sites must always be to ensure that they can serve as adequate places of memory. That they can offer societies the actual, physical space to remember and honor the victims and survivors and to acknowledge their suffering.

Safeguarding sites is key to carrying survivors' memory forward.

Ladies and gentlemen,

These commitments were borne out of the brave and tireless work of Holocaust survivors like you, like Max Safir, and like your peers.

But commitments do not only exist on the political, institutional level. All of us here today, as well as those watching online, are committed to carrying the memory forward.

Survivors made it their life's work. We will do the same.

Let us do all we can to uphold our commitments. And the promises we made to the victims, to the survivors, and to future generations.