

SPEAKING NOTES FOR

DR. MARIO SILVA, IHRA CHAIR 2013

**CULTURE OF MEMORY ON THE WWII
FORGOTTEN ROMA VICTIMS**

**INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
LINKAGE OF THE HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE OF
ROMA IN EUROPE
WITH THE PROMOTION OF TOLERANCE
AND NON – DISCRIMINATION OF ROMA**

**DECADE OF ROMA INCLUSION 2005-2015
PRESIDENCY OF THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA**

MAY 23 – 24, 2013

**HOTEL ANTUNOVIC
ZAGREB, REPUBLIC OF CROATIA**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour to be here as Chair of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, or IHRA, to participate in this Conference.

The mass murder of six million Jews has become one of the most-documented genocides in modern history.

However, many people forget - or are unaware - that hundreds of thousands of members of different communities also fell victim to the persecution of the Nazis.

For the Roma, history has been largely silent on the fact that they were second only to Europe's Jews in suffering during Hitler's rule.

For many decades, Roma survivors of Nazi persecution were themselves silent and rarely voiced their stories or reported their experiences and observation. And because remembrance depends on people's memories, survivors' testimonies, research, and official recognition, the Roma suffering went largely unnoticed.

Recognition of their place among the victims of the Nazi regime has been slow but I'm pleased to see that this is beginning to change.

Germany, in the early 1980s, acknowledged that the extermination of the Roma was based on racial grounds, and today has a commemorative monument in Berlin.

About a decade ago, the Roma themselves chose August 2 to commemorate their experience. This day has significance for the Roma community because it was on August 2, 1944, that the last remaining Roma women, old men and children, approximately 3,000, were killed in Auschwitz.

In 2011, Poland declared August 2 as official Roma and Sinti Genocide Remembrance Day.

In Canada, where we are in establishing a National Holocaust Monument, we have been cognizant that communities, such as the Roma, and others affected by Nazi genocide must be included in the story of the Nazi atrocities committed during the Second World War. Their inclusion is specifically set out in the Act of Parliament, which was supported by all Canadian political parties.

In my capacity as IHRA Chair, I have also met with the Canadian Roma community to broaden my understanding of their concerns and aspirations for inclusion in the broader discussion of the Holocaust and genocide.

We must all look past the stereotypes and realize that the Roma people were victimized during World War II and ensure that their experience is commemorated.

IHRA, as the only inter-governmental body devoted exclusively to the memory of the Holocaust, has a role to play in helping the world remember, not only what happened, but why – how hate and intolerance transformed neighbours into victims and perpetrators.

It was in the spirit of keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive that the IHRA came into being in 1998.

Its 31 member states are governed by the principles of the *Stockholm Declaration*, which emphasizes the importance of upholding the “terrible truth of the Holocaust against those who deny it,” and of preserving the memory of the Holocaust.

The Stockholm Declaration on the Holocaust acknowledges all the victims of the Nazis and the indelible scar that their suffering has left across Europe.

In 2010, IHRA established a Subcommittee on the Roma Genocide to:

- Encourage further efforts on education, research and remembrance of the Roma genocide;

- Encourage the inclusion of the Roma genocide into school curricula; and
- Reach out to a wider network of educational institutions to promote knowledge about this largely forgotten aspect of European history.

The committee will also call attention to the continuity of traditional prejudices against Roma before, during and after the Second World War by:

- Making links between the present situation of the Roma and the history of discrimination and persecution;
- Avoiding stereotyping and competition of different groups of victims;
- Focusing on Roma resistance rather than on a victim status; and

- Emphasizing the resilience of Roma culture.

Currently, the committee is developing an overview of the status of research, education and commemoration of the Roma genocide in IHRA member countries. Wherever possible, IHRA will help further the international exchange of best practices in this field.

IHRA also supports projects that focus on the inclusion of the history of the Roma genocide within the context of the Holocaust, as well as education strategies that combine learning about the past with combating anti-Roma sentiments in society today.

For example:

- In Austria, a project brought together experts in the field of Roma genocide to establish a co-ordinated narrative about "The fate of the European Roma and Sinti during the Holocaust" and to produce educational materials for journalists, opinion leaders, persons active in the political sphere, and also as teaching aids for educators and students.
- In France, another project focused on researching the Roma deportations and mass killing sites in Eastern Europe during World War II, with plans to develop a toolkit for teachers in several languages describing various aspects of the Roma genocide.

IHRA is also working with other international organizations – OSCE/ODHIR, Council of Europe, and European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, that are responding to the

present day discrimination and exclusion that the Roma are encountering.

As the Chair of an organization dedicated to the remembrance of the Holocaust and the victims of genocide during the Second World War, I am deeply troubled to see the Roma subjected to racial prejudice, hate crimes, expulsions, and even in some cases murder.

I condemn these practices and call on all governments to protect the rights of this vulnerable minority, whose communities still suffer from their persecution and genocide under Nazi rule.

Part of our work at IHRA is to ensure that the world never again responds in silence or neutrality to the acts of oppressors. Our task is to ensure that future generations will always remember.

In the spirit of remembrance, I would like to draw your attention to a Canadian documentary “A People Uncounted” directed by Aaron Yeger, which sheds light on the culture and history of the Romani people in Europe, with special emphasis on their plight during the Holocaust.

The film highlights that while persecution happens at the local level, we must not be complacent, but act before the roots take hold and start to grow.

Each of us has a responsibility to act. Let us never remain silent and indifferent in the face of the oppression of others.

Elie Weisel once said that “I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides.”

It is vital that we learn from the Holocaust and are empowered to shape an inclusive society, based on respect for diversity and the protection and promotion of fundamental human rights.

The Roma genocide was a dark period in the history of the Roma, and should never be forgotten.

Conferences such as this ensure that the narratives about the persecution of the Roma under the Nazi regime become legitimate parts of main stream Holocaust narrative and teaching.

I'm pleased to see Gerhard Baumgartner, a world-renowned expert on the Roma genocide, who also provides IHRA with his expert advice, is here today as moderator for the panel "About the forgotten genocide: Presentation of suffering of Roma in contemporary education and media".

Only through the commitment of the international community will we ensure the rightful place of the Roma among the victims of the Nazi regime.

While many countries have acknowledged and condemned their role relating to the Jews, very few have to this day acknowledged and condemned their role relating to the Roma genocide.

The issues are difficult: What happened during the war? What did our country do? What did it not do? And what are the lessons for us to learn to ensure it never happens again?

The memory is what we owe to the victims, survivors, and to ourselves – so that “Never Again” is not just a hollow slogan, but a promise to the victims that has been fulfilled.

Each of us has a role in helping the world remember, not only what happened, but why – how hate and intolerance transformed neighbours into victims and perpetrators.

We must strengthen the moral commitment of our peoples, and the political commitment of our governments, to ensure that future generations can understand the causes of the Holocaust and reflect upon its consequences.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I wish all of you a good conference.