

Ceremony of Handing over the Austrian ITF Chairmanship to Norway

Tuesday, 17 March 2009,

Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs

Address by the Outgoing Austrian Chairman,

Ambassador Ferdinand Trauttmansdorff



Ladies and gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that we welcome today Ambassador Tom Eric Vraalsen and the members of his team to the handover ceremony of the Chairmanship of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research. I am equally happy to welcome the diplomatic representatives of ITF, member and observer countries and many more prominent representatives from the interested Austrian community.

A year ago, after a yearlong careful preparation, we took upon ourselves the Chairmanship. We were determined to continue the excellent work of the previous Chairs, in particular the Czech Chairmanship, in trying to contribute decisively to the consolidation and thus to the operability and efficiency of this Task Force.

When I say 'we', I mean a dedicated team that merits our thanks in the very first place. The Ladies dominated our team in a manner as efficient as charming. Without Hannah Lessing, the head of the Austrian Delegation and her expertise and international connections and the financial and human support of her National Fund, without Lilly Sucharipa, who managed the entire organization in an impressive manner, without Martina Maschke, whose dedication and expertise were indispensable. Without her Ministry's support, which, together with the National Fund and the Foreign Ministry secured our budget and made available to us the Ministry's premises for our first meeting, we would have been unable to assume this task. The full support of our experts Brigitte Bailer Galanda, Heidemarie Uhl, Barbara Schaetz and Eveline Merhout made sure that we could meet our mandate in the plenary sessions and particularly in the Working Groups that continue to be the backbone of our organization. Esther Jakubovicz completed the Ladies' element in our team.

The men were in the minority and gladly accepted the women's rule. Werner Dreyer has always been and still is indispensable for our educational mandate. Yariv Lapide helped us in the Memorial field. Last but not least I want to mention Michael Baier. He played the pivotal role in our Chair's team and, if truth be told, dedicated more than a year of his life to coordinate and mastermind the Chairmanship. I have worked so many years with him but after that year he leaves me humble and impressed and I am sure to speak in the name of all, would like to thank him especially.

Michael and I are truly grateful to all of you and I will always miss the excellent cooperation and, indeed, friendship that guided our work. We will look back to this team with everlasting nostalgia wherever our future will take us.

I would also like to mention the important political reinforcement this project received and which has been extended to us by Ms Barbara Prammer, the President of the Austrian parliament and I would like to thank her wholeheartedly for it. President Prammer supported us throughout our entire tenure and even made the Austrian Parliament available for our winter plenary session. She is also the President of the National Fund which contributed so importantly to our budget and work. I also wish to thank the Foreign Ministers Ursula Plassnik and Michael Spindelegger as well as Secretary of State Hans Winkler, who accompanied our ITF membership since its beginning, for the financial and moral support. We wish to thank the Minister of Education, Ms. Claudia Schmid and her Ministry for contributing decisively to the financing and offering its premises for our work. We are grateful for all the other Austrian sources, whom I cannot name here, for their support and dedication to the cause of the Holocaust Task Force.

When I had the honour to take over the Chair from our Czech friends, the stakes were high due to their excellent performance. But they left us the most important heritage by presenting us with one of their greatest achievements: A permanent secretariat established in Berlin with the generous support of the German Government and an Executive Secretary: Kathrin Meyer. The Task Force could hardly have found anyone more experienced, efficient or

dedicated for this task. However, I would like to point out, that her most important quality is her human dimension, her warmth and friendship. She became an invaluable part of our team without ever forgetting that her first loyalty remains with the organisation and not only with the Chair. We will all always remember every hour of our cooperation with Kahrin with whom we gained a friend whom we will always cherish.

I wish to underline once again the great privilege of having been able to benefit from our Honorary Chairman, the great scholar Prof. Yehuda Bauer on whose wisdom and advice we could rely at every moment of our Chairmanship. In addition it has been a great privilege to cooperate with our academic Adviser, Prof. Dina Porat, from Tel Aviv. Her expertise and dedication was of enormous value to us.

Now, what are we handing over to our Norwegian friends, with whom we were able to spend considerable time in transferring our experiences and with whom we were in large agreement on how to shape the future of this organization?

We believe that the Task Force has now gained considerable consolidation and stability and is on the right track to be able to face the growing challenges in the field of Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research and, let me underline this element, in communication. We will still have to do some homework in streamlining and strengthening our internal procedures and in enhancing our capacity to focus our resources and activities on the larger task ahead of us. Our experience showed that the organisation will not meet the mentioned challenges by scattering our efforts on limited projects. Projects will always remain important. They will, however, have to follow a clearer policy and a more programmed approach without which our organisation will not use its full capacity in terms of expertise, networking capability and influence on policy and public and private action of our 26 member states.

It is one of the strengths of this Task Force that it comprises all major institutions in the field of Holocaust education, remembrance and research starting with Yad Vashem and including such organisations as the Washington Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Memorial de Shoah in Paris, the memorials of Auschwitz and the other death camps in Poland as well as the memorials in Germany and also in Austria, like Mauthausen. But we can also say that there is no international organisation uniting this much expertise supplemented by dedicated diplomats who can add a lot to exert real influence also on the level of public affairs. At this time, action on this double track approach seems to be more necessary than ever during the ten year's existence of the Task Force.

We are facing challenges from Holocaust remembrance fatigue to soft and even hard revisionism including Holocaust relativism and Holocaust denial. These attitudes mix with ever new forms of Anti-Semitism that disguises its ugly face for instance in seemingly politically correct criticism of Israeli practices in its conflict with the Palestinians. Anti-semitic, xenophobic and racist stereotypes mix with fears and anger in face of the current financial and

economic crisis. Such attitudes cannot be isolated any more in quarters of right wing extremism. They include leftist attitudes as well and may have long since reached the mainstream under the cover of political correctness in public discourse and in cultivating anti-Semitic and xenophobic attitudes during dinner talks, in private e-mail contacts and web-chatting. The freedom of expression may serve as an argument in order to protect such malpractice.

Ladies and gentlemen, 8th

In such an environment, Holocaust education, remembrance and research gains new importance. Attitudes towards remembering the Holocaust may serve as a litmus test for covert anti-Semitic attitudes. Remembering the Holocaust through use of the wealth of recordings of Holocaust witnesses and the presence of such witnesses that are still alive, may still be an important weapon against anti-Semitism, xenophobia, racism and intolerance, since such remembrance show what kind of terrible evil can be brought upon humanity under certain conditions.

Recently, the walls of the concentration camp Mauthausen have been smeared with parols that are sending chills down every decent person's spine. It said: "What the Jew has been for our fathers, the brood of the Moslems is for us – beware – 3rd World war – 8th crusade!" The message sent by this act of desecration cannot be merely put aside as a ridiculous act of a few extremists. The message painted in red letters connects the Holocaust to today's xenophobic attitudes against foreigners and follows a terrible logic of genocide. There can hardly be a more alarming message reminding us that the Holocaust has not been an event which has been sealed forever in a distant past. No, the evil spirits underlying this unprecedented Genocide are still alive!

In this environment, this hand-over ceremony is not the place for praising the achievements of the Austrian chairmanship. The second Austrian Republic started to face the full extent of the involvement of Austrians in the Holocaust with too much of a delay in order to allow us to be proud of achievements in the field of Holocaust remembrance. We, therefore, started our Chairmanship in the spirit of humility, trying to contribute our share to the remembrance of the Holocaust and all the related activities by strengthening the operability of the Task Force and by serving it with our full dedication. We can say that we tried our best to complete our Chairmanship in this spirit and handing over to the Norwegian chair something to build on just as we received from the Czech Chair a lot to build upon. Not only did we try to invest in the strengthening of the organization, but we engaged in some difficult tasks like dealing with revisionism in some member countries and gaining access to hitherto inaccessible archives.

In that spirit of humbleness we were probably not sufficiently active in contributing our share to make the Holocaust Taskforce better known on the international level. So even in the circles concerned with Holocaust Remembrance and combating anti-Semitism, do not know enough about the potential that this organization is representing. A lot remains thus to be done

in the field of strengthening the profile of an organization who's name is even difficult to remember by insiders.

Dear Ambassador Vraalsen, I am handing over the Chairmanship of the Holocaust Task Force to you and Norway. I am sure you will contribute your share to ascertain that the Task Force will become an ever stronger instrument in trying to prevent the horrific experience of the Shoah for all future generations. There is a lot to worry about, but there is also room for optimism. The Norwegians are great Sportsmen and - women, ready to face any challenge created by a hostile environment in a spirit of achievement and optimism. We, therefore, know that the Task Force is in good hands during the coming year. We will nevertheless remain ready to support you wherever we can within and outside the Troika. I wish you all the best.