

Report to the Plenary on the Working Group on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, June 19, 2009

delivered by

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Mister Chairman,

- The working group on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research spent almost two days of intensive discussions on the current state of our thinking and acting on these issues. We heard quite a few inspiring examples of the leading institutions in the field – Yad Vashem, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the network of memorial institutions organized by the Topographie des Terrors in Germany. We heard from courageous initiatives taken within Russian civil society and from practical experiences gained from tolerance education with young people in Western countries. Our first result: The difference between the levels achieved in different countries is still enormous. In many countries, Holocaust Education is mandatory, some of them have developed multiple instruments like memorials or remembrance days and have worked out elaborate methodologies for different target groups – but many countries have to do much more.
- The second result is more complicated. An overarching issue was the need to transcend a one-dimensional way to tell the Holocaust. It is important to realize how different the national contexts are and how strongly they are shaping our understanding of the Holocaust. On the one hand, Holocaust Education has to connect with these national contexts. On the other hand, the Holocaust does not fit fully into any of them. It rather tends to deconstruct national narratives and myths. When done right, education about the particular histories of the Holocaust reveals its universal meaning and its importance for the emerging global civilization. Holocaust education is an excellent indicator of how self-critical a country is in dealing with its own role in history.
- Our third result concerns Holocaust Research: it is amazing to see how many questions still remain un-answered, especially on the local and regional levels. On the one hand, the newly opened archives represent enormous opportunities. On the other hand, it became quite obvious that the researchers need the widest access possible to the archives. Some archives still follow restrictive access policies, whatever the reasons for these restrictions may be. Archives were mentioned *inter alia* in Ukraine, Russia and the Vatican. The working group therefore appeals to all authorities concerned to open all the relevant archives as soon as possible and as widely as possible.

- We agreed on a fourth point: The plurality of perspectives. In the future, Holocaust Education can only be effective and reach its audience when taking fully into account that our societies are changing. They have become multi-cultural and we face new perspectives, new emotions, diverse backgrounds which have to be respected. We certainly face challenges here – but we agreed that it is possible to meet them.

We also have to take into account that the Nazi crimes extended to Jews and to other groups as well. There was another genocide aimed at the Sinti and Roma. And murderous crimes were committed to Poles, to handicapped people, to forced laborers and prisoners of war. This historical context needs to be addressed within Holocaust education.

It is important to stress that teaching the historical contexts will make visible the extraordinary and unprecedented character of the Holocaust which cannot be minimized. Initiatives like the recent motion within the European Parliament to commemorate the events that followed the Hitler/Stalin-Pact must clearly be seen in this perspective.

- Finally, Mister Chairman, at the opening ceremony we carefully noted Simone Veil's warning that remembrance is not happening by itself. She reminded us that transmitting memory and understanding rather needs our active commitment. Permit me therefor to close my report on a note of cautious optimism. We have a great number of committed people and we have a strong structure in place with the ITF (Task Force on International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research) involving more than 27 countries united on the basis of the Stockholm declaration. The ITF has grown and matured over the last ten years and serves as an effective platform for our common efforts in this field. The planned Terezin European Shoah Legacy Institute must strengthen these endeavors. With our conference in Prague, we send a further strong signal that we will carry this work forward into the future.

Thank you, Mister Chairman.