



Dr. Kathrin Meyer
Executive Secretary

Evocation Ceremony on Holocaust Remembrance Day, Biblioteca da Assembleia da República, 27 January 2011, Lisbon

Dear Mr. President,

Distinguished Members of Parliament,

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good evening. I am honored to be invited to speak to you tonight and to have the opportunity to represent the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research. Allow me to start with a quote from Elie Wiesel: “Not to transmit an experience is to betray it.” The remembrance of the past and the millions of those who perished in the Holocaust is the least we can do to honor their experience. The memory is what we owe to the victims, survivors, liberators, and to ourselves.

Between June 17 and July 8 of 1940, Aristide de Sousa Mendes, the consul of Portugal in Bordeaux, issued entry visas to thousands of Jews and other refugees fleeing Nazi-occupied France. In less than three weeks time he had saved the equivalent of a small town from almost certain destruction. Scholars of the period say that his actions were vital to opening up an escape route through Portugal that remained in use throughout the war. It is no exaggeration to say that tens of thousands of people alive today owe their existence, directly or indirectly, to this courageous man who died in poverty and disgrace, punished by the Salazar government for disobeying direct orders to stop issuing visas to Jewish refugees. But de Sousa Mendes remained

defiant: *“I could not have acted otherwise, and I therefore happily accept all that has befallen me,”* he said after the war. This is the very definition of a hero: a man who will disobey his own government and pay a heavy personal price in order to do what is right – in order to save innocent people from death and suffering. It is also the definition of a true diplomat: someone who used his position of influence to help people cross borders to safety in the midst of a terrible war. He was truly one of the Righteous among the Nations and was officially recognized as such in 1966 by Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority of Israel. In 1988 the Portuguese Parliament rehabilitated Aristide de Sousa Mendes and he was awarded the Order of Liberty.

You are of course familiar with the fascinating details of de Souza Mendes’ great story of heroism.

It is an uplifting story to be sure.

Most stories from the Holocaust are not.

Baruch Lopes Leão de Laguna was born in Amsterdam on 16 February 1864, to a Portuguese Sephardic family. He descended from Jews who had been expelled from Portugal in the late 15th century. Like many Portuguese Jews in the Netherlands his family was proud of their heritage and passed down their Portuguese name. Tragedy struck early in Baruch’s life. When he was 11 years old his parents died in an accident onboard a ship and he grew up in the Portuguese Jewish orphanage in Amsterdam. As a young man he showed a talent for painting and became one of the few Jews admitted into the National Academy of Fine Art and had a successful career as a painter. His paintings are in the classic Dutch tradition and masterfully capture quiet scenes of everyday life: a group of women reading, a mother and daughter knitting together, a vase of flowers in a window.

Baruch Lopes de Leão Laguna spent the first years of the Nazi occupation in hiding in a remote farm in Laren, where he painted his striking self-portrait and gave it to the family that was helping him. I encourage you to take a look at his self-portrait. He has a kind face with penetrating eyes.

Eventually, Baruch was caught and deported by cattle-car to the Auschwitz extermination camp, where he was murdered on 19 November 1943 at the age of 79.

Yet despite his tragic death we are lucky to have his heritage, and the impressive legacy of his art. The same cannot be said for the millions of Jewish children killed before they had a chance to pursue their own talents and dreams, to leave their name and face to history. We have the face of Baruch Lopes de Leão Laguna, but most of the victims remain just a name, and for others we do not even have that.

Yad Vashem has now recorded 4 million names of Jews who perished in the Holocaust, only two thirds of the total number of victims. This milestone means that we still do not know the names of millions more. 27 January, International Holocaust Remembrance Day, gives us the opportunity to think about and commemorate the millions of victims, known or unknown, and to keep their memory alive.

It was in this spirit that the ITF came into being in 1998, when then Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson, along with Prime Minister Tony Blair and President Bill Clinton, initiated what would become the ITF.

In January 2000, Persson invited the members of the ITF and other interested governments to participate in “The Stockholm International Forum on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research”. This was the first major international conference of the new millennium, and 48 countries were represented by their Heads of State or senior representatives, including Portugal which was represented by Minister Assistant to the Prime Minister, Mr. Armando Vara. The forum’s outcome was a message for the future. It highlighted mutual understanding as one of the important lessons to be learned from the Holocaust. It underlined the responsibility of the international community to fight the evils of genocide, ethnic cleansing, racism, antisemitism and xenophobia. This document, the Stockholm Declaration, became the basis document for the ITF.

Since the Stockholm Declaration, international organizations such as the Council of Europe and OSCE have made Holocaust remembrance a fundamental part of their mission and signed Memoranda of Understanding with ITF. In November 2005, the United Nations declared 27 January as the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust.

On 27 January 1945, the advancing Red Army entered the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp complex, liberating more than 7000 remaining prisoners, for the most part ill or dying. Days earlier, the SS had forced nearly 60,000 prisoners to evacuate the camp and embark on the infamous 'Death Marches' in which many thousands lost their lives.

The UN General Assembly designated this date to be the day upon which, every year, the world would mark and remember the Holocaust and its victims. So what are ITF member states doing to commemorate International Holocaust Remembrance Day? Today survivors tell their stories, important gatherings take place, books are published, documentaries premier, exhibitions open, and educational programs are launched around the world. In each ITF Member Country, events take place that involve parliaments, government ministries, universities, museums, and various other forums. ITF Member Countries consider this date to be an opportunity for reflection that should be infused with meaning. 65 years on from the liberation of Auschwitz, it is more important than ever to remind ourselves of the universal lessons of the Holocaust and to foster a shared culture of remembrance.

This year, at the initiative of the Israeli Chairmanship, three International Training Teams composed of ITF experts are participating in programs in three different countries to coincide with this day of commemoration. ITF experts will be taking part in events that involve parliaments, government ministries, universities, museums, and various other forums. Each International Training Team will be working with the diplomatic corps, journalists, academics, policymakers, the armed forces, politicians, and educators to promote International Holocaust Remembrance Day. The ITF is honored to be invited to Portugal as one of these three countries, and I'm happy to report that the past two days have been productive and meaningful.

As the only inter-governmental body devoted exclusively to the memory of the Holocaust, the ITF is uniquely positioned to lead the charge against ignorance. ITF is distinctive because it brings together representatives of government, academia and non-governmental organizations. The ITF's experts from the Member States are delegated to three main sectoral Working Groups, Academic, Education and Memorial Museums. The Working Groups identify key contemporary issues in ITF's mandate fields and provide advice to the political level and recommendations for political action, assisting the governments to fulfill their commitments. Thus the ITF has considerable potential to be an influential actor on the international scene.

The ITF was originally intended to be a temporary organization, but since its inception it has expanded exponentially. What started out as a small ad hoc group brainstorming about how to prevent the Holocaust from being forgotten has developed into a full-fledged intergovernmental body to handle issues relating to Holocaust education, remembrance and research and to counter antisemitism and Holocaust denial. From three countries at its founding, the ITF has now grown to include 28 member countries, in addition to three liaison and three observer countries, and we are happy that Portugal is an official Observer of ITF. Even more countries have also indicated interest in joining. 21 of the member countries are EU members. The growth in membership is the result of this increased awareness in the international community. To qualify for membership, countries are required to scrutinize all aspects of their history with regard to the Holocaust: both actions and omissions. As the former ITF Chair Tom Vraalsen said, no one comes out clean from this painful, but vital, self-scrutiny and soul-searching. Through this exercise we are confronted with how unbelievable horror and brutality can suddenly replace tolerance, dignity, and humanity. This in itself is an important experience for societies. For these reasons, the ITF has contributed to an improved level of understanding of the Holocaust in many countries. The ITF was involved in the agreement that enabled the opening of the International Tracing Service archives. We've supported hundreds of projects all over the world since 2001 and have given out 2.6 million € worth of project funding. ITF's experts have developed comprehensive guidelines for teaching about the Holocaust, published in 18 languages and which are being used by dozens of school systems around the world.

We believe that Holocaust education, research and remembrance should not only shed light on the past. It should also shed light on our own time. The ITF is a voice of moral authority on the international scene when it comes to raising awareness about the Holocaust, and can help address the dynamics that we know precede mass killings and genocides. Its place is in the forefront of the struggle against the worrisome trend of Holocaust denial and trivialization as a main contemporary form of antisemitism. Antisemitism has political consequences and poses a threat to democracy, the values of civilization, and to overall security in societies.

One of the ITF's major focuses is to counteract the spread of Holocaust denial and trivialization, a phenomenon shared by extremist groups that often have nothing else in common, such as the far-right and far-left, extremist Christian and Islamist groups. Holocaust Denial is an attempt to deny the genocide of the Jews, or to blame the Jews for causing their own genocide. Holocaust denial may include publicly denying the existence of principal mechanisms (for example, of gas chambers, mass shooting, starvation and torture) or denying intentionality of the genocide of the Jewish people. This aims to poke enough holes in the accepted narrative, to raise doubts about the key facts, so as to delegitimize the essential truth of what happened. Because of its direct connection with ITF's core mandate, in 2009 ITF established a Standing Committee on Antisemitism and Holocaust Denial, as one of its specialized committees, to address this urgent issue.

The Holocaust – as a concept and as a system – originated in the minds of men. It was not a natural disaster. It was a man-made disaster. Prejudice is growing in our own countries and elsewhere, in the public arena and behind the scenes. It is here the fight must be fought.

Genocide and crimes against humanity are still happening in many places in the world. Knowledge about the background, purpose, and significance of the Holocaust is essential to raise public awareness and mobilize forces to push back such tendencies. To keep the memory alive, it is important that European countries continue their efforts to prevent the unprecedented character of the Holocaust from being downplayed and questioned. We need to constantly remind ourselves of the fragility of human life and the vulnerability of our societies. We must preserve the memory of the Holocaust for posterity as a lesson in moral failure of humanity. We do so with the hope that we can indeed learn from the past.

This work of memory is not the responsibility of Jews or of Jewish communities, but all of society. What the United Nations acknowledged in the resolution creating International Holocaust Remembrance Day on 27 January is that this work of memory and this responsibility belongs to the international community, to governments and to all mankind. Because the Holocaust was a failure of humanity, remembering it is our duty – our obligation – to the future. In the same way, combating antisemitism is not the task of just the Jews, but a common obligation of all peoples – especially, in view of the terrible price the Jewish people paid for

unchecked antisemitism over the millennia culminating in one of the worst crimes in history: the Holocaust.

I would like to quote Professor Yehuda Bauer, ITF Honorary Chairman, from his speech exactly five years ago today to the UN General Assembly on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, “Certainly, the Holocaust shows the depth of human depravity; but on its margins, there are the peaks of human self-sacrifice for others. It is that that shows us that there is an alternative”.

Our collective memory is what defines our present and future. Without the memory of the Holocaust, we will not be able to build democratic and pluralistic societies, where ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity is not only tolerated but also respected and valued.

We owe it to the self-sacrifice of Aristide de Sousa Mendes. We owe it to the memory of Baruch Lopes de Leão Laguna and the millions of other innocent Jews who had their lives destroyed by the Nazis and their collaborators only a few decades ago. We owe it to the forgotten child who was killed and whose name has been lost to history.

Thank you very much for allowing me to speak here tonight.