



INTERNATIONAL
**HOLOCAUST
REMEMBRANCE**
ALLIANCE

27 November 2017

**Address by IHRA Chair, Ambassador Benno Bättig at the Reception in
Kursaal Bern**

Dear Holocaust Survivors,

Excellencies,

Dear Members of the Swiss Parliament

Dear Mr. Herbert Winter, President of the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities

Dear Professors Yehuda Bauer and Steven Katz

Dear Delegates and Friends

It is an honour and a real pleasure for me to welcome you all here in the capital of Switzerland during the second plenary meetings of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance under the Swiss chairmanship.

This reception is organized jointly by the Swiss chairmanship and by the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities, with whom we have been working closely throughout this year I am very grateful for the opportunity to hold this joint event and the president of the Federation will take the floor after me.

Holocaust survivors living in Switzerland are among us tonight, as they were already at the first plenary meetings in Geneva. Let me stress that it is a privilege and an honour to have them here.

“We empathize with the victims' suffering and draw inspiration from their struggle”.

The Stockholm Declaration calls upon both the IHRA community and its national delegations to keep the victims and survivors in mind when making decisions for the future.

As a step towards the future, the IHRA has adopted the framework of its first strategy under Swiss Chairmanship. And this Thursday, the prospects are good that IHRA can decide on clear and precise priorities to guide us through the following five years.

The essence of IHRA's work, and of its strategy, is to bring together experts and policymakers of its member states: it aims support policymakers in making historically-informed political decisions.

More than three quarters of a century lie between us and the Holocaust.

The decision-makers of our society are more and more preoccupied with the urgencies of the present.

Nonetheless, it is a moral obligation for us all, but even more so for our political leaders and policymakers, not to forget the tragedies of the past

I am therefore pleased to see some parliamentarians among us tonight in spite of the parliamentary session taking place during these weeks. I would also like to greet the ambassadors of the IHRA member countries with us who are representing their countries in Switzerland.

Conscious of the crucial importance of the establishment of a strategy for the IHRA, the Swiss Chairmanship invited the 31 Heads of Delegation of the Member Countries to an informal meeting in Zurich at the end of October – the first meeting of its kind in the Alliance's history.

To my great pleasure, the policymakers who attended the meeting rapidly achieved a common understanding of the future priorities of IHRA – priorities in which the survivors of the Holocaust, testimonies, sites and the historical record remain at the centre.

The aim of these priorities is not only to fight Holocaust denial but also what is called Holocaust distortion. This includes the minimisation of the number of victims or of the extent to which certain groups collaborated with the Nazis.

Such distortions are an affront to the victims and the survivors and to their dignity. Such distortions threaten education within our societies and the future of our youth

The survivors of the Holocaust are also at the centre of the activities organised in the context of the Swiss Chairmanship.

In Geneva, young students spoke to us about their experience of translating memoirs of survivors in class. Let us remember what two of them said so poignantly:

“We are our country’s future, we are our world’s future. We need to keep the history present in our lives and that is why we read such memoirs, to get a better understanding of the past. Hopefully we learn from it as well.”

Yes: These young people represent the future. And no: they do not declare with certainty that they will learn the lessons of the past. They are more humble than that. Without illusions, they listen to policymakers proclaim their “never again” and declare that they have learned the lessons of the past. However, these decision makers leave our young people with a world in which they have many reasons to despair.

Nevertheless, the first-hand interaction with testimonies from Holocaust survivors instils in them an unforgettable courage – a courage that they can use to guide them when they face forces that deny human dignity.

The entire series of the memoirs of Holocaust survivors has now been translated and is available starting today. The decision to publish each of the 15 memoirs in individual booklets is symbolic. The Holocaust was unprecedented, unimaginable in scale, and yet with each individual story, we are reminded that we speak of people – a history, a memory, a life.

Among the many other projects focusing on youth and survivors, some of you have certainly taken some time to visit the impressive photo exhibition held during the plenary in Geneva last June.

And this afternoon, you have seen a demonstration of an educational web app. This project speaks to youth because it speaks their favourite language – the language of social media. It is also the result of international cooperation with Austria and Germany.

Another excellent transnational cooperation between a Canadian historian and a Swiss journalist resulted in the latest book on Carl Lutz and other Swiss diplomats posted in Budapest during the war. This book is a collection of unpublished testimonies – gathered on three continents – from people who were saved thanks to this collective Swiss deed.

This collective effort which Lutz guided reminds us that mere verbal condemnations of antisemitism, racism and discrimination are not enough. One must also – in extreme situations – have the courage to take risks and, above all, to act.

The IHRA has the word ‘remembrance’ in its name. And on the occasion of the Swiss Chairmanship of IHRA I am pleased to announce such an act of remembrance:

The policymakers of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs regularly gather in a particular meeting room within the Federal Palace in Bern.

After several months of carefully discussing various options, it was decided to name this very meeting room after Carl Lutz. A commemorative plaque will be affixed there also bearing the names of the four other Swiss diplomats who worked with Lutz and were all recognized as Righteous among the Nations.

This initiative has two aims: the new name of the room and the plaque should be a constant source of inspiration for the policymakers of the Department; and it reminds them that actions are almost always collective and that they should act as a team.

In another act of cooperation and teamwork, an IHRA conference was organised in Bern this week on an aspect of the Holocaust we know relatively little about: the mass-murder of hundreds of thousands of people with mental and physical disabilities by the Nazis. The methods they used – for example killing them with gas – were later used during the Holocaust.

With this rarely spoken of aspect of the mass murder of people with disabilities: let us be reminded of states' obligations to protect their citizens and to reaffirm that every human being has the inherent right to life.

I would like to thank the organisers of this conference and the university of teacher education in Bern for this fruitful cooperation.

The last important project of the Swiss Chairmanship will be an international conference on “teaching of and learning from the Holocaust”. This conference is, again, organised jointly with a University of teacher education, this time in Lausanne.

The main goal of this conference will be to examine the challenges of teaching the Holocaust in schools.

How could we end our Chairmanship year better than by placing youth and education centre stage and by reflecting on the challenges?



In conclusion, the thread through all our projects is their focus on young people and a desire to find strategies to raise awareness of these unprecedented historical events.

Ladies and Gentleman,

Allow me to finish today as we began our gathering: with the survivors at the forefront.

I would like to quote Ivan Lefkovits, who participated in the memoir project, who said:

“Why must we write history down? Perhaps it is not for our sake, but rather for the sake of the six million people who died.”

Indeed, we remember to commemorate those who lost their lives.

Let us also remember for those who survived - and for those who came after.

I am pleased now to give the floor to Mr. Herbert Winter, President of the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities.