



International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance

Speech delivered by the IHRA Chair, amb. Mihnea Constantinescu to the inauguration of the Exhibition “Holocaust Education and Remembrance in Romania”, on the occasion of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day

Brussels, 8 Febr. 2017

As Chair of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, I would like thank all of you for attending this event presenting the exhibition “*Education and Remembrance. The Holocaust in Romania*”.

This is a humble tribute to all victims of the Holocaust. We bow our heads before this unprecedented tragedy that each of them experienced individually, but which has impacted the whole humankind.

This event is taking place during the period in which my country holds the Chairmanship of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance and also marks the International Holocaust Remembrance Day. The commemoration of this historic day carries along a double meaning and responsibility:

One goes backwards, and claims our moral duty to remember and acknowledge the suffering of those massacred. The other one is forward-looking and prompts us to educate the future generations about the abominable crimes of the Holocaust.

IHRA Chairmanship has been a time for deep reflection in the Romanian society and for taking bold decisions. Holocaust remembrance is one of the main lines of actions, along with Holocaust education, research and engagement with younger generations *via* social media. We have learned that we must persist in telling the younger generation the truth about the dark history of our country, so that they will not lose courage to prevent and fight against such acts in the future.

This is in line with the objectives of the soon-to-be-opened House of European History, a project that is developed under the responsibility of the European Parliament and a project that IHRA would be happy to contribute. But more precisely, engagement with young generations and raising their interest to learn about the past is the collaborative

platform *My House of European History*, also developed by the European Parliament, that aims to become a virtual library of testimonials and stories from people across Europe.

I cannot conceive that such library of testimonials could overlook the Holocaust. That is why it is my belief that Holocaust education should not be taught exclusively in classrooms.

I would like to invite you all to visit this exhibition, where you can learn more about some creative means to educate new generations so that never again should we witness such atrocities.

We have strived to provide support to educators on how to use the lessons learned from the tragedy of the Holocaust to promote knowledge and tolerance in our society. Students across my country have had the opportunity to attend workshops, lectures, study trips and contests, meant to equip them with knowledge and skills to adequately relate to this tragedy.

Romanian institutions have also established international partnerships for training civil servants, magistrates, diplomats and police officers in combatting anti-Semitism, Holocaust denial, racism, xenophobia, discrimination and hate speech in public sphere.

This will continue as a distinct contribution of this Chairmanship to the change of mentalities and fighting prejudice in our society.

Remembering the darkest pages of our history, by presenting facts unaltered, is how we decided, for instance, to commemorate the 75 years since the Iași Pogrom. The abominable acts committed by the regime of that time are still an open wound in our society. As a proof of this long-standing commitment, the authorities of my country have started the demarches to establish a Museum of the History of the Jews of Romania, in Bucharest.

You will find in the exhibition we inaugurate today the stories of Romanian citizens who have helped their Jewish neighbors, friends, or even unknown persons, to escape persecution and deportations. Years later, their role has been praised by the «Yad Vashem» in Jerusalem with the title of «Righteous among Nations».

Also, there is a special dimension within the Alliance we have promoted during our Chairmanship: remembering and educating about the atrocities suffered by the *Roma population*, throughout World War II.

But keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive, fighting antisemitism and all forms of racism, discrimination and xenophobia is a collective endeavor.

This kind of initiatives – as promoted by Romania – are instrumental in providing the correct reaction when faced with attempts of denying or distorting history, and of whitening persons guilty of crimes against peace and humanity.

The tragic violent events in recent years in Europe with antisemitic grounds, indicate how important is to prevent and clearly identify antisemitism early. There must be clarity about what antisemitism actually is and how it can manifest itself, so that ignorance cannot be offered as an excuse for lack of principle and firmness.

This is one major reason for the IHRA Plenary in Bucharest of May last year having adopted by consensus a Working Definition of Antisemitism. By adopting this definition, the IHRA intends to set an example of responsible conduct to other international fora, and hopes to inspire them to take action in their turn to strengthen the premises for addressing this threat.

Romania stands ready to promote further the working definition on antisemitism. We cooperated last year with the German OSCE Chairmanship for its adoption by the OSCE Ministerial Council in Hamburg. While I was disappointed that the proposal did not pass, I was pleased that all EU member states took a common position of support. Allow me to express my gratitude as IHRA chairman to all EU member states for their common stance and to encourage their action to consider this working instrument to be integrated into the EU policies inside and outside our borders.

I would like to underline here the importance to combat the threat in spreading the hate speech in social networks and the need for effective institutional instruments to follow and to ban this type of actions. I call all of you to act against this menace.

Allow me to thank Mrs. Katharina von Schnurbein, the European Commission Coordinator on combating antisemitism, for her diligent activity to make EU member states aware of the threats posed by antisemitism in our societies and to identify the best means to prevent and combat these threats.

During Romania's IHRA Chairmanship, on 2nd July last year, we lost a great countryman and the world lost a wonderful historian and moral authority. I quote the words of Elie Wiesel who said:

“Because I remember, I despair. Because I remember, I have the duty to reject despair.”

As we remember the past, we are all painfully aware that we again find ourselves today in times of turmoil, where antisemitism, hate and intolerance persist.

Let us not despair. Because we must act, because we are able to act, to prevent and to reject these demons!

I am confident that we will not grow weary in this endeavor if we continue to believe in the moral dedication and strong will of all European Union member countries to better safeguard the dignity and human rights of all our citizens.

Before concluding, allow me to bring to your attention one of the last major projects that the Romanian IHRA Chairmanship is supporting. In a week time, together with the Holy

See, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance will organize a conference on the refugee policies from the 30s until today.

The purpose of this conference is to shed light on „if” and „how” we have become better in treating the refugee dilemma. We were much honored that the Holy See agreed to co-sponsor with IHRA this project and I do hope that you will be interested to attend it.

And finally I will conclude by expressing our thanks to all of you for your participation and by mentioning special thanks to the Chair of the Belgian Delegation to the IHRA, ambassador Jan Deboutte for his wise and long standing contribution to the activity of our Alliance. Thank you !