

Remembrance and human dignity

Exactly one year ago, survivors of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp and representatives of governments from all over the world gathered on the site of the former camp to pay tribute to the victims of National Socialist tyranny. Over seventy years have passed since the liberation of the camp. It should be stated that the focus at this commemorative event was on the survivors, as these last witnesses are now very elderly and soon there will be no-one left who can say, speaking from their own painful experience: "It happened, I experienced it myself, and so it can happen again. Resist any signs of it happening again."

The arrival of the liberators on 27 January 1945 meant salvation for the few remaining inmates, who had reached the end of their strength. This date, meanwhile, does not merely mark the event itself, it now symbolises the end of suffering, a difficult new beginning for the survivors and a deeply felt wish for lasting peace. It has come to universally signify the unimaginable suffering that man can do to his fellow man.

Seventy-one years is a long time. Are the commemorative events that take place in many countries today still able to inform, educate and raise awareness? Do such events contribute to a better, more peaceful world, free of hate and discrimination? I fear that there will always be those who deny, qualify or play down the Holocaust, and there are still loud voices today that incite xenophobia, anti-Semitism, discrimination and violence. And yet I firmly believe in the need to stand up for a world in which the dignity of every human being is respected. And I firmly believe in the power of solidarity, humanity and remembrance.

We are gathering today because the systematic killing of millions of innocent people in the middle of Europe ripped a huge gash in the sensitive fabric of the world, and this has not yet healed. Not only individuals, but whole families, whole villages, and all that they had built up in their lives were extinguished – communal institutions such as schools and hospitals, places of worship and cemeteries, and the varied relationships between neighbours that took no account of religious differences. The world became a poorer place as a result, since the world that we know and appreciate thrives on pluralism, openness and curiosity, from vibrant interaction with those who think the same as us and those who think differently, from diversity, access to knowledge and the desire to learn. While we are aware of what we lost, we would also like to acknowledge how successfully the survivors who settled in Switzerland after the war became integrated in our society. Their work and their civic engagement stimulated and enriched our society.

Like other countries, Switzerland takes a stand against violence and despotism, and advocates remembrance and human dignity. In 2017 it will chair the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), the proposal to do so was made in November 2015, having found the support of the Federal Council and the Alliance's 31 member states. And finally, on this International Holocaust Remembrance Day, members of parliament and federal officials will be among those speaking at the commemorative event held this evening at the Yehudi Menuhin Forum in Bern.

We cannot undo what has been done. But we can speak up for a world in which we do not simply pay lip service to human dignity, but make it reality, every day and everywhere.

Johann N. Schneider-Ammann
President of the Swiss Confederation