



International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance

Address by IHRA Chair, Ambassador Benno Böttig at the Official Reception in Penthes, Geneva Plenary.

27 June 2017

Dear Holocaust Survivors,
Dear Professor Yehuda Bauer, Honorary Chairman
Dear Professor Steven Katz, Adviser to the IHRA
Dear Kathrin Meyer, Executive Secretary of the IHRA

Dear Delegates and Friends,

It is an honour and a real pleasure for me to welcome you all here on the occasion of the first plenary meetings of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance under the Swiss Chairmanship.

We have the privilege to have among us Holocaust survivors born in Poland, Slovakia and Hungary, as well as the families of survivors from Germany and Czech Republic, and who have been living in Switzerland for many decades. We are very honoured to have them here with us. I thank them warmly for coming from so far away.

I would also like to give a special welcome to the students present tonight, who translated memoirs of Holocaust survivors in their schools. I thank them personally for their important work that in my eyes is a good example of the commitment in favour of the IHRA's aims to strengthen, advance and promote Holocaust remembrance and research worldwide.

We also have the pleasure to welcome Swiss representatives of the Yenish, Sinti and Roma communities, who had a fruitful discussion with an IHRA Committee this afternoon. Thank you for being here with us.

And finally, we have the honour to have Members of the Swiss Advisory Group, who have been working closely with the national delegation since Switzerland joined the IHRA in 2004. The Advisory Group has played a pivotal role in developing and

implementing the priorities and programs of the Chairmanship. I wish to thank them here for their commitment. I wish them fruitful discussions with IHRA delegates.

The Chairmanship's priorities and programs are a continuation of the activities Switzerland has developed over the last decades. They are a sign of our lasting commitment to preserve the memory of the victims of the Nazi regime. What is the reason for this commitment?

First of all: the Nazi's crimes against humanity and the terrible suffering of the Jewish people and the millions of other victims of the Nazi regime are an obligation for all of us to preserve memory and to raise our awareness in order to fight against any form of genocide today and in the future.

Secondly Switzerland has never been an island. Even if a former member of government once said: "Auschwitz is not in Switzerland", meaning: "What does Auschwitz have to do with Switzerland?" – Switzerland is part of Europe, and its history is closely intertwined in European history. This very place, the Museum for the Swiss Abroad, as well as donating 1 million Euros in 2013 for the preservation of the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau, is a symbol of this interconnection. Swiss citizens were murdered in Auschwitz and in other concentration and extermination camps, too. Some of them did not receive the support they hoped for and that they deserved from Swiss diplomatic representations abroad. Other Swiss citizens abroad did their utmost to save Jews, for example Carl Lutz in Budapest whose stepdaughter, Ms Agnes Hirschi, is with us tonight.

Decisions made abroad influenced Switzerland's policy. There was awareness of the persecution of the Jews, Sinti and Roma by the Nazis and their collaborators. Decisions taken in Switzerland affected the lives of these victims.

Switzerland had a role in creating two inglorious symbols: The J-Stamp in passports of Jews after the *Anschluss* of Austria and the phrase "The Boat is Full" to justify a more restrictive refugee policy. Given its role in the introduction of the J-Stamp and the tragic consequences thereof, Switzerland cannot and does not deny its responsibility. The president of the Swiss Confederation conveyed his apologies on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the end of the Second World War. On behalf of the authorities I represent, as well as on my personal behalf, here with Holocaust survivors, I express my deep and sincere regrets for the consequences this policy had on your communities.

During the Second World War, Switzerland admitted more Jewish refugees than it turned away. But still, we must bear in mind that assertions like "The Boat is Full" remain unacceptable when people are fleeing persecution and seeking refuge in another country.

Let me add a few words on research: The restrictive Swiss policy towards refugees during the Second World War has been the subject of regular and repeated research

since the 1950s – including research undertaken by the international Commission headed by Professor Bergier in the 1990s. This research continues today. Open access to archives is a basic condition of independent scientific research in this field, as in any other research field related to the Holocaust. Switzerland guarantees this open access to its archives of the Holocaust era and it encourages free and independent scientific research.

We are gathering here in this beautiful place on the occasion of the first reception of the IHRA plenary meeting, which will continue this week. This is an opportunity for fruitful exchanges. However, we must not forget that the IHRA is dealing with ethical issues. The IHRA is on the way to developing and adopting its very first strategy. Such a strategy is meant to focus our efforts and streamline our work, to ensure we have even more impact, in the sense of the Stockholm Declaration. Let us keep in mind that we, delegates, are accountable to Holocaust survivors, to the Jewish and Roma communities. Let us remain ever committed to the implementation of the Stockholm Declaration, from which I will quote the last sentence to finish my address as well:

“Our commitment must be to remember the victims who perished, respect the survivors still with us, and reaffirm humanity's common aspiration for mutual understanding and justice.”