



INTERNATIONAL
**HOLOCAUST
REMEMBRANCE**
ALLIANCE

5 March 2018

**Address by IHRA Chair, Ambassador Sandro De Bernardin, at the Handover of the
IHRA Chairman**

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

A few weeks ago, on the eve of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day, 87-year-old Liliana Segre was appointed Senator for life by the President of the Italian Republic Sergio Mattarella.

Deported to Auschwitz at the age of eight, she is one of the 25 Italian children (out of 776) to survive the concentration and extermination camp. For several decades after her liberation, Mrs. Segre chose not to speak publicly about what she had experienced, but in the 90s she began to tell her story at conferences and in schools.

Since then, she has devoted her life to the transmission of memory, and has had her testimony featured in multiple documentaries and books. By granting her one of the country's highest honours, President Mattarella explicitly recognized the "utmost social merit" of her activities, turning her tragic experience into a message of peace.

Both right- and left-wing parties applauded the President's decision, thereby confirming bi-partisan support for Holocaust remembrance in Italy. This allowed our outgoing Government to commit Italy to the Chairmanship of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance ahead of a general election. Indeed, I take over the

Chair from my Swiss colleague two days after the elections, and I do not know who will lead our next government. But I feel safe, because I am sure that the Italian position and commitment to Holocaust remembrance will not change.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Tonight I would like – first and foremost – to thank Ambassador Baettig for his masterful and productive leadership of the IHRA over this past year. The Swiss Chair’s main legacy is the new organizational strategy which will allow our organization to cope with present challenges more effectively.

The *raison d’être* of the IHRA and its purpose are far from fading into history. Too many worrying factors pollute our societies which increasingly require attention and a sharp response by governments.

Standing up for the truth – the truth of what happened in the past, the truth of what is happening today – remains essential. The contribution of the IHRA to this end remains crucial.

It is with this in mind that the members of the IHRA Troika – Ambassador Baettig, myself and Ambassador Santer who will be next in the Chair on behalf of Luxembourg – look towards Poland, a longstanding and respected member of the IHRA, with a shared concern.

The IHRA community – including Poland – is committed to our founding document, the Stockholm Declaration, which outlines the shared commitment of our Member Countries to encourage the study of the Holocaust in all its dimensions and to uphold its truth against those who would deny it. The recently adopted legislative amendment challenges Poland's capacity to honor this Declaration.

Safeguarding the historical record is of such importance to the IHRA, that along with countering distortion, it will be the focus of our work for the next five years. The main priority for the Italian Chair will be to begin implementation of the new strategy, in particular through the rationalization of our working structures and the strengthening of the Permanent Office. Given its limited resources, the IHRA must focus its work on activities where it can make a difference.

A parallel goal is to increase visibility and awareness of the IHRA in general, beginning at home in Italy. This ambition moved – among other initiatives – the issue, yesterday, of the postage stamp that you can see displayed here.

Helping an informed public and our institutions to know and understand what the IHRA is and does is key to fostering the role of the IHRA as an *influencer* and a contributor to historically-informed policymaking.

With this in mind, beyond organizing the two usual Plenary Meetings of the IHRA (the first in Rome, at the very end of May; the second in Ferrara, in the last week of

November), we are preparing two international conferences which will be open to academics and the general public.

The first one – on 27 May in Rome – will deal with historical models and practices of racial laws. Indeed, 2018 marks the 80th anniversary since the beginning of legal persecution of Italian Jews. We would like the IHRA too to devote some work to the issue of racial legislations during this year.

The second public conference will take place in Milan on 16 November, and will be devoted to countering incitement to hate: a plague that is drawing new strength from the potential of social media in the web.

The most powerful weapon against this plague, as well as against Holocaust denial and distortion, remains education.

That's why, as Italy begins its Chairmanship of the IHRA, our Minister for Education has issued administrative guidelines for effective teaching about the Holocaust. All teachers in Italy are now provided with clear criteria and information, allowing them to speak about the Shoah from a sound historical and pedagogical basis.

Along the same lines, the Ministry of Education is launching a website where teachers can exchange experiences and best practices.

A documentary film is in preparation, with a collection of testimonies from Italian Holocaust survivors in a form suitable for its use in schools. Finally, an animated movie, co-produced with the Italian national broadcaster RAI, of the story of two Italian young sisters deported to Auschwitz (who luckily survived), will soon be released: it is meant to initiate children – in the least traumatic way – in the knowledge of the Holocaust.

Ladies and gentlemen,

“Counter Distortion and Safeguard the Record” is the priority theme spelt by the new IHRA strategy.

Indeed, to stand up for memory is a commitment that we owe both to those who died and to those who have not yet been born. Remembrance is essential not only to honour the victims and survivors of the past, but also to protect the future of our children.

If the Holocaust was not an incident, but a consistent by-product of modernity – as Zygmunt Bauman explained – then we cannot lessen attention and vigilance. As Bauman denounced, progress makes it more difficult to behave in a moral way because it widens the distance between us and the final effect of our behaviour, thereby sterilizing our perception of personal responsibility.

Internet and social media magnify this distance. Moreover, they are the playing field of – and magnify the damage of – all types of fake news. For centuries Jews have been the victims of defamation based on fake news: let's remember the accusations of ritual killing of children, or the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

Hence the essential character of the contribution of the IHRA, where experts work to preserve information and testimonies and share best practices and government officials are called to make use of those materials for education purposes and to shape policy.

IHRA working definitions of Holocaust distortion and denial, and antisemitism are expected to become references for action by national Governments.

Indeed, who can deny that distortion and trivialization of the Holocaust are a growing danger? And that antisemitism is showing up today in many different ways, in many different countries?

Antisemitism is a poison that can be injected in low doses, through different means. Trivialization is one of the most insidious. We have to destroy any small amount of poison, even if that small amount does not seem lethal in itself. Otherwise, sooner or later a lethal level will be reached.

Remembrance and safeguarding the record cannot be seen as perfunctory tasks. You might remember that – faced with the problem of racism in the United States –

American Presidents decided that acting according to the rules of ordinary administration was not enough, and that affirmative action was needed.

Today, can Holocaust denial be considered just an ordinary expression of freedom of thought? If so, even environmental pollution could be presented as an ordinary consequence of freedom of economic activity: but Governments take extra-ordinary measures to counter such phenomenon. They do it because health is a *public good*, the protection of which deserves extra-ordinary action. In the same way, historical truth is also a *public good*, because our societies cannot survive if they are based on false assumptions and polluted by the antisemitism that nourishes them.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let us remember! Let us remember that 2018 marks the 80th anniversary of Italian racial laws, but also of the Evian Conference, where civilized countries decided to close their eyes to the tragedy that was looming on German Jews. It is also the 80th anniversary of the Munich Agreement, when Western democracies closed their eyes to the danger of tyranny and refused to get involved in a drama they considered too far from their borders.

In 1938 the international community refused to recognize the signs of the times. Today the international community still needs a watchman and sentinels to alert our consciences. This is the task of the IHRA, it is our task: to ensure that awareness prevails over ignorance, responsibility over indifference.

As Primo Levi – a survivor of the Shoah – wrote: “If understanding is impossible, knowing is imperative, because what happened could happen again. Consciences – even our consciences – can be seduced and obscured again.”

Thank you for your attention.

