



International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance

16 February 2017. IHRA Chair Ambassador Mihnea Constantinescu at opening of the conference “Refugee Policies from 1933 until Today: Challenges and Responsibilities” in cooperation with the Holy See.

Your excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As Chair of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance or IHRA, it is a great honour to open the conference ‘Refugee Policies from 1933 until Today: Challenges and Responsibilities’.

Noting that compassion and generosity to refugees is one of the hallmarks of the mission of His Holiness Pope Francis, it is a great privilege for the IHRA to hold this event in cooperation with the Holy See.

Please let me begin by expressing our particularly heartfelt thanks to H.E. Archbishop Paul Gallagher, Secretary for Relations with States, Monsignor Antoine Camilleri, Under-Secretary for Relations with States, Monsignor Ionut Paul Strejac from the Secretariat of State of the Holy See and Father Norbert Hofmann, secretary of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, without whom this conference would have never come into being.

We are also delighted to welcome H.E Archbishop Silvano Maria Tomasi, Secretary Delegate of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development as our key note speaker this evening.

Let me also thank the other representatives of the Holy See and IHRA delegates who are here acting as moderators and rapporteurs. IHRA is represented here by committed individuals who are the heart and soul of our organisation and I deeply appreciate their continuous support and advice.

Looking at the programme, I am sure you will note that our invited panellists come from a host of varied and well respected organizations who have refugee policy at the centre of their work. I thank our external panellists for joining us at this important event.

For you to understand the genesis of the IHRA, let me briefly take you back to a historic meeting which was held in January 2000 in Stockholm.

Former Swedish Prime Minister Goeran Persson had been concerned by a poll conducted in Sweden, which seemed to show that high school children had little knowledge of the Holocaust. Barely half a century after the horror of the Holocaust, Auschwitz, Treblinka, Sobibor were beginning to fade into history. To disappear from collective memory.

Recognizing the crucial need for a coordinated, international effort on Holocaust-related issues, Persson brought together the representatives of 46 states with scholars, educators and survivors to attend the Stockholm Forum that January in the year 2000.

That meeting was also attended by five representatives of the Holy See. In the written message the delegation of the Holy See submitted to the Forum, they outlined their hope that “justice and peace will be the result of all endeavors that the Forum might inspire”.

The initial outcome of the Forum was the Stockholm Declaration and the formation of the unique network which exists today as the IHRA. In the Stockholm Declaration, which outlines the commitments of our member countries, we echo the words of the Holy See “to reaffirm humanity's common aspiration for mutual understanding and justice.”

As an organization which deals with the history of the Holocaust, the IHRA knows all too well the consequences of the international community failing to respond appropriately to humanitarian crisis. The circumstances surrounding the current refugee situation are notably different from the persecution of Jews and other victims before, during and after the Holocaust; nonetheless, there are parallels between the treatment of refugees then and now – particularly regarding the closing of borders, the rise of xenophobia, and the use of dehumanising language.

Expert delegates of the IHRA are profoundly concerned about the plight of the refugees fleeing war-torn countries and the current trends of rising antisemitism, anti-Muslim sentiment and right-wing nationalism.

The IHRA greatly respects the work of organizations and volunteers on the ground working to help ensure dignified treatment and sanctuary for people seeking refuge. However, as a network of policy-makers, historians and educators, the IHRA wishes to contribute to supporting this important work in the best way it knows how – this is through sharing expertise. Policy-makers and people working on the ground with refugees have little to no time to read anthologies on the refugee policies of the

1930s, but IHRA experts can make knowledge on successful and failed refugee policies from the past visible and accessible to organizations and governments dealing with this issue today.

This is what we tried to do in our recent publication on the neutral countries and the Shoah and this is what we try do here today.

Let us call this historically-informed policy-making.

We wish to establish ourselves not only as a body of historical experts, but as an institution which reflects on the past in order to contribute to positive and ethical solutions to the worrying challenges of the present.

This is the IHRA contribution to seeking justice and peace and we are honoured to have the Holy See cooperate with us here today in working towards this noble goal.

In the summer of 1938, delegates from thirty-two countries met at the French resort of Evian. Records note that country delegate after delegate took the floor to express great sympathy for the plight of refugees. But as Time magazine reported, most of them “pleaded that they had already absorbed their capacity”, or even “turned in a flat 'No' to Jews.”

In winter of that year, the first Kindertransport train left Berlin for Harwich in the United Kingdom. There are touching photographs of unaccompanied minors arriving on British soil – but there are no photographs of their parents, left to their fates in Nazi Europe.

Six months later the vast majority of the 937 passengers on board the SS St Louis - mostly Jews fleeing the Third Reich - were turned away from the American continent before being forced to return across the Atlantic. By the end of the war 254 of them would be dead. Murdered in Sobibor. In Auschwitz-Birkenau. In Buchenwald.

Ladies and gentleman,

Needless to say the list above is not exhaustive – as Professor Yehuda Bauer always reminds us, no one comes out of the Holocaust clean. Let us remember the policies that brought relief. But let us not forget the failures of the international community.

I finish with these examples of the failure from the not too distant past because they are so very relevant today. I urge you to keep them in your minds as we discuss. Let us call to mind those individuals who in this very moment find themselves standing before a sealed border with nowhere to go.

We must offer a way out.

We must make a place.

We must act together as a humble reflection of the Saint wisdom: “Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary.”

I am confident that this conference will be an important contribution to the present international initiatives addressing the situation of the refugees in the world.

Let us raise awareness and speak out of the problems they are facing, inspired in each of our endeavor by the visionary and generous encouragements expressed by His Holiness Pope Francis.

I wish you a fruitful discussion.