

Excellencies,
Dear Dr. Libeskind and dear Mrs. Libeskind,
Mrs. Executive Secretary,
Ladies and gentlemen especially the representatives from the media,
Dear colleagues and friends,

Thank you all for joining us today for the handover of the Chairmanship of this organization dedicated to the Education, Remembrance and Research of the Holocaust. A very special word of thanks goes to our host, my colleague and friend, Ambassador Renier Nijskens who so generously receives us here today.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Recently someone asked me, ‘Has not all been written and said on the Holocaust? Do you really think you will have enough to do during that Belgian chairmanship?’

Dear friends, I am sure many of you will have heard the same remarks. They contain a serious risk and present a challenge we have to face: even well informed people would prefer to consider the Holocaust, this unprecedented genocide, challenging the foundations of civilization itself, as ‘another’ fact of history.

I would like to argue that this is not a symptom of “Holocaust-fatigue”, it is rather a demonstration of ignorance and a lack of awareness of the huge gaps in our knowledge. Gaps in the knowledge of the facts, gaps in the knowledge of the processes of the Holocaust and gaps in the understanding of the environment that made and let it happen. It is exactly for that reason that almost 15 years ago, a very sincere and very determined effort was undertaken: to educate, remember and research about the Holocaust. Your presence here today proves that that effort has been worthwhile. Indeed, we have grown into an intergovernmental organization of 31 Member States. Three States and a number of international organizations enjoy observer status.

It is thus with a lot of apprehension that I stand here today, on behalf of my country, Belgium, taking up the chairmanship of a rapidly growing Taskforce.

The Charter of this Taskforce, the Stockholm Declaration, to which all Member States have committed themselves, constitutes a set of values and an ambitious program as such.

Unfortunately, 12 years after we solemnly adopted this Stockholm Declaration, we cannot but note an increase in manifestations, statements and acts of racism, Antisemitism and xenophobia.

To promote the education, remembrance and research about the Holocaust in a deteriorating environment will require increased efforts and cooperation of all, especially since the number of direct witnesses, of survivors, is rapidly dwindling.

The Belgian chairmanship stands ready to cooperate with all ITF members, observers and representatives of the civil society to achieve our common goals.

In other words, dear Colleagues, we need your cooperation, support and understanding.

Luckily, already before starting, we got the best help we could get from the outgoing chairmanship, our neighbors and friends from the Netherlands, who have tirelessly worked to restructure the Taskforce, to make it ready for a more content-oriented focus. At this point I would like to sincerely congratulate and thank Ambassador Karel de Beer, his deputies Marcel de Kort and Marcel Floor and the whole Dutch presidency team for their splendid chairmanship. I have just one regret, you have set very high standards and made it extremely difficult for your successors to live up to this. A very tall order indeed!

Thanks to the Netherlands chairmanship, the structures and the procedures are there, it is now up to the membership to prove that this is not a loose and heterogeneous group who from time to time meets and exchanges views, but a dedicated group with a purpose and a vision.

Belgium will try to implement the decisions taken at The Hague and, together with the Chairs of the Working Groups we will develop multiyear action plans, focusing on killing sites, access to archives, educational research and Holocaust Memorial Days.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Belgium being a federal State, competences on many of the themes the ITF is dealing with are with our Communities, which are well represented here today. Their representatives will actively cooperate in the Working Groups and will organize the two major meetings of our Chairmanship: the Flemish Community in June in Mechelen, the highly symbolic city which served as the starting point for the deportation of Jewish citizens from Belgium and in December in Liège by the Communauté Française and the Deutschsprachige Gemeinschaft.

Over the coming year a number of events will mark the Belgian Chairmanship.

In May a Train of the 1000 will transport as many young people from Belgium and from Europe to Auschwitz. They will get an educational program on the horrors of the darkest pages of European history.

In September we will inaugurate a monument in memory of the hidden children in the very South of Belgium, the Province of Luxembourg, and a week later the completely new Museum and Memorial will be inaugurated in Mechelen.

Obviously there will be many more conferences, symposia and events over the coming year. We will make sure that you and your experts are informed about these and get the most out of it.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Brussels is the world over known as the capital of Europe and its decision making centre. We will try to use the proximity of the European Institutions to establish a working cooperation in order to create synergies.

Contacts have already been made and will be pursued.

At the same time we will of course continue and intensify the excellent cooperation established with a number of international and intergovernmental organizations.

We will do our utmost to be able, in a year from now, to hand over a performing organization to our successors, Canada. I take this opportunity to salute very warmly the Canadian delegation and the future Chair, Mr. Mario Silva.

Before concluding, I would like to sincerely thank the head of the permanent office, Dr. Kathrin Meyer and her team.

Without you, dear Kathrin and without the permanent office, we would not be where we are today.

Thank you for your valuable support in the coming year.

And now Ladies and Gentlemen,

I do not need to introduce Dr. Daniel Libeskind, who is known the world over and especially in Berlin, and who has established a very special relationship with the Taskforce.

Dr. Libeskind, Mrs. Libeskind, dear Lev, we very much appreciate your generosity towards the Taskforce and your being with us today.

Dr. Libeskind, the floor is yours.