



International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance

**7 March 2017.**

**Ambassador Benno Böttig at the IHRA Handover, Swiss Embassy in Berlin**

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for Switzerland to take over the Chairmanship of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance today from Romania.

Switzerland considers this chairmanship as a means of carrying on its commitment to sustain and implement IHRA's goals. This implies a great responsibility for Switzerland - and for me personally.

I would like to begin by expressing my thanks to Ambassador Mihnea Constantinescu for the successful cooperation which began already under his chairmanship in 2016.

I also would like to thank Ambassador Christine Schraner Burgener for hosting us at her residence and the staff of the Swiss Embassy in Berlin for their excellent preparation of this handover event. We have started as we mean to go on.

I must also echo the words of Ambassador Constantinescu in thanking Dr Kathrin Meyer, Executive Secretary of the IHRA, and her entire team for their role in helping us to prepare the Swiss chairmanship.

And last but not least, I am very grateful to the Swiss delegation to the IHRA who have provided input and guidance to me as we prepared.

We rely heavily on the expertise of our delegates and of the members of our National Advisory Group. The priorities and projects of our chairmanship have been conceived and developed within the frame of this group of representatives of Jewish and Roma organizations, of teacher trainers and academics.

I am delighted that we have Monique Eckmann, a member of the delegation, with us today. I congratulate Monique warmly for her tireless work and her vision to have seen, four years ago already, the need for the publication on research in teaching and learning about the Holocaust that is presented today.

On receiving the invitation to this event, I hope that it stayed in your hands a little bit longer than usual. The portraits of Bronislaw Erlich, Nina Weil, Eduard Kornfeld and Christa Markovits, all Holocaust survivors, are on the front of the invitation card. They are also part of a photo project you will have the opportunity to discover after the handover today. This exhibition, conceived by the Gamaraal Foundation, presents some of the Holocaust survivors living in Switzerland.

Survivors of the Holocaust are at the very heart of what we do here today. These portraits remind us that when we speak of the victims and the survivors of the Holocaust, we speak of human beings. Often the sheer scale of the tragedy can overwhelm us – testimonies remind us of the people behind the history.

Holocaust survivors may be few, but we have a monumental opportunity to engage and talk with those who have lived this history. The work being done to gather testimonies is essential for educating future generations.

An excellent example of how such a dialogue between generations can be fostered is the project “Gegen das Vergessen” conducted by the teachers and students of the Georg-von-Giesche school in Berlin.

And I am particularly happy to welcome those teachers and students among us today!

Why don't you stand up to be recognized by us today.

Six groups from the 9th and 10th grade researched 15 short biographies of Holocaust survivors living in Switzerland that were displayed in libraries and schools and eventually republished with paintings of Gerhard Richter on the cover page.

The interesting history of this editorial project led by Professor Ivan Lefkovits is summed-up and illustrated in the book of 2015 “Stories and Faces of Holocaust Survivors”, copies of which you find here.

Ivan Lefkovits, born in 1937 in Czechoslovakia, lost his entire family in the Holocaust, with the exception of his mother. He was deeply moved by the careful and thoughtful work the students did in recreating his own story and history as well as the stories of other 14 survivors. Some of the students had the opportunity to meet Ivan Lefkovits and his wife when they travelled to Berlin. Ivan Lefkovits stressed the importance of helping young people today to find a connection to the history of the Holocaust.

The decision to publish each of the 15 memoirs in individual booklets is symbolic. The Holocaust was unprecedented, unimaginable in scale, and yet with each individual story, we are reminded that we speak of people – with a history, a memory, a life.

We must also acknowledge that they are slowly disappearing from among us. Of the 15 stories captured in this collection, seven of the survivors have passed away.

It was the belief that the Holocaust must never be allowed to fade from collective memory that inspired then Swedish Prime Minister Goeran Persson to create the IHRA in the year 1998. It is that belief that motivates us today.

Following on from the priorities of the Romanian chairmanship, the Swiss IHRA chairmanship will focus on education, youth and social media. These three pillars are inextricably linked. To ensure that the past remains a part of the present of the younger generation, a greater use of their digital language and a larger presence in their digital space is necessary.

Our children today live in a world, in which they are flooded with information, which tends to blur the distinction between real life and virtual reality. We have therefore a duty to provide the younger generation and citizens of tomorrow with the tools to distinguish between what is essential and what is secondary, between a fact and a myth and so between the real and virtual worlds.

As a citizen and as a father, I am personally aware of the duty to remind the young generation that the story of the Holocaust and its victims touches everybody. We have to remain vigilant and conscious of what can happen if we subject others to systematic discrimination, humiliation and exclusion.

Accordingly, the Swiss Chairmanship is planning a number of further initiatives:

In cooperation with Austria and Germany, Professor Peter Gautschi, who together with Monique Eckmann, was one of the organisers of IHRA's conference on education research in Lucerne, is developing a multimedia smartphone-application entitled "Fleeing the Holocaust".

Through personal stories, the app seeks once again to make the abstract concrete – using a medium that is very familiar to young people today.

We also support the project by a Canadian historian and by Mrs. Agnes Hirschi, the stepdaughter of Carl Lutz, who have been gathering testimonies of Jewish people saved by Carl Lutz's action. Carl Lutz was the Swiss diplomat who worked with the Jewish resistance to save tens of thousands of Jews in Budapest. A collection of these testimonies will be presented at the second IHRA plenary meeting in Berne in November.

The question of teaching about and learning from the Holocaust arises in several national contexts, with each country having a different response based on its own history and its relationship with the past.

Against this background, the University of teacher trainers of Lausanne organizes an international conference early 2018 aiming at giving teachers and trainers from the various member states of the IHRA, including Switzerland, the opportunity to share their practices and their experiences, and encouraging a diversity of perspectives so that we can learn from each other.

Prior to the second IHRA plenary in Berne, the University of teacher trainers Bern will host an IHRA conference on the murder of people with disabilities and the connection of the euthanasia programme to the Holocaust.

In conclusion, the thread through all our projects in our Chairmanship is their focus on young people and the desire to find approaches and strategies to raise their awareness of these unprecedented historical events.

Ladies and Gentleman,

Allow me to finish today as we began our gathering: with the survivors at the forefront as they will be throughout the Swiss chairmanship.

I would like to quote Ivan Lefkovits who said:

*“Why must we write history down? Perhaps it is not for our sake, but rather for the sake of the six million people who died.”*

Indeed, we remember to commemorate those who lost their lives. Let us also remember for those who survived and for those who came after.