



COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
COMMISSAIRE AUX DROITS DE L'HOMME



CommDH/Speech(2012)9
English only

Remember the past and remain vigilant today

Statement by Nils Muižnieks
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Tribute from the European Youth to the people who saved the honour of humanity during the Holocaust, Tirana, 5 September 2012

The Shoah stands out as one of the defining moments of history that shaped the conscience of mankind. The extreme scale of the systematic persecution and genocide perpetrated against the Jewish populations in Europe has made the Shoah the epitome of human tragedy. While unique in its roots, implementation and envisioned totality, the Shoah has broader significance – remembrance of the Shoah has become a central part of our efforts to prevent all crimes against humanity.

Along with the victims, we must also remember those courageous people across Europe who strived to save the lives of their fellow human beings from extermination. Many persons from different walks of life stood up and opposed evil even under the totalitarian Nazi regime. This was the case in Albania as well and we are now paying tribute to these people for upholding human values. Alas, the righteous were not numerous enough to save many European Jewish communities.

The founding of the Council of Europe grew out of a determination to overcome past hatreds and conflicts and to promote peace, democracy and human rights on the continent. The European Court of Human Rights, the various monitoring mechanisms, including the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, which I had the honour to chair previously, and of course the Commissioner for Human Rights all contribute to the general mission of the Council of Europe.

Knowing the past is vital and the Council of Europe promotes the teaching of the Holocaust as a tool for preventing future crimes against humanity. The Council of Europe also has extensive experience in fostering multiperspective history teaching about key events in the 20th century. We have to document the past, seek to understand why such virulent racism could flourish, how genocide could take place, draw human rights lessons from it, and integrate the Holocaust into our identities.

Unfortunately, antisemitism is still very much alive in Europe and it often takes the form of trivialising or even denying the Holocaust. Many Jewish community centres, synagogues and cemeteries in Europe need armed guards to prevent attacks or vandalism, which still occur all too often. Disturbingly, Nazi symbols continue to be used and hate speech against Jews, especially on the internet, remains shockingly common.

Some of the broader “habits of mind” that underpinned the Holocaust have not gone away – racialised thinking, conspiracy theories, the tendency to search for scapegoats and dehumanise the “other”. Such “habits of mind” are not only present among right-wing extremists, but have made broader inroads into mainstream society.

Holocaust and human rights education are essential, as is combatting racism and intolerance. The action needed is clear: we need comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation and good hate crimes laws that are consistently implemented by well-trained law enforcement, strong equality bodies, well-funded civil society organisations, and media and political parties that condemn racism, antisemitism and other forms of intolerance and make them socially unacceptable.

There is also an urgent need to renew our commitment to ensure accountability for genocide and to combat impunity. International courts, whether we speak of the Nuremberg Tribunal, the ICC in the Hague, the ICT for the former Yugoslavia and others, have an essential role to play. However, we must also remember the victims and help them rebuild their lives, implement their rights, and tell their story.

We must ask ourselves every day whether we are building societies with courageous individuals like those to whom we honour today, whether we are rearing a young generation which is immune to the appeals of racist, totalitarian ideologies? We have a duty to remember the past and remain vigilant today. It is only then that we can look with hope and confidence to the future.