

Roma Holocaust ceremony, 2nd August 2019

Speaking points Matjaz Gruden, Director of Democratic Participation

On this day 75 years ago, 3000 Roma men, women and children have been murdered at the so called Gypsy Camp, or Zigeuner Lager, a part of the Auschwitz Birkenau extermination camp.

Today we are here to remember and pay respect to these and other victims of the Nazi crimes against the Roma and Sinti.

And we are here to say - »never again«.

In January, we shall mark the 75th Anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz - and we shall say again - »never again«.

As we have said it year - after year - after year. As a promise. As a pledge. As a commitment.

But far too often also merely as a ceremonial platitude. Well meant, but with not much more than words to back it up.

And that is not enough. Because it happened. And it may therefore happen again.

Not my words. But of Primo Levi. Italian Jewish author and a survivor of Auschwitz Birkenau.

History is a precious teacher. But it may also be a severe and merciless one, repeating itself as a punishment to those who choose to ignore its lessons.

So memory is important. Memory of the victims.

Memory of the millions of Jewish victims of the Shoah.

Memory of hundreds of thousands of others – Soviet prisoners of war, Poles and other Slavs, political opponents, Jehova's witnesses, people with disabilities...

Memory of the homosexuals, condemned to the camps by the Nazis, but often forced to serve their sentences in full, after the camps had been liberated.

And memory of Roma and Sinti victims of the Holocaust. Condemned, as Jews, to extermination.

Memory of up to half a million of men, women and children - first murdered, then, for decades, ignored. The prejudice which survived the war – the same prejudice that had paved the way for the crime in the first place - had also erected a wall of silence, only broken by the Roma themselves, struggling to keep the memory of their tragedy – of our tragedy - alive.

So memory is important. But so is the understanding of history. The understanding of the gradual, state orchestrated descent into inhumanity, of a crime conceived by politicians peddling hate, planned by bureaucrats, cheered by many ordinary citizens and executed by people in uniforms. The mechanics of a crime. The logics of a crime. Not just it's tragic end, but also – and especially – the seeming banality of its beginnings.

Without understanding yesterday, we cannot understand today.

Without understanding what happens when there is no more democracy, no more human rights, no more humanity, we cannot truly understand what is democracy and what are human rights. And why they are important. And why they are important for us.

This is why we propose to restore the Council of Europe work on history teaching and remembrance of the Holocaust, also as means of prevention of crimes against humanity.

To remember. And to understand. Because it is important.

And we appreciate the support of member states and especially the attention of the French presidency, to history teaching and the understanding of history.

We also appreciate the strong political support of the member states for the Council of Europe work on Roma.

Even today, in parts of Europe, there is still evidence of racially-motivated discrimination, of hate speech - and hate crimes - against Roma. Of systematic persecution and forced evictions.

This is why the activities of the Council of Europe are so important. The efforts to fight the prejudice, to combat discrimination and to improve the integration and daily lives of Roma.

The Council of Europe member states have recognised the difficulties faced by Roma and Travellers and the need to undertake effective measures to eradicate discrimination against them. The 2016 Thematic Action Plan on the Inclusion of Roma and Travellers, which is coming to an end this year, is an important milestone in the Council of Europe effort to progress on key strategic objectives.

It is an effort which needs to be continued.

Because it is important to remember.

Because it is important to understand.

And because it is important to do something about it.

If we are really serious about »never again«.