

**European Roma Holocaust Memorial Day
Auschwitz, Poland, 2 August 2019**

**Speech by Mr Jeroen SCHOKKENBROEK
Director of Anti-Discrimination, Council of Europe, Strasbourg**

Excellencies, distinguished speakers, ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of Secretary General Thorbjørn Jagland, I thank the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma and the Association of Roma in Poland for inviting to this commemoration ceremony the Council of Europe, Europe's international organisation for the promotion and protection of: human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. The Council of Europe was established in 1949 as a direct consequence of the horrors of the Second World War in the firm belief that upholding these three principles is essential to ensure that the atrocities would never happen again. In this sense, Auschwitz was the moral birthplace of the Council of Europe.

On this memorial day, let me first pay homage to the victims, the hundreds of thousands of Sinti and Roma who perished in the Second World War. We commemorate with the survivors who are here with us today. We are privileged and humbled by your presence. Your testimonies are stark reminders to all of us to keep the memory alive and to work hard so that the atrocities are not repeated.

The Roma Holocaust would have passed into oblivion if the Roma themselves had not struggled to keep the memory alive because so many Europeans turned a blind eye to what had happened.

It is vital to end the silence that has lasted for seven decades. Recognition of the Roma Holocaust and giving the history of the Roma its rightful place in history teaching in Europe are crucial for building confidence and trust between Roma and non-Roma.

Ladies and gentlemen, this commemoration would be incomplete if it was limited to remembering the past. It is also a reminder of our duty to work for a better future. It is said that history never repeats itself, but we are only doomed to relive our past if we fail to learn from it.

But what do we see when we look our contemporary society in the face?

Extremist and xenophobic movements are mushrooming throughout Europe. Nationalism and populism are on the rise, no longer in political discourse only, but also in action. They threaten the very principles of the European model of substantive democracy, based on Human Rights and Rule of Law. In the words of the Council of Europe's statute: genuine democracy! Roma and other people perceived as "different" - jews, muslims, LGBT persons and others - are under threat in many of our member states. Anti-gypsyism is rampant, even in mainstream and in high political circles.

Large sections of the population share these views. Also, much of this discrimination is fed by the media. Media, above all the social media, grossly misrepresent Roma and perpetuate negative images and stereotypes.

Roma face discrimination, hostility, rejection, segregation, racism, hate speech, and hate crimes.

Many Roma face obstacles in accessing the justice system to defend their human rights.

Combating anti-gypsyism and working for the social inclusion of Roma are amongst the top priorities of the Council of Europe, because this is about defending the Human Rights of millions of Europeans.

Human rights are not a luxury to be accorded at leisure. They are rights here and now. They are universal rights that belong to each and every human being.

This is being demonstrated time and again by the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights and the findings of our other human rights bodies such as the Commissioner for Human Rights, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), and the European Committee of Social Rights.

The Council of Europe is promoting the teaching of Roma history to show the contribution of Roma to the common European heritage. We work together with OSCE/ODIHR on Roma Holocaust Remembrance education. We work together with the European Commission on inclusive education for Roma children, on access to justice for Roma women, and on Roma inclusion at local and regional level through good governance, capacity-building and Roma empowerment.

Society, but also Roma themselves, have a duty to rediscover and restore the Roma heritage and identity. To that end, the Council of Europe co-founded the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC) in Berlin, with a mandate to fight anti-Gypsyism through arts and culture.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The hundreds of thousands of Roma men, women and children who died in this camp and in other places during the Second World War must be a constant reminder to all of us to never lose sight of our goal: a European society free of discrimination, racism and violence, where everybody, including all Sinti and Roma, can live in peace and dignity.