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COMMISSAIRE AUX DROITS DE L'HOMME



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**74<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the  
Roma Holocaust Memorial Day**  
Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2 August 2018

**Address by Dunja Mijatović**  
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

I would like to thank the German Central Council for Roma and Sinti and the Association of Roma in Poland for inviting me to take part in this commemoration. I would also like to thank you all for coming here today, to the place where humankind showed its vilest face.

But most of all, I would like to pay respect to Rita Prigmore and the other survivors who are with us today. You have overcome the pain to come back to the place that took the lives of your family members and friends, and marked your own forever. Your testimony and presence here today is a powerful message of courage and strength. It confers on us an even greater responsibility to never forget what happened, and to act every day to prevent history from repeating itself.

As any time I visit this extermination camp, I can hardly find the appropriate words to describe the feelings that this place evokes. These barracks, fences, laboratories, the crematoria, they all stand as testimony to the cruelty that human beings are capable of when they are influenced with propaganda and prejudices that generate fear and hate.

At the same time, as I walked around the camp, I also thought of all those courageous acts of resistance that took place here: the sharing of food, the loving care of parents protecting their children, the acts of rebellion, such as the uprising of 16 May 1944 in the “Zigeuner Lager”. Those acts of humanity defied the reign of cruelty that ruled this camp and planted seeds of hope.

The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum not only reminds us of our duty to remember; it makes us “feel” the imperative to act on that memory and help the current and future generations to stem off the prejudices and hatred that made the Holocaust possible and caused so much suffering to our fellow human beings only because they were Jews, Roma, or otherwise considered as not fitting the monstrous plans of the Nazi-regime.

The imperative to act is particularly important today. Ignorance, the denial of past atrocities, anti-Gypsyism and anti-Semitism, hate and violence are spreading in many European countries.

In today's Europe there are countries where it is still seen as acceptable for the authorities to single out Roma as a group for police operations; countries where neo-Nazi militias chase Roma from their homes; where they cannot live a normal life because the authorities constantly evict them. Or where Roma children are obliged to attend segregated schools or are abusively separated from their families. Let us not forget that these human rights violations are a continuation of past practices.

It is not rare to hear politicians minimise or condone horrendous past human rights violations. In doing so, they not only offend the memory of the victims, but also make it possible for these past abuses to perpetuate themselves. By scapegoating Roma and blaming them for the human rights violations they experience, they dehumanise them. They fan the same flames of hatred that little by little led to the Holocaust of Roma.

All of this is an insult not only to Roma and Sinti people and to those who died and suffered here, but to us all as human beings. We have the duty to halt this tide of hate.

The best way of doing this is to speak out, confront and educate. Educate about the tragic past but also the positive contribution of Roma and Sinti to Europe. Educate to debunk age-old myths and deeply-rooted prejudices. Educate to resist and confront hate speech and human rights violations against Roma. Educate about justice and equality for all.

I want to see more politicians, intellectuals, opinion makers, and teachers break their silence and become vocal against those who instill hate and trigger human rights abuses against Roma.

I want to see more education systems that teach Roma history and culture, that treat Roma children equally and give them the same opportunities to contribute to society as other children.

I want to see more truth and reconciliation commissions that set the record straight once and for all on past human rights violations against Roma, compensate the victims and promote mutual understanding and trust.

I want to see more and more young people visit memorials like this camp and engage in dialogue with institutions promoting remembrance of past atrocities.

As Commissioner for Human Rights, I'll spare no efforts to contribute to achieving these goals. I will keep reminding state authorities of their duty to remember, to protect and to prevent. I intend to be vocal in countering anti-Gypsyism in all its forms and in recalling that Roma must be able to enjoy their human rights like all other Europeans, free from fear and coercion.

I also intend to engage with young people, the media and society at large to promote a better understanding of Roma history, to combat prejudices and discrimination and foster more accepting societies, and to overcome obstacles that still keep many of them on the margins of society.

Today, we commemorate the Roma who suffered and died at the hands of people blinded by hate and fear. From tomorrow on, we must act to open the eyes of our families, friends and colleagues to the cruelty that happened here, on its causes and consequences. We must take the testimony Rita Prigmore shared with us as a call for action.

The women, men, children, elderly who died here had loved, dreamed, hoped like each and every one of us. Their tragic destiny must become even more visible and guide us towards a more just, inclusive and peaceful future.