



Statement by the Chairperson in Office

H.E. Miroslav Lajčák

**Conference on Combating Antisemitism in the OSCE Region**

Bratislava, Slovakia

5 February 2019

UNOFFICIAL TRANSLATION

(delivered in Slovak)

*Dear Foreign Minister Kneissl, Secretary General Greminger, Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights Gísladóttir, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen.*

Welcome to Bratislava.

I am delighted you have accepted the invitation to the conference of the Slovak Chairmanship in OSCE on the difficult and painful subject of antisemitism.

I could start with a historical interpretation of the origins of antisemitism.

I could approach the issue conceptually or methodologically.

I could focus on political dimension of antisemitism.

Or take the religious angle, considering the geopolitical space.

I could speak about the psychology of an individual.

Or sociology of nations.

Because combating antisemitism takes all these – and many more – shapes.

However, today, I will speak about the tragedy of its human consequence.

I will tell you three stories from one human life.

### **First story**

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In the first story, I will take you to the place 330 kilometers away from this hall.

It's 7 April 1944 and the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp needs to be extended.

On the outside, behind the barbed wire, the construction of new barracks is progressing.

Hidden in the small gap between the piles of wood are two men.

One of them is still just a boy.

Rudolf Vrba from Topolčany and Alfred Wetzler from Trnava.

They have spent two long years in Auschwitz and know too well what follows an attempt to escape.

A sound of an alarm cuts through the evening air.

The camp closed and for the next 3 days as the wider area was searched.

Vrba and Wetzler decided to wait out literally just a few meters from the fence.

They spent 3 days hidden in between the wooded logs. In the end, there was either a spark of hope for freedom or certain death.

After the 72 hours the state of emergency in the camp was recalled and the police and gestapo took over the search. Vrba and Wetzler crawled to the near forest and begun their run.

They run home, to Slovakia. They run mostly throughout the night. Through forests, snow and mud.

They run for more than 12 days, 140 kilometers, before crossing the Slovak-Polish border and entered Skalité.

On 20 April 1944, when local farmer Ondrej Čanecký stepped out to his fields, he thought he had a simple, routine day ahead.

But right there, laying on the ground exhausted, hungry and sick, were Vrba and Wetzler.

It must have been immediately clear to him, that by helping the men, he would risk everything. Including his own life.

But Ondrej Čanecký took the men in, kept them hidden in his house for several days and fed them.

When they regained strength, he connected them with representatives of the Jewish religious community in Žilina.

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I know that many of you know this story.

It is a story of courage in face of the cowardice of antisemitism

Story of the power of the human spirit.

Strength. Will. Endurance.

I also know how important it is to remind ourselves.

Again. And again. And again.

Because antisemitism is not defeated. To the contrary.

It's 2019 and in Europe and around the world we are seeing trends that are dangerously reminiscent of the past.

We hear rhetoric of hate and it is making a comeback to our legislatures. Including in Slovakia.

It's the same old hate, just taking on a modern form.

It hits online, hides behind anonymity on social media and it is now so strong, that it manifest in parliamentary elections.

It is our duty to act against the spread of hatred.

Because anti-Semitism is not only about the 30's and 40's.

It's about centuries of sense of superiority, hate towards the unknown and misguided notion of one's own exceptionality.

And it's worst manifestations are always followed by the same question: *how is this possible? How could it happen again? How did after each pogrom come another?*

*And how some people dare to say holocaust never happened?*

We cannot allow a scenario in which future generations look to us and ask: *how could you let this happen? You must have seen it coming. Why didn't you act*

And that is where the second story starts.

## **Second story**

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Vrba and Wetzler didn't escape the death camp just to save themselves, but to save others.

Even though they had been planning a revolt for a long time, they took the action after finding out that Nazis were preparing new transports from countries they previously avoided, mainly Hungary.

When the massive construction of new barracks begun, Vrba and Wetzler couldn't wait any longer.

They had to go, they had to warn others and stop this.

At that time, the world didn't know about the scale and brutality of the atrocities.

When they arrived in Žilina, they testified before the Jewish working council between 25 - 28 April.

They were questioned separately and gave precise and detailed account of the massacres.

Their testimony was staggering.

Together, they drafted a 32-pages long report, detailing the layout of the camps in Auschwitz and Brzezinka, describing process of selections of the Jews and functioning of the camp.

They described when and how many transports arrived to Auschwitz, they drew sketches of the crematorium and gas chamber and estimated the number of deceased.

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This – is a story of prevention.

Vrba and Wetzler decided to act so that others wouldn't have to suffer like they did.

Today, when we have a new generation stepping up. Generation that (thank god) never experienced unfreedom. We have to talk about what happened.

Perhaps with the example of Rudolf Vrba.

When taken from his town and deported to the camp, he was 17 years old.

He too was somebody's classmate. Somebody's friend.

We need to tell these stories to our youth.

So they can detect the warning signs and understand that antisemitism is dangerous.

Because the support of the young generation to political entities promoting extremist ideologies and historical misinterpretations is growing. And it's very worrying.

Our Ministry is trying to respond to hoaxes and misinformation. We visit schools and universities and talk to students about what kind of a country Slovakia is.

How difficult was the fight for its democratic character and place in the European Union.

That democracy is not guaranteed. There are many enemies seeking to destroy it. We need to protect our democracy from hate.

Hate is the essence of antisemitism. To anti-Semites, totality is closer than freedom.

The third – is the story of upset and alert.

### **Third story**

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The text of the report was immediately translated to other languages and distributed to authorities abroad.

It reached Vatican, Switzerland, US ... BBC informed about it in the broadcast.

Vrba and Wetzler wanted to stop the atrocities, warn those in danger and inform those in power.

But the reaction came in late.

Maybe the things they saw were too much. Too painful. Too much to comprehend.

The deportations were ceased in the summer of 1944, sparing more than 200 000 Jews. But the lives of hundreds of thousands of those deported from May '44 were forever lost.

Disillusion of both Slovaks was colossal.

Vrba wrote: „ *Why did I run? What was the point? Didn't they realize that ten thousand people were to die every day [... ] ? Didn't they understand me? Didn't they believe me?*“

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This – is a story of the value of truth.

Vrba and Wetzler risked their lives to tell the truth. To let the world know.

But many refused to accept the facts and their own contribution to this reality.

That's why – we, carrying the lessons from the past – must critically see the reality and stop shutting our eyes.

We cannot think that our voice does not matter.

Vrba and Wetzler run 140 kilometers to tell the truth. We just need to pick up a cell phone.

Just a few clicks and you can read the Vrba-Wetzler Report. You can share it. And you can oppose to those who would dare to question it.

And we need to do this.

Many still consider extremists to be a virtual threat, a sham.

But they are gaining strength. This is the reality we are facing in Slovakia.

And we cannot close our eyes or assume that it will just go away. We need to confront it.

So that nobody would ever again have to hide in the wood pile. Simply for looking different.

So that nobody would ever again have to dip in petrol to distract the sniffer dogs. Simply for praying to God of his ancestors.

So that nobody would ever again have to fear persecution for helping two men in need.

Each one of us can be a hero.

And in these times, each one of us must be a hero.

Because – dividing people to *we* and *them*, judging someone for their religious origins, suspecting the conspiracies of ethics – never, in the history of mankind, stopped at words.

And I will repeat this again.

In history, antisemitism never stopped at words.

Our generation has a duty to punish and prevent words of hate.

We don't have a right to give up.

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Thank you all for being here today. Through this conference, we are sending a clear message that antisemitism has no place in our society.

Special thanks go to ODIHR for invaluable support to OSCE participating states in their fight against all forms of intolerance and discrimination.

And also for your vital support in organizing this conference.

I hope these two days strengthen our determination to stand up to hate.

*Thank you*