

**Address of the Minority Ombudsman on the occasion of the
Roma Holocaust Memorial Day**

2 August 2021

Distinguished Mr. President,
Distinguished commemorating attendees,

I am thankful for the honour of being called to be the principal patron of this event, however, You have entrusted me with an extraordinary duty. It is with a heavy heart that I stand before You on this International Roma Holocaust Memorial Day, as we pay tribute to half a million Roma victims in Europe, including tens of thousands in Hungary.

“Very deep is the well of the past. Shouldn’t we call it bottomless?” These are the opening words of Thomas Mann's monumental and compelling novel *Joseph and His Brothers*. It may be a cliché, but it's true: it's hard to navigate the present without knowledge of the past – whether it's our own personal past, or that of our families, communities or even of humanity as a whole – but it's even harder to create a future in which we can avoid the mistakes we've already made in the past.

However we know from our own lives: it is not easy to remember or to be reminded when it implies only pain and suffering. Why and how should we still do this in the case of an event as shocking and incomprehensible as the Holocaust?

Yet we must remember and remind others as well!

On the one hand, because the survivors of those horrors are unfortunately fewer and fewer among us. They can't tell us any more stories, answer our questions and we can't hug their pain away from them. We remember and remind for them.

On the other hand, because such horrors should no longer exist in any form. Those who today can live their lives and embrace their identities in Europe without anxiety also have a responsibility to those who continue to live as despised, excluded and persecuted persons because of their nationality origin, wealth status, physical characteristics or other identities. We also remember and remind for them.

And thirdly, we remember and remind for our future: we cannot allow murderous ideas, political ideologies or ignorance to once again take away people's choice to shape their own lives, and then their freedom, dignity and ultimately their lives.

For this incredible triple responsibility, we have only one tool: **our words, which can have serious consequences and lead to fatal events.**

Since ancient times, every collaboration, enterprise, idea and social process in human communities has begun with the words that bring ideas to life. All good and all bad things, including the road to the Holocaust, began with words. With mocks, jokes, prejudicing notes, generalisations and prohibitions that went beyond words and no longer only affected the subjective feelings of those concerned: no entry, no work, no marriage, no leaving the territory.

In many countries in Europe, Roma faced hate speech, discriminatory regulations and harassing police measures as early as the 1920s.

After a decade in Germany, they were deported and completely disfranchised. And in the 1940s, the Roma population of the Third Reich, like the Jews, had to endure and suffer inhuman humiliation and injustice. In Hungary, anti-Gypsy legislation was adopted relatively early. In 1938 a decree had already been adopted stating that the Roma should be declared untrustworthy as an ethnic group, and the police was instructed to take strict action against them if necessary. In 1944, at least thirty ghettos and labour camps were set up, where tens of thousands of Roma were worked in inhumane conditions. Smaller Roma groups were sent to German extermination camps as early as the spring of 1944, and in August Gypsy labour service companies were set up. Mass killings took place in several municipalities, such as Dobozy, Várpalota, Lajoskomárom and Lengyel. Overall, racial persecution directly affected hundreds of thousands of people of Roma origin, almost a third of the Roma communities in Hungary.

Words first killed, and later their absence became fatal: a whole generation was silenced from the fact of the events, and then the magnitude of their impact was trivialised from the 1950s until nearly 1990. We owe our current knowledge to such brave and dedicated professionals as József Choli-Daróczi, Ágnes Daróczi, János Bársony, Gábor Bernáth, Vivien Brassói, Ágota Varga. The research and education of Roma history and especially of the Holocaust is still a challenge, an unfinished task, which can only be provided at an adequate level with the support of the state, the cooperation of NGOs and professionals.

Today we have words again, we speak and we remember. However, we don't seem to be loud enough and we can't always find the right words. In many European countries today, we are witnessing anti-Gypsy manifestations and even attacks by various neo-Nazi, neo-fascist and paramilitary groups, often resulting in deaths. Exactly sixty-five years after the day of the Auschwitz-Birkenau tragedy, at dawn on 3 August 2009, Mária Balog was shot dead with a shotgun in her house in Kisléta, and her then thirteen-year-old daughter was seriously wounded. As part of racially-motivated attacks, known as the Roma murder series, criminals used guns and Molotov cocktails to attack Gypsies on nine occasions over two years, killing six people in total.

We must also be loud when we talk about the existential challenges of the present. Nevertheless, we cannot understand and therefore cannot effectively address the discrimination, social, labour market, educational, housing or even health problems faced by Roma without understanding the roots of these problems in the past and taking into account the current social situation.

Just as words were the beginning of horror then, words can be the beginning of **change** today.

Let's take notice and take action against all forms of hate speech and discrimination!

Let us help our children to do the same: I am convinced that a healthy social defence mechanism against harmful tendencies can only be developed if we equip young people from an early age with credible historical and social knowledge, a broad perspective and a critical outlook, **so that they can recognise and combat exclusionary and hateful intentions.**

I encourage everyone to **learn from the past**, try to **live the right way** and **pass on the best** to our children.

Behind great successes, there is often a community that is not just a numerical sum of its members, but one that has a common drive, a belief in a common goal and can only achieve results through collective action. Today, cooperation and thinking together is the only way to true freedom and the defence of human dignity.