

Jewish Life and Anti-Semitism in Contemporary Europe

International conference
organized by
the **Tom Lantos Institute**
in Budapest,
on October 1-2, 2013.

Tom Lantos
INSTITUTE



Introduction

Anna-Mária Bíró, President and CEO, Tom Lantos Institute

This booklet contains five important speeches delivered at the international conference Jewish Life and Anti-Semitism in Contemporary Europe organised by the Tom Lantos Institute (TLI), an independent human and minority rights organisation based in Budapest, Hungary. The conference was convened to address the most pressing challenges and significant issues facing European Jewish communities today. It took place in the former Upper House of the Hungarian Parliament on 1-2 October, 2013. The conference was sponsored by the Hungarian Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Appeal of Conscience Foundation, and the Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice.

One of the key reasons for holding the conference was the recent alarming resurgence of anti-Semitism throughout Europe, including Hungary. Therefore, the conference brought together policy-makers, academics, educators and members of the civil society to address this issue and identify possible approaches to countering this phenomenon. The conference also explored, from a number of perspectives, more hopeful and positive aspects of Jewish life in Europe. Identity, culture, effective interest-protection and interfaith dialogue were among the topics discussed. In addition to the high-level expert presentations, the conference aimed at generating and expressing a powerful political commitment for countering anti-Semitism in Hungary and Europe.

The opening ceremony included speeches by Deputy Prime Minister Tibor Navracsics, Israeli Minister of Finance Yair Lapid, Foreign Minister János Martonyi, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Zsolt Németh and Israeli Ambassador to Hungary Ilan Mor. These speeches revoke the horror of the Holocaust, warn against rising anti-Semitism in Europe and stand up against any of its forms. Importantly, Tibor Navracsics, János Martonyi and Zsolt Németh pointed out in their speeches Hungary's responsibility in the Holocaust and reiterated emphatically Hungary's zero tolerance of anti-Semitism and any form of racism.

The forum was attended by 250-300 people from around 40 countries including the United States, Canada, Israel, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Greece, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Serbia, Croatia. Representatives of Jewish communities came from France, the United Kingdom and from countries adjacent to Hungary including Austria, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine.

The conference was never intended to be a stand-alone event. On the contrary, it feeds into TLI's broader programme on Jewish Life and Anti-Semitism with follow-up activities including education and the development of policy recommendations and norms. The presentations delivered at the event will be gathered in a publication so that, along with the speeches in this publication, they re-iterate and spread the conference's twofold message: active condemnation of any form of anti-Semitism and the celebration of renewed Jewish religious, social and cultural life in parts of Europe where it had almost disappeared.



YAIR LAPID

Minister of Finance of the State of Israel

Good morning,

I am happy to be here today. It is a complicated sensation, in which we are all a bit lost between longing for the past and being surrounded by the horror of that same past. We are caught between the hope that something profound has changed within human society and the fear that nothing will ever change and still that demons still live among us.

70 years ago, a sign was hanging from this beautiful parliament building; it said, “No entrance for dogs and Jews”. We want to forget. But we cannot forget.

There is a moment, it is my family’s formative moment; it is my formative moment, even though I wasn’t yet born. It happened here in Budapest, in February 1945.

In February, 1945 my father Josef “Tommy” Lapid, at that time known as Tommy Lampel, was 13 years old. He was living with my grandmother in a basement here in the ghetto in Budapest. They were living mostly from the meat of dead horses they found on the street.

The Russians were already approaching Budapest, and the Germans together with the Hungarian fascists started taking Jews out in death convoys. Most of them were led to the frozen Danube River. They were ordered to dig holes in the ice, and then they were shot and submerged into the frozen water.

One early Monday morning, the Germans surrounded my father’s block, and started leading the local Jews into one of those death convoys. There were approximately 600 people. They were walking through the streets of Budapest which were empty because of the Russian bombing. From the windows of buildings that lined the street, they were looked upon by people who knew that they were sentenced to death.

At a certain point, when they reached the Margit Bridge, a Russian plane descended over the convoy for a second, and suddenly people were yelling and shouting, the Germans and the Hungarians were shooting into the sky, and my father hid behind a small public lavatory painted in green. His mother, standing behind him, pushed him in this public lavatory and told him-"you need to pee now". But it was difficult. It is difficult to pee when it is freezing and you are 13, and people are shooting and the entire world wants to kill you, but he did. She closed the door behind them and the convoy left. Ten minutes later, out of 600 people in the death convoy, 598 people were dead under the ice of the Danube River, except for my father and grandmother. They were standing in the street alone and they were free; they were free and the entire world was open to them.

In the American Mid-West and in the Australian 'Bush' there were thousands of square miles where no one lived. I once flew over the Australian 'Bush'; you can fly for three hours without seeing a single soul. Paris was already liberated, London was of course free, but my father – a 13 year old kid – had nowhere to go. He had nowhere to go. Therefore he just went back to the Ghetto, to the same basement hoping that the Russians will come before the next death convoy would take place.

Many years later I traveled to Budapest with my father. We were walking down the street, and suddenly he stopped, and he started crying, and said-"Yair look, look". I was looking and there was nothing there, just an empty street. He said- "No, you have to look", and I looked, and there was nothing there except a small public lavatory painted in green, which is still there.

We went there yesterday; it's painted gray now, but it's still there. And he told me after he relaxed a bit; "This is it, this is the place where my Zionism was born. This is the place I was reborn. This is actually the place where you were born. Because this is the place I understood that I always have to have a place to go to. I need to have a place to go to."

We were standing there; two grown men, stroking the green wall of this public lavatory, and the pedestrians on the street were skirting around us carefully because they thought we were crazy. But, we were not crazy. We were a statistical error. My father was supposed to be dead, and I was not supposed to have been born, and yet we were there, against all odds, two men who had to have a place to go.

When my father went back to the ghetto, he met another young Jew by the name of Tamas Peter Lantos, who was a member of the anti-Nazi underground. He smuggled food and medicine into the ghetto, risking his life day after day to help others. In the ghetto Tom met Annette- who is here with us today along with her daughter Katrina. From the inferno a family was born.

A few months later the war was over. My father went back to his home town and discovered that his father had died in the concentration camp of Mauthausen, and that the majority of his family was exterminated during the Nazi occupation.

Tom Lantos went back to his home and found that his mother had died and the majority of his family had also been slaughtered. In all, 450,000 Hungarian Jews were killed during the ten months of the Nazi occupation.

I am a guest in this house, and guests are not supposed to embarrass their hosts, but we will miss the whole point behind this event if we will not face the fact that genocide of this scope could not have happened without the active help of tens of thousands of Hungarians, and without the millions of other Hungarians who remained silent.

There is a stain on the honor of this house and for years we have tried to ignore this, but history has taught us that ignoring is never the right policy. Anti-Semitism has raised its ugly head in Hungary once again. We know today- because we learned this from the little public lavatory, and the banks of the Danube- that we cannot overlook racism, we cannot disregard it, and we cannot let it grow. Hatred is not disappearing. It is a horrible fact of life here and we should fight it every hour of every day.

To all of those who say it is different now, and that times have changed, and that this cannot happen again, I raise the memory of Tom Lantos and Tommy Lapid, two ordinary kids, from ordinary homes, with ordinary families- not too rich, not too powerful, maybe not too significant- who got up one day, and instead of going to school they were forced to run for their lives because the entire world decided it wanted to kill them. Not because of something they did – they didn't do anything wrong, but just because of who they were.

Tommy and Thomas remained friends for the rest of their lives. Tommy became the Minister of Justice of the State of Israel, and Thomas became the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of the United States Congress. They died within months of each other, in 2008. No one should feel sorry for them. They both had full and good lives; they lived and died surrounded by love and appreciation.

They left us a will, and their will says: we can never ever stop fighting against racism and hate, we must fight for justice. In an interview that Tom Lantos gave a few years before he died to the Shoah Foundation, he was asked what should the next generation learn from the Holocaust. He said, " It is very simple: We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers... we cannot be bystanders... the prime obligation of every human being, is to speak out against injustice committed against any other human being, and the more different this human being is from you, the greater is your obligation to defend him".

These words should echo forever in this house. This house has to get up every morning and say: this will not ever happen again. Jews will never die again on Hungarian soil just because they are Jews.

We are and we always will be obligated.

Thank you very much.



TIBOR NAVRACSICS

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Administration and Justice of Hungary

Annette and Katrina Lantos,
Minister Lapid,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Hungary is a republic of good-willed people. It is a community where good-willed people work together for common goals. At least, this is how we would like it to be in 2013. The question arises: is this statement really true? Can we say today that Hungary is a republic of good-willed people, where, irrespective of worldview, race, religious affiliation, or gender, we can discuss issues, argue and debate with each other – and sometimes even squabble – with the aim of making Hungary a better place? A better place for all those who are citizens of Hungary, or who feel like citizens of Hungary, or who simply like living in Hungary but are citizens of another country.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Born in 1966, I represent a generation that was not personally touched by the Holocaust. We were born twenty years after 1945; the span of a generation separated us from the Holocaust and separated us – here in Central Europe – from that chapter in politics that cannot be explained in rational and scientific terms, as such categories offer us, at most, a few data and details, and tell us how the institutions worked. Through literature, however, we may come to know the madness. We may come to know what it is like when the human mind, usurping social norms and institutions and abandoning ordinary common sense, embarks on a self-destructive rampage. We may come to know what happens when a state turns against its own citizens and when institutions take decisions that remove decent citizens of good will from their own community and destroy them, first in spirit and then physically. People of my age and of my generation are aware that in that period the Hungarian history textbooks tended to miss out the positive aspects of Jewish and Hungarian people living together. A kind of silence was

the norm. Sometimes the fate and viewpoint of the Jewish community in Hungary was mentioned – in the context of the emancipation, the law permitting civil marriages, and then the Holocaust. But nothing was said about what came before or after.

We did not learn from our history textbooks that Hungary has always been a multiethnic and multicultural community in which, alongside Slavs, Romanians and Germans, there were also Jews living among us. They benefited the common good, contributed to our culture, and made the lives of our forefathers happier and more prosperous. We could only learn about all this from personal accounts. For instance, I remember how my father, who grew up in Balatonberény, told me that there had been a boy in his class at school. And in the village a man named Braun had run the shop, and his son had been my father's classmate; in fact, they had shared the same desk. And one day this boy did not come to school; and he did not come the following day. The shop was closed, and members of the Braun family were no longer to be found in the village. And when you asked, people would not say what had happened; everyone was silent in embarrassment, and everyone said it was better not to ask questions; the family had clearly moved elsewhere. And then, in 1979, when we went as a family to Poland and visited Auschwitz, we found on the wall, among the Hungarian victims, the whole Braun family.

This is how I became aware of the Holocaust. And this is why – after 1990, when it suddenly became possible to speak of these things – it came almost as a shock for Hungarian society to learn of the responsibility of the Hungarian state [for its role] in the Holocaust. For we did not learn at school about the Hungarian state's responsibility. We were taught that the Horthy fascists, as they called them, had been responsible – a separate human species that was no concern of ours, because this chapter [in history] had ended in 1945 with the victory of the communists, and Hungary had moved on. And then suddenly, in 1990, we were faced with the fact that this was not true. In 1990, we discovered that the Hungarian state – the operator of the institutional system, based on a thousand-year-old culture – had turned against its own citizens and had even assisted in the destruction of its citizens.

Minister Lapid said that he did not want to be rude to his host but was bound to say that the Hungarians are also responsible for the Holocaust. As the host, I say to Mr. Lapid that he was not being rude. We know that we are responsible for the Holocaust. And we know that the institutions of the Hungarian state were responsible for the Holocaust.

It would be easy for me, as a latter successor of the Hungarian ministers of justice, to ward off responsibility, as we learned in the 1970s and 1980s to ward off responsibility, [by claiming] that it was not us, that those were other Hungarians, with whom we do not have to concern ourselves. But it was us. We know it was. Even if I personally and, thank God, my family were not involved, but the perpetrators of these acts were Hungarians and the people who suffered were also Hungarians. The men who fired the shots were Hungarians, and the ones who died were also Hungarians. And this is a great responsibility, which we must face here in Hungary and in Central Europe.

We must face it; that is to say, we must seek out the memories, we must seek out the evidence, and we must seek out the survivors, whom we can compensate to some degree for the failings of the past or at least commemorate these memories. This too will not be easy, because although I can say that we have taken many measures, especially since the turn of the millennium, in terms of government policy in Hungary – whether by the centre-right or centre-left government – to make sure that the Holocaust victims receive compensation – some compensation. So that the memories of the Jewish community in Hungary once again feature in the public mind. We know that there is much left to do. For we know that, in accordance with the decision of the Hungarian Parliament made in 2000, a Day of Remembrance for the Hungarian Victims of the Holocaust has been held in Hungary on April 16 every year since 2001. Thus, in addition to the International Holocaust Remembrance Day, Hungary has its own day of remembrance. In 1999, we decided to establish a Holocaust Memorial Center, which was duly inaugurated in the Páva Street Synagogue in 2004. The year 2002 saw the opening of the House of Terror, a museum presenting the events and victims of the most dreadful periods of Hungarian history and serving to confront us with the past. We have also sought to revive local memories. In 2000, we renovated the synagogue in Jánoshalma, and in the same year we established the Ipoly Region Jewish Collection in Balassagyarmat. In 2002, we renovated the Makó Synagogue and in 2012, jointly with Sweden, we held the Raoul Wallenberg Commemorative Year. On January 1, 2013, we increased the supplementary pension for Holocaust survivors by fifty percent.

We are making efforts to preserve the memories and the [accounts of] survivors for the future. Here in Budapest we can proudly show to both foreign visitors and domestic tourists the cultural legacy of Hungary's Jewish community. However there are some towns where nothing remains of this legacy. In Veszprém, where I was born, the communists turned the synagogue into a coalmine; they built a commercial head office on the site and they destroyed the Jewish school and the Jewish quarter – which was tiny anyway. They also destroyed the memory of the Jewish community of Veszprém. And yet Veszprém's Jewish community gave to the Jewish community in Hungary such major figures as the chief rabbi and scholar Ármin Hoffer, as well as József Schweitzer, who is still alive today; I wish him a long life with God's blessing.

And yet, as we search for what remains, we find that the task is not an easy one, for there are fewer and fewer survivors among us and some of the memories are gone. This means, however, that we have a responsibility to act as quickly as possible, in order to discover the past.

Hungary is a republic of upright people. As I said, this is how we would like it to be, and this is how I would like you to see and experience it in your everyday lives, but we know that this is only partially the case. We might wish for it, but we know that no country is inhabited exclusively by good-willed people. There are, and always will be, people who thrive on hatred – either because hatred defines their essence or because they see good commercial opportunities for making a living out of hatred or basing their politics on hatred. It is for this very reason that while we rediscover the past, we should not forget the present.

Legislation has a great role to play in defining the rules of play for a democratic community: what is permitted and what is prohibited. And the Members of Parliament here with us today are very familiar with the voracious debates that have taken place in recent years about where to draw the lines for Hungarian democracy. Where to draw the line for what is acceptable and unacceptable and the dividing line between freedom of speech and incitement to hatred. And, of course, when the solution has been found, then the matter seems simple. But when something has to be defined – it is a difficult task and a dilemma, as anyone who has taken part in such debates is aware.

George Bernard Shaw once said that he did not like arguing because in the end he always realized he was wrong. And, indeed, one always feels a bit like this in the parliamentary debates. You come with what appears to be a firm stance on what needs to be done, and as the debate unfolds and you listen to the counter-arguments, you begin to recognize, for instance, the shakiness of the foundations of the rules governing hate speech or determining the boundaries of parliamentary freedom of speech.

You may well know – as unfortunately the Hungarian Parliament has provided several examples of this in recent years – how difficult it is to draw the line between freedom of speech and hate speech. The words spoken in Parliament by Márton Gyöngyösi, which were reported internationally, did much damage to the reputation of Hungarian democracy; we had to make the House rules stricter and impose limits on parliamentary freedom of speech. Let us be frank; this is what really happened. And this was done precisely to stop people from inciting hatred in Parliament, because, as I say again to Minister Lapid: we have learned from the past. We know exactly what happened here, and this is the reason why we are so determined that such things should not happen again. This is why this democracy defends itself. It defends itself and it defends all its citizens from those who seek to incite hatred. It does so by means of tougher laws, the introduction of laws governing incitement to hatred, and, where an individual's actions or words have caused offense to a group, the opportunity for members of that group to launch a class action against the individual in question. The aim of all these measures is to make sure that everyone feels safe and secure in Hungary.

Hungary is a republic of good-willed people, or at least this is what we would like it to be. This is what I said. And for this to be a reality in the future, for us to get closer to our dream of Hungary being a republic of good-willed people, we have much to do for the future. Because whatever we do now for children in the present, we are doing for the future of Hungary. Whether they be Hungarian, Croatian, Serbian, Jewish, Roma, Romanian, German, or belong to any other ethnic group – those who live here, whose relatives live here, who want to live here, or who simply like Hungary. And since we are fully aware of our responsibility, we have decided that 2014 is to be the Holocaust Memorial Year in Hungary. And since we are fully aware that we can only come to grips with this responsibility in the light of the future, we have decided that education and teaching should be at the focus of the Holocaust Memorial Year 2014. We must teach our children the things we were not taught. We must teach our children, not only about the responsibility of the Hungarian state for its role in the Holocaust, but also about the achievements and mutual benefits of centuries of Hungarian-Jewish peaceful cohabi-

tation. Because, in my view, our [shared] history has been fundamentally positive. For centuries, this community represented one of the strongest and richest communities in Central Europe. This community brought to Hungary and to the cities that now lie outside Hungary's borders, development and prosperity in a cultural and economic sense and in every field of life; it also produced positive examples of cohabitation that serve as a lesson for our children. And these lessons need to be taught, so that the horrors of the past are never repeated and so that the haters of today will have no one to replace them. Another reason to teach these lessons is to make sure that the Hungary of the future is indeed a republic of upright people.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There is no doubt that there are some politicians and political groupings in Hungarian politics today who envisage Hungary's future in a sea of hatred. We are not among them. We belong among that group of people who are sure that Hungary will only have a future if every citizen, every relative, acquaintance and friend of its citizens, and every friend of Hungary feels good here and feels safe here. We cannot permit there to be discrimination among our citizens on any grounds. In particular we cannot allow – being conscious of the responsibility for the past – anti-Semitism to gain strength in Hungary. If necessary, we must toughen our laws. And as far as possible, we must apply political means to make Hungary a republic of upright people.

Thank you for your attention.



János Martonyi

Minister of Foreign Affairs of Hungary

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

This conference was about a common fight, a fight against anti-Semitism, which means a fight against evil and against death, against the destruction of civilisation and against the destruction of the good side of human nature by the evil side.

So, in a way it is a fight between good and evil. It is a fight between life and death. And, as I understand, we choose life. I think this is the main message of this conference. We choose life and life can never be defeated.

John Lukács wrote that when the Second World War was coming to an end, Hitler thought that, okay, clearly I cannot win the war, but I can still win the war against the Jews. And despite the murder of six million innocent lives, he did not win that war either.

The State of Israel was founded and Jewish life, culture resurrected across the world. But, as it has also been referred to, civilisation is paper-thin. I think Katrina Lantos was referring to her father, Tom Lantos's words. So, that is why, I fully agree, we have to be vigilant, we have to be relentless. As said, we have to get up every morning with the thought that this can never, never happen again. And yes, also, we need the survivors like Tom and Annette Lantos, to remind us, to warn us, to testify and to tell, to explain the truth.

Yes, anti-Semitism is, indeed, a crime against humanity, we all know. . But beyond this universal message, I believe that for us, Hungarians there is also a special significance to anti-Semitism and, to the Holocaust, because the Hungarian Holocaust was committed by and against Hungarians. Both the perpetrators and the victims were Hungarians. And, believe me, this is our biggest national trauma we have to live with,

we have to confront, we have to cope with. What shall we do? What can we do? First thing, as it has been referred to, is to accept and to admit responsibility. As was said, eloquently by the Deputy Prime Minister yesterday, I would just like to underline that this statement by Tibor Navracsics was made on behalf of the Hungarian government, was made on behalf of Hungary. It was made on behalf of the Hungarian nation, just like other statements carrying the same message, including mine, for instance, at the beginning of the Wallenberg Year.

It is a national tragedy, because there was a community that had been living with us for, some people say and I believe them, at least twelve centuries. A community that gave an immense and immeasurable contribution, to the progress and well-being of this nation, to Hungarian culture, Hungarian literature, Hungarian science, economy and so on and so forth.

Yes, that was precisely this constructive co-existence as it has been referred to by Bishop Gáncs, and yes, indeed, that was also the Fasori Gimnázium, if you think of the Nobel Prize winners who had studied there. And yes, it was also the Revolution and War of Independence in 1848-49, when our Jewish compatriots were fighting and dying for the freedom and independence of Hungary. And I would like to assure you, Rabbi Raj, that your congregation was not only good for Lajos Kossuth, but it is also good for my Government and for my Parliament. I do not want to get into all the details, you are a registered church and there is an additional revision going on, hopefully with a positive outcome.

But I believe the conference is not only about opposing the bad and evil. It is also about proposing a future. And that is why the title carries also the word Jewish life, because, yes, we all believe in a Jewish resurrection, a Jewish renaissance in this country. This is also part of the message that we all choose life. We now have a vibrant and flourishing Jewish community. There are, of course, concerns, which have also been voiced at this conference. But the main point is that we live together. And we very much believe in a constructive co-existence for the next decades, indeed, centuries.

Now, let me tell you one or two words about foreign policy, because I happen to be the Foreign Minister of this government. It is an old and never-ending debate what foreign policy has to be based upon: upon values, or, conversely, upon interest, or, on both, in a given proportion between the two. No secret, I am one of those who still believe that, fundamentally, foreign policy should or has to be based upon values. If you want to follow values you have to have ideas. And if you want to have ideas, yes, you have to accept and you have to recognise responsibility. And when we speak about our Middle-East policy, when we speak about the State of Israel, we should never forget about the historic responsibility that we have. That is point number one. Point number two is that we have a very-very special bond between the two countries. As said, we have an extremely important Jewish community in this country, but at the same time there is also a 200 thousand strong community of Hungarian-speaking Israeli citizens in Israel, many of whom, by the way, are also Hungarian citizens. Many of them, by the way, will also vote next year, in April 2014 at the general elections in Hungary. This is I believe a very-very special bond between the two countries and that is why I think that

our policy always has to take into account these fundamental facts, these fundamental considerations.

Now, coming back to the conference, some people think – they are probably right – that this conference is a gesture. Much has been said about gestures towards our Jewish community, or indeed, Jewish communities altogether. That is all true. But we should not forget that this conference first and foremost helps the whole Hungarian nation and only thereafter its Hungarian Jewish community. It helps us to live with, to cope with exactly that national trauma I was speaking about. So, we thank you very much for this. We are on the receiving side of this conference. And I tell you this, because I am grateful to all who recognised the efforts we make in our fight against anti-Semitism and racism. We also thank those who reminded us that this fight has to be continued relentlessly and, also, it should be, from time to time more robust – so that is the main message - which we fully accept. And Rabbi Raj, I would agree with your proposition that next year should be a year of repentance and reconciliation. I would only add that this is something which is not for one year only but it is a continuous exercise. Repentance and reconciliation will go on even after next year. And that is exactly the message that we should never give up. We should be vigilant and we have to renew our strength and our resolve and our determination to fight for the good and to fight against the evil. Whether this is domestic politics, whether this is foreign policy, international relations, we always follow the same principles and the same values.

Finally, I would just like to thank you all, the organisers, everybody who contributed to this conference. I would like to thank you, Tom. Köszönöm, Tamás. I thank you for your help that you gave us through your memory and also through your family, Annette and Katrina. My only wish is, please, stay with us. I am one of those, who believe that you have been and are with us even now, so my only wish is, please, stay with us also in the future.

Thank you for your attention.



Zsolt Németh

Minister of State, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The title of this conference refers to a concept that is extremely precious to all of us: “life”. We all share the view that there is nothing more important than life; protecting, cherishing, promoting and supporting life is a value that binds all human civilization and us, the participants of this conference together. We may come from very different backgrounds, very different cultural or religious contexts, yet, we are all united in our “respect for life”.

However, while we commit ourselves repeatedly and emphatically to the eternal value of respect for life as the basis of human civilization, we are all aware of the fact that there have always been powers that chose to extinguish life, chose the destruction of life. When we gather for a conference about Jewish life in Europe, we have to remember this. We must remember and never forget the millions of Jewish lives that were attacked, tortured and destroyed in the very heart of Western civilization, here, in this part of the continent, too. Committing ourselves to respect for life also commits us unconditionally to the imperative of “never again!”

When we speak about the “Political aspects of Jewish life” - this must be our single point of departure: “never again”. It must never happen again, that our fellow citizens are deprived of their dignity or their lives, based on horrendous ideologies like Nazism, anti-Semitism or any other form of racism. Therefore, it must be the common denominator of all democratic politics that there are no bridges between democratic political forces and those who openly or indirectly play with the dangerous fire of anti-Semitic or racist sentiments. This duty comes from our very civilization. Only if we are very clear about this – and the Government of Hungary is very clear about this – are we entitled to speak about Jewish life in Europe today, and about its political aspects in our part of the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is symbolic that this conference takes place in the Hall of the former Upper House of the Hungarian Parliament. These walls were witness to the dark days when anti-Semitic laws were adopted by the lawmakers of that time. We know that it was tragic not only for the Jewish community in Hungary, but it was also truly a Hungarian national tragedy, because it is always a tragedy for the whole nation when it moves away from the solid foundations of European civilization and chooses death against life.

But it is symbolic also that we are discussing the questions of contemporary Jewish life in Hungary and in Europe, as we sit here, surrounded by these very same walls. It shows that the powers that intended to destroy life have been defeated and Jewish life is flourishing today in Europe and, of course, in Hungary, a country with the third largest Jewish community in the European Union.

We often speak about Jewish renaissance in Hungary and it is so. I am sure that during our two-day conference we will find out a lot about it. Jewish culture has always been an enriching, integral part of the culture of Hungary and we witness today that it is regaining the prominent place in public life that it deserves. The Hungarian government welcomes and supports this process.

The Hungarian Jewish community has of course many links to the State of Israel and the reverse is also true: there is a large community of Israeli citizens who have many ties to Hungary as the country of their ancestors, who speak Hungarian and share our Hungarian cultural identity. We could say that Israel is the “eighth neighbor” of Hungary: the Hungarian Jewish community in Israel is large enough to be compared in size to the Hungarian minority communities in our geographically neighboring countries. And I am glad to see that there is a high demand for Hungarian citizenship in Israel too. Our embassy there is pleased to assist those who intend to express their belonging to both Israel and Hungary, by applying for the citizenship.

These close ties make it obvious that Hungary is deeply concerned for the security of the State of Israel. A major aspect of anti-Semitism today is the denial of the right of Israel to exist, or the unfounded criticism of the Israeli democracy. One can, of course, be critical about policies of Israel as a democratic State, but that is completely different from assailing the State of Israel for its identity. We must unite our efforts on the international stage in order to combat this form of anti-Semitism, too.

And, of course, we believe, in keeping with the political legacy of Tom Lantos, that all peoples, including the peoples of the Middle-East, have the right to live in dignity, peace and security. That is why we closely follow the current developments of the Middle-East peace process. Hungary also welcomes the newly restarted and intensified talks between Israel and the Palestinians, facilitated by US diplomacy, for reaching a final status agreement in the framework of a two-state solution.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we speak about the promising aspects of life we cannot be silent about some warning signs either. It is alarming that today, seven decades after the Shoah, we still have to speak about the phenomenon of anti-Semitism. We had hoped that this despicable ideological distortion could be long forgotten. But, as we all know, this is not the case in Europe or in other parts of the world, and, here in Hungary, we also have to continuously address this issue.

The government of Hungary makes it very clear that Hungary does not tolerate any form of anti-Semitism, any public incitement to hatred or any form of racism. In order to make this happen, we have introduced strict legislation so that law enforcement in Hungary has the appropriate legal instruments and authority to prevent these phenomena. Further, we believe that education and publicity must also play an important role in combating anti-Semitism.

We work closely with Hungarian Jewish communities to find ways to reinforce those themes in our educational system that are necessary to avoid the younger generation falling prey to these destructive ideologies.

For this reason, last year, on the centenary of his birth, Raoul Wallenberg was celebrated throughout Hungary and abroad, in a joint effort with the Embassies of Israel and Sweden. In 2014, we are going to commemorate the sad 70th anniversary of the beginning of the mass deportations of our Hungarian Jewish fellow citizens. We shall use this anniversary to mobilize all possible means to remind ourselves the imperative of “never again”. A special government committee is preparing this year of remembrance, and Hungary is ready to chair the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) for the year 2015.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Many of us believe that Life has a transcendental dimension, that Life is the gift of the Eternal One. We read in the Bible: “I have set before you life and death..., now, choose life!” (Deuteronomy 30:19). I wish for all of us, that when we speak about the practical political aspects of Jewish life today, we should never forget this imperative. With this in mind my wish for this conference and this panel is that all our deliberations should lead us closer to a better world that is characterized by an unconditional respect for Life.

Thank you for your kind attention!



Ilan Mor

Ambassador of the State of Israel to Hungary

Thank you for the invitation, I am glad to take part in this special conference.

Thanks to the organizers and participants.

I think that all conferences dealing with the topic of anti-Semitism are important stages in the long process of struggling with this phenomenon, which has not been easy. Therefore, I consider this conference a very significant one, similarly to all events that are organized for creating social awareness on this issue.

In fact, it is about taking further effort involving and taking use of all democratic powers against this ancestral phenomenon.

I have been the Ambassador of Israel in Hungary for exactly two years.

I am neither born Hungarian, nor do any branches of my family relate to the country. Before I arrived to Hungary, I had read everything possible about the long and magnificent history of this country and her people, about successes and defeats, social and political traumas, about the social structures that have evolved throughout the years in Hungarian society, as well as the long process of the development of Hungarian culture.

Whoever is the Israeli Ambassador, he or she has two tasks: to represent the state, the authorities and the Israeli society within the framework of the host state's institutional system. This involves the fact that he or she wishes to safeguard his or her country's interests and at the same time shall also seek and find common interests with the different social groups of the host state.

The nomination of an ambassador between two countries is carried out under the auspices of existing relations, mutual understanding and appreciation, and with the intent

of strengthening the amity of these countries.

In parallel, all Israeli Ambassadors on commission have historical and ethical duties towards people of Jewish origin and nationality living outside the boundaries of the sovereign State of Israel.

Consequently, the Jewish community of the host country means a fundamental target group for him or her, it is an important subject of his or her diplomatic activity, which fact cannot be disregarded in any case.

In a few more words, the 1948 Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel contains a few principles forming the future interrelation of the state and the Diaspora. The following was determined in these principles:

- The State of Israel is the state of all Jewish people and thus also belongs to Jewish people having no Israeli citizenship.
- The state is committed to the Jewry of the Diaspora; opens the motherland's doors to all Jews, and is always open to Jews' immigration (aliyah) and to gathering the scattered ones.
- The Jewish state asks the Diaspora to join forces for the country by immigration and supporting the state's building, and to testify for it in the great battle of the realization of Zionism, to create the Jewish home in the land of Israel.

In one sentence: Israel is the state of all Jewish people, it is a symbol of the collective fate and mutual responsibility shared both by the Jewish people of Israel and those living in the Diaspora.

Jewish people are the most important strategic treasure for Israel, both important for its own sake and for the Jewry of the Diaspora; as well as in a broader sense for the sake of the continuity and development of universal Jewish civilization.

The existence of the Israeli State strengthens the identity, national pride and sense of security of the Diaspora's Jewry.

The Israeli State is committed to the Jewry of the Diaspora, and feels responsible for the peace and security of the Diaspora's Jewry in the field of fighting against anti-Semitism (e.g. the Eichmann trial; John Demjanuk; the act on jurisdictions on Nazis and their helpers; rescuing Jews from countries that became dangerous; securing institutions and providing help in case of terrorist activity).

The State of Israel contributes to the personal and physical sense of security of the Jews. All Jews know that they can find shelter in Israel in case of distress.

The state acts on behalf of her people: the act on jurisdictions on Nazis and their helpers. Secondly, the task is to represent the sovereign State of Israel among Hungarian people and in the Hungarian society. In this sense the task is to safeguard Israel's interests, to build bridges and relations between the peoples of Israel and of Hungary. It is important to understand that bilateral relations are not the matter of mood or generosity.

The advancement of the relations between two countries is based on interests which are sometimes identical, another time opposing, then obliging us to seek a fragile balance, to hold critical dialogues and conduct constructive actions, if necessary; all this for the sake of the promotion of bilateral relations.

Within the aforementioned constructive dialogue I act for realizing the principles of these two tasks to promote the friendly relations between the two countries and their peoples, as well as I serve as both ethical and other type of support for the members of the Hungarian Jewish community.

Ladies and gentlemen, as the Israeli Ambassador I am a full partner in the not easy fight against anti-Semitism present in the Hungarian society.

My public activity as well as my activity behind the scenes is known. I do this as an Israeli citizen, as a Jew and as a representative of the Jewish state.

I cannot disregard the repulsive phenomenon of anti-Semitism and racism even personally. Even less can I afford this as the Ambassador of Israel.

Certainly, as the Ambassador of the State of Israel – just as being an Israeli and a Jew myself – I have historical and ethical responsibility for the local Jewish community according to the horrible tragedy happened here 70 years ago. It is my duty to respond to any anti-Semitic event that occurs.

Unfortunately, since I came here two years ago I have had to devote a significant amount of my time to the fight against this repulsive phenomenon, both in the form of public statements and of open dialogue with the Hungarian government, apart from the media.

However important this activity is on my side, the automatic public responses to anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli events – like the burning of Israeli flags on two occasions; MP proposition for listing Jews, who are thought to mean hazard to Hungarian safety; spreading conspiracy theories on alleged aims of the State of Israel in relation to Hungary; ideas that have no reference to reality at all; etc. – have not really proved to be sufficient.

Therewith and also concurrently with all the obvious activities that are a matter of substance themselves we could develop a practice that strengthens consciousness in the Hungarian society against the phenomenon of anti-Semitism and anti-Israelism.

This means a constructive cooperation with the majority of and the different strata of the Hungarian society.

It means intensive diplomatic activity of cultural and public nature that aims to familiarize Hungarian society with the uniqueness of the State of Israel and of Israeli society: innovation, creativity, courage, a way of thinking that can grow over conventions, that takes shape not only in science and technology, but in arts, culture, education, social initiations, media, fashion, gastronomy, etc.

Our intent is not to show off, not to tell how great Israel is, but to present it as a country that maintains a normal and friendly relationship with Hungary.

Our purpose is to introduce the path that has led Israel to become a state with a unique face in many areas and which may provide fertile grounds for the cooperation of the two countries in a WIN-WIN situation.

In order to show some examples on this activity I have to mention the many cultural events organised in the past years all over Hungary: translations of Israeli pieces of literature into Hungarian, the Jewish film festival which has taken place for the 17th time this year and has become a tradition, support and participation in the Jewish festival and encouraging the Hungarian citizens to visit Israel.

It is important to mention the Day of Innovation due to be organised in Budapest in two days and which has outstanding significance in the relationship between the two countries.

We are also actively present in the new media, while the embassy's Facebook site, presenting lots of information on the numerous and colourful activities of the embassy and Israel, is also welcomed with 10 thousand likes. There are on-going studies in the elite universities of Hungary - Corvinus and Eötvös Loránd University – regarding not only on the Middle Eastern conflicts, but also dealing with Israel itself.

I believe that this work will change the opinion of Hungarian citizens about Israel in the medium and long term and will help to fight against the nowadays common negative stereotypes on the Jews and on the state of Israel.

Besides this, together with the members of the Jewish community we would like to enrich and extend the information on Israel and the Hungarian Jews in the Hungarian text books and in the now renewing national core curriculum.

The purpose of this dialogue is to convince the persons in charge of Hungarian educational system to more consciously build the topics on Israel and on the Hungarian Jews in the text books of the forthcoming generations, since the future prime ministers, foreign ministers, scientists and intellectuals will emerge from among the latter ones.

We would like to call the attention of the persons in charge to act in order to establish an educational system that realistically reflects the changes of the world, including developments in Israel, and especially the 65-year-long historical processes of independency.

I think that high-school students, the future generation of Hungary shall come to know the present, 21st century Israel as the land that maintains an amicable relation with Hungary through comprehensive and synthetic studies as well as through regular youth and school exchange programmes.

It is my pleasure to announce that the two states signed a youth and student exchange agreement to be organised through the Klebelsberg Centre. They will mobilize and encourage several hundreds of Hungarian secondary schools to establish student exchange programs with suitable Israeli schools.

The Israeli students will be hosted in Zánka at Lake Balaton, which I have already visited myself.

I can already talk about positive developments, since the constructive dialogue has proved to be fruitful in this term. The topics on Israel will be entered in the text books in a way that they will not primarily focus on the Arabian-Israeli conflict or the traditions and religion of the Diaspora, but they will encompass cultural, scientific and innovative

issues as well, that is, to cast light on Israel as an amicable and normal state together with her citizens, as well as on the historical background of the two countries' special relations and their societies.

Hungarian Jews, or „the Hungarians of Moses Religion” – as they were called for many years by their non-Jewish neighbours –, shall receive their deserved place in the new text books. Hungarian society shall tell and proudly present the contribution of Hungarian Jews to the country's boom prior and during the First World War.

Our enhanced work aims to increase consciousness about the above problem present in Hungarian society in connection with the mentioned issues, and to let them confront these on a daily basis. The above activities reach out to the different groups of Hungarian society so that they can establish a coalition based on common values to fight anti-Semitism, racism and xenophobia.

I wish that Hungarian society reacts unambiguously on future anti-Semitic actions without waiting for us, Israelis and Jews to react.

Any time when there was an anti-Semitic action in the world the first that people called to react were employees of the Israeli embassies or the Jews.

Why us?

The problem of anti-Semitism is not our problem but primarily of the given society in which the phenomenon arises.

What is the reason of calling the ambassador of Israel or the leaders of the synagogue to react to anti-Semitic events, actions and manifestations? Since there is no anti-Semitism in Israel, and in those countries where anti-Semitism exists Jews are victims and not perpetrators of that...

Consequently, the activity I described above is based on my respect towards and attention paid to Hungary, her society, her culture and history; and my work is primarily dedicated to the Hungarian society with the aim of reaching cooperation in terms of the need for common struggle, and to intensify the emotional threshold regarding the existing problems.

Eventually, we speak about a Hungarian society as about one that placed its belief in the values of democracy and which belongs to the European Union and therefore bounds itself to humanist values, and for this reason shall act to support the fight against anti-Semitism.

In the end, I would like to mention that I find it a brave and true decision on the Hungarian government's side that they intend to devote the whole year of 2014 to the remembrance of the 70th anniversary of Holocaust all over the world.

I welcome, support and of course will enhance this decision, as much as it is required from me.

Its realization is a big test for future Hungarian society.



About the Tom Lantos Institute

The Tom Lantos Institute (TLI) is an independent human and minority rights organisation with a particular focus on Jewish and Roma communities and other transnational minorities. As an international research, education and advocacy platform, TLI aims to bridge the gap between research and policy, norms and practice. The TLI was established in Hungary in May 2011 to honour and continue the legacy of Tom Lantos, a Hungarian-American and the only Holocaust survivor ever elected to the United States Congress. He was the Co-Founder of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus and rose to become the Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.



Published by:

Tom Lantos
INSTITUTE



ISRAELI ÁLLAM NAGYKÖVETSEGE
EMBASSY OF ISRAEL



MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF HUNGARY

Budapest, 2013

Tom Lantos Institute
1016 Budapest, Bérc u. 13-15., Hungary | Landline: +36 1 209 0024 | Fax: +36 1 209 0024
info@tomlantosinstitute.hu | tomlantosinstitute.hu