

Speech
by
Federal President Alexander Van der Bellen
at the Opening of the Conference
“An End to Anti-Semitism!”

Entwurf: Peter Schwarz, ca 6.30 min

Ladies and Gentlemen,

(Introduction)

It is a pleasure for me to be here today at the occasion of the opening of this important conference.

The theme of the conference is timely:

Although the horrors of the “industrial” mass murder of the National Socialist Holocaust took place almost a lifetime ago, anti-Semitism continues to be an issue today.

Hostility towards minorities is not a thing of the past but still a frightening part of the present, likely to challenge us also in the future.

(Consequences of racial fanaticism)

We are all painfully aware of the devastating consequences of racial fanaticism in the 20th century.

We all know that millions of Jews and members of other minorities were forcefully displaced and murdered in its name.

Today, we are also aware of the extent

of damage that the persecution
of religious and ethnic minorities inflicted
on society itself.

This damage on our society
- a society, which had considered itself enlightened, modern and humanistic
at the dawn of the last century-
was enormous.

When people are driven out
from our midst and murdered,
it changes the consciousness of an entire generation,
and that of those who follow.

After the end of the National Socialist reign of terror,
perpetrators -
but also those who had remained silent and inactive,
who had not opposed this insanity –
neither of them were the same as before 1938.

Those tenthousands of people
who were displaced and murdered

- artists, intellectuals,
- writers and scientists,
- and all other parts of the Austrian Jewish society-

left an enormous void.

Our country has lost a wealth of
creativity and knowledge,
of spirit and culture,
of brain-power and intellectual capital.

(Historical anti-Semitism)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Nazis did not invent Anti-Semitism.
For centuries prior to the holocaust,
anti-Semitism had led to pillaging, persecution
and forced displacement in many parts of Europe

But it was only in the 20th century
that the National Socialists
perfected a perverse regime
of degradation, organised persecution and murder
on an unprecedented scale.

The National Socialists exploited
the anti-Semitism present in
wide circles of society for their political goals.

(Present anti-Semitism)

A great European,
the Hungarian novelist
and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature,
Imre Kertesz, said:

“Remembering the Holocaust is necessary.
In order to prevent it from happening again.
But since Auschwitz, nothing happened
which would make another Auschwitz impossible. (..)
Before Auschwitz, it was unimaginable. Now it is not anymore.”

Nowadays, new forms of anti-Semitism are emerging.
Criticism of Israel
does not equate to anti-Semitism.
But often that criticism provides a platform
for anti-Semitic ideas or clichés.

This new Anti-Semitism
is a phenomenon which is cropping up
and slowly taking effect in our country.

Our joint responsibility is to remain vigilant.

(Challenges)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The lesson to be drawn
from the pogroms and the Holocaust
is the unconditional recognition
of human rights and human dignity.

However, the great challenge ahead of us is:
How do we convey these principles?

How do we reach young people on these issues?
Do schools fulfil this task?
Or visits to memorial sites?
What responsibility can be assumed by the media?
What role does political discourse play?

(The fight against anti-Semitism)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We need to confront
not only anti-Semitism
but all forms of racism
and hostility towards minorities
in an open and critical manner.

Our society needs to be sensitized
to any kind of hostility towards minorities
and any form of racism.

Human dignity and human rights must serve
as the foundations of our actions and our society.

They need to become anchored
in the mindset of all people living here.

It is in this spirit
that I would like to thank the organisers
of this conference and wish you all
a stimulating exchange of thoughts.

And to all of us, I wish for great momentum
in order to come closer to our shared goal
of a world free of racism,
free of anti-Semitism,
free of hostility directed at minorities.

A world where the understanding
that all human beings are born free and equal
in dignity and rights
is truly being upheld.

Thank you.