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**Address by Irina Bokova,**

**Director-General of UNESCO**

**on the Role of UNESCO in Countering Anti-Semitism and Preserving the  
Legacy of the Holocaust – on the occasion of the launch of UNESCO's  
guide on Holocaust Education and Genocide Prevention**

**15<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly of the World Jewish Congress**

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Mr President of the World Jewish Congress, Ambassador Ronald Lauder,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am deeply grateful to Mr Ronald Lauder for this opportunity to speak today about UNESCO's role in countering antisemitism and preserving the legacy of the Holocaust. Allow me also to thank Mr Robert Singer, CEO and Executive President, for the very kind words you addressed to me this morning.

Let me congratulate you, Ambassador Lauder for your re-election as President of the World Jewish Congress and reiterate my deepest thanks for your longstanding support to UNESCO.

I remember your decisive participation in UNESCO's special event on the prevention of violent extremism at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York last September, where you made a deeply moving tribute to the great Elie Wiesel.

I remember the presence of Executive Vice-President Mr Singer for the launch of the *Education without Border* exhibition at UNESCO headquarters, side by side with Israel, in April last year.

Today, we stand once again together, united around shared values, and I am deeply moved to be here on the occasion of *Yom Hashoah*.

*Yom Hashoah* sends us back to the founding moments of UNESCO, which was created in response to the Second World War, in response to the Holocaust and to all forms of racism and antisemitism yesterday, today and tomorrow.

UNESCO places the fight against xenophobia, racism and anti-Semitism at the heart of our action for peace.

Our role, our core function within the United Nations, is unique -- we act on mentalities, we act through the minds of men and women, through education, culture and knowledge, to build a climate for dialogue, for human rights and peace.

I insist on this approach, because I believe the ethical and political commitment against anti-Semitism and intolerance today must be founded on an intellectual effort to understand the roots of hatred and to defuse the discourse that exploits ignorance.

This is precisely UNESCO's role.

We believe knowledge is a tool for peace.

We believe culture is our strongest weapon against hatred.

This is why UNESCO is the only United Nations agency to run a dedicated global program to teach the history of the Holocaust as a lever against anti-Semitism today.

This is why I am convinced education, culture and knowledge have become core security issues in the world today, to combat violent extremism built on distortions of faith or history.

This work has perhaps never been so important, nor so difficult.

Antisemitism has been raising in the past two decades.

We see it in Europe, where terrorist attacks have targeted Jews, in Toulouse, in Brussels, in Paris, Copenhaguen.

We see it in regions of the world where there are no more Jewish communities – they have been persecuted, forced to flee.

Hatred of Jews is ancient and it has evolved over centuries -- adopting new masks, learning how to shelter behind double speak, even behind freedom of expression.

There are religious, political, social and racial forms of anti-Semitism.

And there is also – this must be very clear – an new anti-Semitism today expressed in the form of a demonization of Israel, through the hateful and systematic criticism of a country, and seeking to de-legitimize its very existence.

That is why the teaching of the history of the Holocaust remains a foundation in the struggle against anti-Semitism today -- to know the past, but above all to teach the mechanisms of escalating violence, how prejudice may lead to insults, insults to discrimination, discrimination to murder.

UNESCO teaches about the holocaust as a starting point to teach about other forms of mass atrocities – including the Genocide of Tutsi in Rwanda, against the Yezidis in Iraq, and to help prevent new genocides.

I will never forget the wisdom of our dear friend Sam Pizar, Auschwitz survivor, UNESCO Honorary Ambassador.

He said: *“I speak not only to mourn the dead, but to warn the living.”*

In this spirit, I nominated Serge and Beate Klarsfeld as *UNESCO Honorary Ambassadors and Special Envoys for Holocaust Education and the Prevention of Genocide*.

A key aspect of this work is to fight against the banalisation of anti-Semitic discourse and hate speech.

Anti-Semitic violence is never an “isolated act” – it builds on public discourses, it is encouraged by perverse rhetoric stigmatizing minorities, refugees, foreigners, or by distorting Jewish history.

It is against this discourse that we must fight, and we are carrying out this educational work on all continents, to help teachers better address this difficult topic.

We see more and more, especially in Europe, attempts to deny or distort the history of the Holocaust and minimize the responsibility of local authorities alongside Nazi Germany – we see unacceptable prejudices become commonplace again.

Some political parties even promote it.

This clearly is a regeneration of traditional, nationalistic antisemitism.

It seeks to revisit the history of the war, whitewashing responsibility in the crimes perpetrated, expunging national histories from their Jewish dimension.

These discourses must be countered and this, I believe, is UNESCO's role.

*Against those who distort history*, UNESCO works to tell the truth about Jewish history, to protect World Heritage sites in Israel, to share the wealth of Jewish culture among all other cultures:

- as we did with B'Nai Brith, during our symposium on the Permanence of Yiddish in 2012 and on Judeo-Spanish paths and Mediterranean in 2014.
- as we do in cooperation with the Simon Wiesenthal Center since 2015, with our travelling exhibition on *3,500 years of relations between the Jewish people and the Holy Land*, which has already travelled around the world, to the Knesset, the US Congress, the Vatican, Buenos Aires, Baku and London, and it will continue its journey in many other countries.

*Against Holocaust denial and relativization*, which fuels antisemitism today, we teach about the Holocaust -- and, over the last 5 years, UNESCO has organized countless workshops and conferences, involving educators of all regions of the world, from Europe to Latin America and Africa, to educate, to mobilize.

UNESCO has created Chairs in leading universities on Holocaust education and genocide prevention, including here in the United States, at Rutgers and at the University of Southern California - Shoah Foundation as well as at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland.

Last year, with the President of France, François Hollande, we opened a new Chair on citizenship education and the convergence of memories at the Camps des Mille -- a concentration camps in Southern France.

Today, I am pleased to announce the publication by UNESCO of the first-ever Guide on Holocaust Education and Genocide Prevention, designed for policymakers, curriculum developers and teachers.

This Guide is the first step of a series of projects conducted with the support of the Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

I see this as a direct contribution by UNESCO to help strengthen policies, and make a difference at the global level.

With this innovative and one of a kind policy guide, UNESCO speaks to the next generation of leaders, of teachers, of citizens around the world. We must empower future generations with the lessons from the Holocaust, to equip our children and grandchildren with the tools they need to vanquish intolerance and hate, bigotry and anti-Semitism, racism and prejudice... before it takes root.

In addition, UNESCO is working to ensure that places of remembrance are preserved and respected.

UNESCO is, indeed, about leveraging the power of ideas – but it is also very much about protecting, concretely, places and sites of historical significance, as World Heritage Sites.

It is in this spirit that the German Nazi concentration and extermination camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau was inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1979, and we work with all Member States, to ensure the history of this site is taught to all.

Last January, the Auschwitz Museum opened an exceptional exhibition of personal objects of victims, lost for decades, shown to the public for the first time at UNESCO.

UNESCO's Memory of the World register, which recognizes and protects the most important archives of humanity's shared documentary heritage, now also includes

the *Ringelblum Archives of the Warsaw Ghetto*, Anne Frank's *Diary*, the *Archives of the International Tracing Service of Bad Arolsen* and the *Pages of Testimony of Yad Vashem*.

When people say the Shoah is a myth, when negationists argue there were no gas chambers in Auschwitz, or that 6 million Jews is an exaggerated number -- we need to equip young people with these documents and stories, as references to respond.

I have heard many of the stories of Holocaust survivors during our commemoration of the *International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Holocaust* at our Headquarters every year.

I still hear the voice of Schlomo Venezia, who spoke about his experience in the SonderKommandos in front of a silent room at UNESCO.

I remember the world premiere of the film by Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah*, subtitled in Farsi, Turkish and Arabic by the Aladdin Project – our privileged partner in this work, and broadcast from UNESCO by satellite to Iran in 2011.

Every year on 27 January, UNESCO commemorates the *International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Holocaust*, at its headquarters in Paris with its partner, the Shoah Memorial.

Exactly 6 years ago, in January 2011, I lead with the Mayor of Paris, Mr Bertrand Delanoë, a delegation of 150 personalities, Rabbis, Imams, and Bishops who visited the Auschwitz Birkenau extermination camp.

Over the last 10 years, UNESCO has welcomed the greatest intellectuals to transmit and educate: Yehuda Bauer, Steven Katz, Dina Porat, the Yad Vashem Chief historian, and many more.

On all these fronts, UNESCO has played its part and laid the foundations for an irreversible commitment to the knowledge of history -- without the determination and authority of UNESCO, none of these projects would have been possible.

I have to admit that this is not always an easy task.

There are setbacks and hurdles.

But in my firm opinion it is necessary and it is non-negotiable, and we need the support of all of you to ensure these documents and stories are told in schools, in textbooks across the world.

*Today, against the new forms of anti-Semitism, we must constantly reinvent our tools.*

We work with the *International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance*, with which we organized a conference in December on the prevention of anti-semitism through education, culture and communication, with the impressive participation of the French Senator Robert Badinter, one of the staunchest fighters against Anti-Semitism and for Human Rights.

With the *Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe* (OSCE), we will produce this year new tools for educators, as we have done to denounce anti-Muslim racism in schools.

For all this, we need the mobilization of all our partners and friends, to really make a difference, and this is why I believe our cooperation with Israel, on these issues as well as on scientific research, new technologies, and so much more, is vital.

We have built a strong network of partners in Israel, with the *Golda Meir Institute* which I visited 6 years ago, with the *Weizmann Institute of Science*, the *Shimon Peres Institute for Peace*, among others, and this must grow further.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I consider UNESCO's work against antisemitism as a core part of its wider efforts to build peace and prevent violent extremism.

I consider that 'hard power' alone is not enough to prevent threats that draw on exclusive visions of the world and build on false interpretations of faith.

We need the 'soft power' of education, culture and communication also, to win the battle of ideas, particularly in the minds of young people.

When the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2347 against cultural destruction and cultural cleansing in the Middle East on 24 march, I quoted the German Poet Heinrich Heine who once said: “*Everywhere when people start burning books and culture, they end up burning other people.*” – and history shows this to be true.

I believe that if we unite for heritage, if we protect books and culture and knowledge, we also protect the people, we also strengthen the defences of peace.

This is the salience of UNESCO today.

This is the spirit of our cooperation with the European Union, to bolster education in emergency situations.

This goal underpins UNESCO’s work to craft education guidelines for human rights education.

This underpins UNESCO’s leadership in the first *High-Level Conference on Education to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism*, organized at UNESCO in 2015, with the support of the United States.

This underpins the normative tools developed by UNESCO -- our *Teachers’ Guide on the Prevention of Violent Extremism* and our recently published *Guide for Policy-Makers* on the same topic.

In the digital world, we organized the first *International Conference on Youth and the Internet – Fighting Radicalisation* – and held a second one in Quebec, Canada.

I mentioned the UN Security Council resolution 2347 adopted on 24 march, against the destruction of cultural heritage and cultural cleaning, and its link to fighting extremisms and terrorism financing.

This historical decision, with the first-ever G7 meeting on culture organized a week later, attests to a new awakening about the power of protecting culture for peace and security.



Violent extremists know the power of culture to unite, and this is why they target and destroy heritage ... this is why they destroyed the fabled Shrine of the prophet Jonas / Yabbi Yunis in Mosul in Iraq, revered by Jews, Christians and Muslims.

In response, for the first time, the Security Council Members have unanimously made the protection of heritage a key security issue – fighting against illicit trafficking of antiquities to curb the financing of terrorism, denouncing the destruction of heritage as a war crime and a new tactic of war.

This includes all Permanent Members together, united for heritage...

This includes 57 co-sponsors countries, including Israel, Lebanon, Morocco, Iraq, united for heritage...

This global effort, spearheaded by France and Italy, is also the result of years of advocacy and work by UNESCO.

We need to show everybody that dialogue among cultures actually exists and has always existed – that it is not dream, but a reality, embedded in the stones of our World Heritage.

There is hardly a stronger symbol than the Old City of Jerusalem and its Walls, which is, of course, a UNESCO World Heritage site, to share this universal message of hope and unity and if you allow me, I would conclude by this.

Nowhere in the world more than in Jerusalem do Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions share space and interweave to the point that they support each other.

These cultural and spiritual traditions build on sacred texts and references, known by all, that are an intrinsic part of the identities and history of peoples.

In the Torah, Jerusalem is the capital of King David, where Solomon built the Temple and placed the Ark of the Covenant.

In the Bible, Jerusalem is the city of the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In the Quran, Jerusalem is the third holiest site in Islam, where Muhammad arrived after his night journey from Al Haram Mosq (Mecca) to Al Aqsa.

In this microcosm of humanity's spiritual diversity, different peoples worship the same places, sometimes under different names.

The recognition, use of and respect for these names is paramount.

The Al Aqsa Mosque / Al-Haram al-Sharif, the sacred shrine of Muslims, is also the Har HaBayit – or Temple Mount – the holiest place in Judaism, whose Western Wall is revered by millions across the world, a few steps away from the Saint Sepulchre and the Mount of Olives holy to the Christians.

The outstanding universal value of Jerusalem, and the reason why it was inscribed on the World Heritage list, lies in this synthesis, which is an appeal for dialogue, not confrontation.

To deny, conceal or erase any of the Jewish, Christian or Muslim traditions runs counter to the reasons that justified its inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage list.

Jerusalem puts us in front of a radical choice.

We can try to ignore these interactions, distort our heritage in endless disputes about what belongs to who, to this culture or another, and cut our heritage in pieces.

Or we can make another choice, and decide to unite for heritage, to harness the power of heritage to build peace, and better understand our common destiny.

UNESCO's responsibility is to strengthen this cultural and religious coexistence, and this is my absolute daily determination as Director-General, to work with all Member States in this spirit.

It is not always easy, but there is no other way.

And I believe, in echo to Heinrich Heine, that indeed when people unite around culture, around the shared knowledge of history, they protect each other, and this is

how we can combat anti-semitism and honour the memory of the victims of the Shoah.

A few days before she was deported to the death camps, Héléne Berr, a French young Jewish woman wrote in her Journal:

*“It gives me pleasure to think that if I am deported, my friend Andrée will have kept this Journal, which is what is most precious to me, for now I do not care for anything else that is material; what must be safeguarded is one’s soul and one’s memory.”*

Protecting this soul and memory, this is UNESCO’s role, this is my determination as Director-General, and I thank you very much for your attention.