

Opening speech

Welcome and Introduction

Good morning.

On behalf of the “Elie Wiesel” National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust, it’s a great pleasure to have the chance to open this conference!

Before we begin, I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude and appreciation for the support of our hosts. Notably, to **Professor Alexandru Florian**, General Director of the INSHR EW, who accepted to host our research project entitled “Coming to Terms with National History and Participation in Contemporary Memorialisation of the Holocaust in Central and Eastern European Post-communist Countries”. Our conference is part of this research project and it has received financial assistance from **the Executive Unit for Financing Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation (PN-III-P1-1.1-TE-2016-0811)**. I would especially like to thank **Roxana Popa**, who has dedicated her time and her skills to help me organise today’s scientific event. This would not have been possible without her precious contribution.

And last but not least to you, **our distinguished participants** to our conference.

Thank you so much for applying! Your participation to our scientific event is very welcome!

I am looking forward to everyone’s presentation!

Thank you to all of you, who have made this life-changing opportunity possible for me!

Before starting the first session, let me introduce **Ana Bărbulescu**, senior researcher at INSHR EW and head of the Research Department, who continuously help me refine my research demarche and offered me valuable advice whenever I needed. After her speech, I will shortly present the project of the “Holocaust Memoryscapes” in Central and Eastern Europe.

Ana, you have the floor.

Presentation of the “Holocaust Memoryscapes” in Central and Eastern Europe

Our today’s international colloquium takes place in a particular context, that of Romania’s national commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust.

Why is it so important that we remember the Holocaust?

Thinking that previously racial stereotypes and demonization were the “prelude to mass violence around the world” that led to the Holocaust, considered a “turning point in history”, it is important to remember the Holocaust because it is an example of how these trends could evolve into something far more threatening. Given that in our today’s society there are serious concerns over the spread of anti-Semitism and the flourishing of discrimination and prejudice, it seems imperative to have a lively and proactive debate about the Holocaust and related issues. Holocaust remembrance is above all a political and ethical obligation. At the same time, awareness of the legacy of the Holocaust, and of the dangers of perpetuating stereotypes, prejudices and racial hatred, is a moral responsibility to every citizen. It is therefore imperative to tackle, challenge, debate, discuss, expose and teach.

A quote that stands on the walls of the Auschwitz Memorial is widely used when talking about the Holocaust: “He who does not learn from History is doomed to repeat it”. Not only should we learn from the past, but we should also stand up against injustice and take position on it in order to preserve democracy values and to produce change in society. “Our obligation is to give meaning to life and in doing so to overcome the passive, indifferent life”, said Elie Wiesel, Nobel Laureate for Peace in his speech entitled “Against Indifference”¹ delivered on the 12th of April 1999, at the White House in Washington, D.C.. By keeping in mind this quote and considering that the Holocaust issue is still not acknowledged enough, decades after the end of the war, “Holocaust Memoryscapes” research project was inspired by the challenge proposed by Elie Wiesel. Our research critically engaging with the field of memory and heritage studies will provide specific insights to the impact of the Holocaust on the lives of Jews and Roma people and their continued shared lives. In this attempt we proposed to scrutinize the question of ideological debate in coming to terms with difficult pasts and the stakes of integrating it into mainstream historical consciousness, by analysing frames, media and political economy of remembrance, by exploring affects, engaged and catalysed by processes of shaping public memory, and examining the social impact of transmitting the memory of such tragic events.

¹ <https://americanrhetoric.com/speeches/ewieselperilsofindifference.html>,
<https://worldandeverything.org/2019/08/notable-speech-elie-wiesel-the-perils-of-indifference/>

Our colloquium examining the social, cultural, cognitive, political and technological shifts affecting the extent to which individuals, groups and societies remember the Holocaust in European post-communist contexts is part of such debate on the extent to which states across Central and Eastern Europe have dealt with ‘the Holocaust issue’ and acknowledged their traumatic pasts.

Considering that this issue is of paramount importance for research, we conceived our international colloquium as a forum for addressing from a comparative perspective Holocaust memory as a multi-layered process.

Therefore, our colloquium will focus on the processes of Holocaust public memory building in post-communist countries, by presenting official and alternative practices of framing public memory, discourses underlying the foundation of Holocaust memorial places, along with audiences’ engagement with the Holocaust “memoriscapes” in Eastern Europe.

Top-down manners to build Holocaust memory offer unique insights into the nature of official memorial culture compared to bottom-up approaches to memorialising and commemorating the past, as alternative perspectives.

Therefore, the objective of the “Contemporary Memorialisation of the Holocaust in Central and Eastern European Countries” is to deepen the understanding of the Holocaust memory-making mechanisms, including both state and non-state agencies of memorializing the Holocaust with the emphasis being put on the role of memorial markers in directly engaging the audience with Jewish and Romani histories, in an attempt to critically analyse and challenge the concept of shared history and memorializing the atrocities of the past.

With these words, I wish you all a fruitful conference and an enjoyable stay in Bucharest. Thank you!

Sonia CATRINA, PhD

Project Director at INSHR EW& Conference Manager
