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Commemoration of the destruction of the Roma camp in 1944

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

65th anniversary of the destruction of a Roma camp

Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2 August 2009

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are standing at the scene of an appalling tragedy brought about not by Nature or by Fate, but by people whose actions were neither random nor misconceived, but intentional. They inflicted that tragedy on other people whom they had deprived of the right to be people. They were evildoers who at that moment ceased to behave like human beings. Through their decision to brand their victims as Untermenschen undeserving of human treatment, they themselves became inhuman.

In the course of human history, millions of people have been slaughtered by other people on battlefields or have perished unarmed solely on account of their beliefs or because they belonged to an enemy tribe or race. However, what happened at Auschwitz and at other Nazi extermination camps is on a totally different scale. Here, men, women and children were massacred wholesale – not because they had expressed some opinion or other and certainly not because they belonged to a rival or enemy race, but merely because someone had decided that they were inferior and were not entitled to even the most basic of rights: the right to life.

Merely because they were Jews – with whose fate Auschwitz is most often linked – or Roma, whom we are commemorating today.

I considered it my duty to come here today. One reason for my visit is that the unique horror of Auschwitz – that atrocity which was not the act of primitive barbarians but, rather (as Zygmunt Bauman describes it), a terrifying product of the modern industrial age – must not be forgotten.

Another reason why I considered it right to come here concerns the Roma themselves. These days, neo-Nazi gangs attack and intimidate Roma, threaten to exterminate them and express overt support for Hitler's views. And that is not all: even some senior politicians belonging to apparently "normal" parties express populist anti-Roma sentiment.

Some people basically deny that the Roma holocaust ever took place and they maintain that the Roma camp was not actually a concentration camp in the true sense. Others brand the Roma as "misfits" or as "nomads", decree a "zero-tolerance policy" against them and take action which has the effect of totally excluding them from society. They are convinced that campaigning against the Roma can win them most voters' support which they would not otherwise secure. And that, unfortunately, is too often the outcome.

Throughout Europe we need to raise awareness of the fact that the Roma genuinely were the victims of Nazi extermination policy – and that Nazi persecution of the Roma was just as heinous as persecution of the Jews. But that is not all: our wealthy, democratic societies must do much, much more to ensure that the Roma no longer remain on the margins of those societies but have the same prospects of a decent education, a job and a place to live as anyone else, and to ensure that no one can exploit their social exclusion as a means of stirring up xenophobia and inter-ethnic tension.

That is our common task, to be shared by the members of mainstream societies and the Roma themselves. However, the bulk of that task lies understandably with those who have the means to change the situation: politicians, journalists and those who help to shape public opinion.

Populists, xenophobes and the manipulative must not be given another chance! Instead, let us finally give the Roma themselves a genuine opportunity.

Thank you for your attention.