



COMBATING ANTISEMITISM FOSTERING JEWISH life



SUMMARY REPORT

INFORMAL CONSULTATIONS TO SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF A 'EUROPEAN NETWORK OF PLACES WHERE THE HOLOCAUST HAPPENED'

Introduction

On 23 January at the “Holocaust Remembrance Conference: Remembering the Past. Shaping the Future.”, organised by the European Commission in cooperation with the Swedish Presidency of the EU and the Swedish Presidency of International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), a first discussion took place about how the creation of a ‘Network of Places where the Holocaust happened’ can be supported. The network is a key action in the EU Strategy on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life. At the conference, Vice-President Schinas announced further informal consultations. In that regard the Commission organised the following informal consultation sessions with representatives of Holocaust sites, Holocaust projects and independent experts:

1. Killing sites, camps and mass graves (21 June 2023)
2. Deportation places, and ghettos (22 June 2023)
3. Hiding places, escape routes and points of arrival (26 June 2023)
4. Unmarked sites and graves, and smaller sites (28 June 2023)

In every session participants were invited to discuss the main challenges Holocaust sites face, discuss opportunities that exist, list existing relevant projects and discuss what the objectives of the new “European Network of Places where the Holocaust happened” should be. This report summarises the main discussion points of the different sessions. It does not necessarily reflect the views of the Commission.

1. Session I: Killing sites, camps and mass graves

As part of the ‘Safeguarding sites project’, IHRA is developing a list of challenges and threats Holocaust sites face. Threats range from climate change and natural disaster to lack of financial support and lack of a management plan for the site. It is currently unknown how many sites face which threats, and a mapping of the threats per site would be very valuable. Which percentage of sites currently lacks resources for maintenance and preservation? How many sites are properly marked? How many sites have a website where all information about the history of the site can be found easily? How many visitors do sites have? Are among the questions where more knowledge is needed.

Especially the state of smaller sites is concerning. Often they have no markations or information on them and in some cases are full of litter and mess. If they are marked, or have a small monument on them, it has often been erected by communities from Israel and/or the US. Therefore, a specific challenge often mentioned was the lack of ownership by local communities and



the fact that they do not see the site as part of their own history, but as part of “another” Jewish history. Getting local communities involved is therefore important. Specifically in Ukraine, the war further negatively influences the state of Holocaust sites.

The websites and digital resources of many individual sites need improvement. Often visitors know how the story of their own family is related to a Holocaust site, but they do not know the full story of the site and this information is also not easily accessible. The digital preservation and accessibility of all existing material will also remain a challenge, for example of the existing pictures. An example of an application that can show digital information when people are physically at the location of a site is the IWalk.

Furthermore, there is a need to bring together websites which already map specific Holocaust features in specific countries and other websites of main camps which have information on their subcamps. Ideally, there should be a comprehensive website with 'local layers' that could include narratives and stories that matter locally.

The importance of physically marking sites was also discussed. A marker on sites can help safeguard the sites, and ideally it is a two-way process between a marker and good information at the site on the one hand and having information virtually available online on the other hand. However, it was also noted that people are sometimes against marking sites, for instance because they fear it would reduce tourism, or it would have too little added value compared to other things that can be done. Overall, the importance of visitors was stressed, as sites that receive (more) visitors have a smaller chance to deteriorate. Improving online accessibility can in that regard be seen as the second step, yet crucial as well.

As currently a lot of information exists on Holocaust sites, the network would be an opportunity to bring all that information together. It could for instance be a citizen's science project, which brings all existing sites together and allows people to upload information. It would also be powerful to online map unmarked sites, which would allow more knowledge to be developed about the sites.

2. Session II: Deportation places, and ghettos

Education is seen as crucial as time is passing away and younger generations are questioning the relevance of the Holocaust. With the last survivors and witnesses passing away, physical Holocaust sites are becoming more important, and it is therefore important that their visitors capacity is increased and more people are encouraged to make visits. However, taking students or people in general to a site does not mean they get educated. It is therefore important that the educational context is improved. This is even more important considering the increasing pressure on places of remembrance, for instance through distorted narratives.

In the entire story of the Holocaust, deportation places and ghettos are important, but they are not where the Holocaust started as people were brought in from their homes. Furthermore, there are many unmarked sites, which have not even been 'geo-located'. If this geo-location would take place and be combined with a dedicated online website, that would already be a step forward for many sites. A concrete output of the network could be a research on the general state of Holocaust sites.

It was discussed that the main purpose of the network should be to support the preservation of the sites, and to help them improve their visibility. Concretely, cooperation and knowledge exchange between sites to do this can be encouraged. Local authorities could also be engaged, as they can take a role at local level in safeguarding Holocaust sites. This is especially relevant as all sites have their local needs and opportunities, for which the local level can best be engaged.

The importance of the online dimension was also discussed. Sites should be much better connected to the online available stories, and the Iwalk was referred to as an app that can do that tailor-made. Overall, the online available information about



sites should be greatly improved, as this gives the opportunity to better prepare a visit and a follow-up to a visit.

A label at the site could help for the visibility. However, this should be combined with improvements in the educational material and programmes available. Labels alone do not always help, as sometimes they prevent new developments or maintenance.

The town of Terezin in Czech Republic was discussed as an example of the costs that can be involved with renovation and maintenance. In Terezin the whole town was a ghetto. It usually was a town for around 7000 soldiers, but from 1941 it housed 51.000 Jews. Many buildings now need renovation, but the costs can be up to ten times higher than the available budget.

3. Session III: Hiding places, escape routes and points of arrival

It was emphasized that more knowledge and research is needed about the escape routes. We know where camps are, where deportations started, but we do not know everything about the escape routes. It was stated that too little knowledge exists about the topography of rescue efforts during the Holocaust and the escape routes are therefore not completely marked. The geographical scope of these escape routes is very wide as they often ended outside Europe. Overall, it was seen as important that rescue places are included in a network together with murder and atrocity places, to ensure all different types of sites are remembered.

The 'Safeguarding sites project' was mentioned as it shows that Holocaust sites need safeguarding from very different challenges. The project will also include a map of responsibilities to safeguard sites. The major challenge is that most of the places are not marked, and in order to mark them, the cooperation of local authorities is needed. The importance of local authorities in addition to national authorities to safeguard sites can therefore not be underestimated.

The importance of mapping all existing Holocaust sites was also mentioned, which can be done in a digital map. The ideal of experts is that the testimonies can be combined with the actual places. To have the context, the stories and the narrative, the testimonies, the pictures, all information and official documents related to sites online in one place, closely linked to the real physical site.

Holocaust sites can struggle with the numbers of visitors they receive. For most this means they have too few visitors, or their visitor numbers have for instance still not recovered from and returned to pre-COVID-19 pandemic levels. Yet, one site mentioned that in some periods of the year it actually receives so many visitors, that not everyone can get a ticket to enter the site and they need to be referred to other Holocaust related sites in the country.

Another challenge are the changing attitudes in society. Nowadays, a great deal of the audience believes in conspiracy theories, and we live in a time that the narrative of a site and of the Holocaust in its entirety can become very distorted. In that regard it is important that the network is relevant for young people and supports sites to reach them. In addition to this, the apathy from many local people to learn about the story of a site is a main challenge. The network would be a success if it succeeds in providing a true historical perspective and context to all Holocaust places and supports sites to increase their reach to local and young people. In that regard it is important that the network also focusses on the fields of Holocaust education, tackling distortion and prevention of future mass atrocities. Empowering local authorities to deliver the maintenance and ownership of Holocaust sites alongside local communities is seen as another key element.

The escape routes from Denmark to Sweden were discussed, as there is currently a lack of coordination efforts to develop a common policy regarding the different places related to the escape of Danish Jews to Sweden and to the Holocaust in general. Monuments are often set up by foreigners, but it does not come from the local society. On the one hand this is due to an overall modesty about the collective rescue efforts, but on the other hand it might also be because promoting the remembrance about the rescue efforts might fuel conflict in society about who actually helped and who did not.



4. Session IV: Unmarked sites and graves, and smaller sites

It was highlighted that unmarked sites and graves, and smaller sites face significantly different challenges than bigger and well-known sites of the Holocaust, as they are not marked and often nobody feels real ownership for them. For those sites mapping out initial partners for a network would be the starting point. Ukraine was specifically mentioned as efforts are being made to map 2000 killing sites. So far, 1300 sites have been mapped and new killing sites are still being discovered. However, every month less survivors and witnesses are alive to help point out the original places. The overall state of these sites is relatively bad, as there is no maintenance and ownership.

The graves of the death marches are a specific type of unmarked sites that are often not taken care of. Sometimes they have been moved, and build upon as they are close to the roads. But often they have also been moved, so that they could be forgotten and local societies would not need to feel responsible for them anymore. Many graves are still without a name as the death marches were not documented. It is important to engage people so that these graves and the people are not forgotten.

Overall, the number of active small memorial sites is diminishing due to a lack of volunteers on which they are often depending. Yet, these sites have the largest potential in terms of making a direct impact on their communities, and in that regard can be seen as having more added value than the national memorials. Internationally there is much more focus on these national memorials or larger sites, and they often receive most of the funding. The lack of ownership further contributes to the lack of resources and funding of smaller sites.

The state of sites in Poland, where there are an estimated 1500 killing sites of which 300 now have been located and around 100 have been marked, was highlighted. The challenge is to protect the sites. Under Polish law they are being registered as war graves, so that they no longer can be built upon. So far only one site could not be marked.

It was mentioned that the objective of the network should be the creation of a place that gives a total panorama of Holocaust places in Europe and how the Holocaust happened. A hub where people can go to find all sites and organisations that are involved in promoting remembrance and education. It should become the focal point between all existing initiatives. A further key objective should be the digitalisation of all Holocaust places. If at least detailed coordinates and descriptions of places are available it can be ensured that knowledge and information about the places remains available online, despite if sites are physically marked or not. From experience it can be said that some info has been lost, because it was not digitalised. Digitalising and translating everything is therefore important. Furthermore, a network should encourage the continued search for unknown places.

It was further highlighted that it is important that local authorities are involved in the work to protect sites, however they often have a lack of knowledge and expertise on how to safeguard the sites. In light of this, it was also mentioned that convincing politicians at all levels is crucial to preserve sites. Creating a database of all relevant places, with a user-friendly environment, was mentioned as important. Although there were also some warnings against it, as the investment is high, and there are many databases that are underused. From that perspective the focus of the network should be at bringing together the right people and organisations as to be a forum to host discussions of best practices and practical advice for those working in the field. Furthermore, a focus on how the network can encourage education on the Holocaust and help combat antisemitism is seen as valuable.