

Speech by Sabina Higgins at the Roma Holocaust Memorial

Mansion House, Dublin

Wednesday, 2 August 2017

Dear Friends,

May I begin by thanking our hosts here in the Mansion House for allowing us to gather here today for this sombre but so important event. I would also like to thank our friends at Pavee Point for inviting me to be with you today. I am looking forward to hearing Gabi Muntean, Bianca Paun, Lynn Jackson, Prof. Ethel Brooks, along with all the representatives of the Roma community who will share with us their rich culture and heritage.

We are gathered here today to remember the Porajmos which took place on 2 August 1944 when almost 3,000 Roma were exterminated in the gas chambers of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp. In remembering the terrible genocide which was perpetrated against the Roma and Sinti, the Jewish people and against various other minority groups in the 1940s, it is my hope that we can address the lasting effects of the holocaust and prevent a similar loss of life in the future.

The Roma and Sinti people are often forgotten when we discuss the holocaust. During the Nuremberg Trials, held by the Allied forces after World War II, no mention was made of the genocide perpetrated against the Roma. In fact, the genocide of the Roma people wasn't

formally recognised as such until 1982. As a result, Roma survivors of the concentration camps received no assistance or compensation from the German government for the terrible suffering they had to endure.

While preparing my remarks for today, I was particularly struck by the words of Romani Rose, head of the German Council of Sinti and Roma. A Sinto activist who lost 13 members of his family at Auschwitz-Birkenau, as referenced by Ethel Brooks in her paper “Remembering the Dead, Documenting Resistance, Honouring the Heroes”, he said “There is not a single family of Sinti and Roma in Germany who has not lost immediate family members. It shapes our identity to this day”.

We are not even sure of the full extent of this genocide. The number of Roma who were executed by the Nazis has often been underestimated by historians. The Nazis did not keep accurate records of the Roma they killed, and as a result contemporary historians estimate that between one third and two thirds of the European Roma community, approximately half a million people, were exterminated. In addition to this horrific genocide, a further 500,000 Roma were displaced, dispossessed or had their identity papers destroyed during World War II.

Of course, the suffering of the Roma people did not end with World War II. Today, the Roma still face racially motivated hate crimes, violence, persecution, deportation and discrimination in countries

across Europe. The recent rise of right wing, neo-fascist political parties across Europe has led to the return of anti-Roma sentiment, along with anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and anti-immigrant narratives.

These poisonous ideologies must not be allowed to gain a foothold in the contemporary moment. It is a cause of great grief that right through history such appalling unnecessary suffering has been inflicted on humanity through man's inhumanity to man.

The politics of hate, fear and "otherness" must be rejected, and in its place we must strive for inclusion, mutual respect and ethics. We must acknowledge that which makes us different and strive to learn from each other, to better understand each other and care for each other. This is how we overcome discrimination – through education, mutual respect and love. Integrated education for our children is, I think, an essential step along the way.

The Proclamation of the Irish Republic set us the challenge to cherish all the children of the nation equally. We must renew and redouble our efforts to meet this challenge. Every child in Ireland, including the children of Travellers, Roma, asylum seekers, migrants and many other minority groups should be afforded the care-free, joyous childhood which they so richly deserve.

It is a challenge, not only for government but also for us as citizens to honour our responsibility to create a contemporary environment

where cultural difference is recognised, respected and celebrated with true democratic, republican values at its core.

Both myself and the President were delighted when, earlier this year, Irish Travellers were formally recognised as an indigenous ethnic minority. It was a time of national celebration. I know that many people who are here today campaigned and worked on this issue for many years, and I would like to convey my congratulations and appreciation for their work.

In conclusion, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge and to remember all who lost their lives during the darkest moment of European history; whether Roma, Jew, Gentile, homosexual, people of different physical and mental ability and all other minority groups. We must never allow ourselves to forget. We must remember.