



**Address by the Minister for Education, University and Research
Stefania Giannini
on the occasion of the European Symposium
“Establishing a European Teaching Network on Shoah Education”**

Rome, Jewish Community Centre *Il Pitigliani*, December 15, 2014

Dear Andreas Loverdos, Minister of Education and Religious Affairs of the Hellenic Republic,

Dear Under Secretary of State for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and international Cooperation Mario Giro,

Dear Director of the International School for Holocaust Studies of Yad Vashem Eyal Kaminka,

President of the Italian Jewish Communities Renzo Gattegna,

Ambassador of Israel to Italy Naor Gillon,

Ambassador Vince Szalay–Bobrovnický, Head of the Hungarian IHRA Delegation,

*President of *Il Pitigliani* Ugo Limentani,*

Dear Guests and Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me thank you all for being here with us today.

Here, today, we are taking a solemn step. With the promoters of this event and of the network we are launching today, all Europe is heading towards the disambiguation of an intense and slippery word such as “memory”.

The word “memory” entered the public discourse with an heavy burden of ambiguity. Italy knows it well, as it fixed with a law the day of the memory of the persecution and extermination of Jews – a law that much has done to free the



country from self-absolute shortcuts. Europe knows it well, as many countries adopted laws which punish negationism – even if they know that in front of the falsehood, positive knowledge is vulnerable, but not defenseless. Educational systems know it well, as they acknowledge that Jürgen Habermas' imposing pedagogy involves the risk of a distancing understanding.

Paul Ricoeur taught us a lot about memory and its history: he taught us that the first negationism is the one which deprives memory of its function as a “matrix” of history in order to transform it into a province of the history itself. Viceversa, history is not a province of memory: with a “imposing pedagogy” – and especially within young generations – it involves a risky distancing outcome.

Memory does not fulfill its task when it becomes eternal in objects and monuments – which are made to remember us to forget; when it becomes the “matrix” of a communicable knowledge – from teacher to taught.

It would be a vulnerable knowledge – since nothing protects the positive argument from the practice of negation and from the call for evidence.

Nonetheless, it would be a knowledge proud of its public status of knowledge. It would be a part and the engine of a collective conscience, reflective and structured.

It would be a precious knowledge, for it frees us from the paradox that the Shoah is the core of the issue. The issue of the Shoah is to refuse the idea – even implicit – that we face facts which are out of any human measure and responsibility. The issue is to describe its ferocity and irrationality as the epiphany of some demonic thing which authorizes us not to see the facts: beliefs, omissions silences, projects which have in human story the place where to reproduce and therefore to be understood and judged.

This is a risky operation from the intellectual point of view. Historical knowledge is threatened by the “tribunalization” of history and the arguments on the uniqueness of the Shoah evoke “the depraved slippery from similarity to justification”.

This is a turning point that Israel already faced with the construction of the Yad Vashem: that place (YAD) and that name (SHEM) that the Almighty promises in the book of Isaiah and that the State of Israel structured, weaving together remembrance, archives, research and teaching.



To this experience, Italy looks with respect and commitment.

The Italian Ministry of Education University and Research and the Yad Vashem Authority in Jerusalem enjoy a bilateral agreement on Holocaust Education since 2011. We are very grateful to Yad Vashem for the fruitful work done together over the recent years.

Thanks to it, we have together developed a common educational path on this important subject, in a time, I believe, in which this joint work has become very crucial for Europe and probably for all the International Community.

Year after year, we witness the impact of this work.

Hundreds of Italian teachers, who attend the Yad Vashem seminars, come home with new tools, with a strengthened awareness and a new full confidence on these delicate themes.

They gain tools for understanding, tools for teaching, tools for coping. They are able to transmit knowledge to their students in a completely different way, to stand on debates, to deliver the right questions and to give the most appropriate answers.

For this reason, the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research has granted a special accreditation to the Yad Vashem seminars, enabling the teachers who attend them to add an official certificate to their curricula. It is an important incentive.

These facts mark improvement and success. However, positive results on the ground push us to do more and to reach together new goals.

This is what we are doing here today, during the Italian Presidency of the European Council, together with Yad Vashem of course, but also with the Jewish Communities of Italy and with all those Institutions, in Italy and in Europe, who work on this sensitive and complex subject – the SHOAH – and who feel, like us, the urgent call to improve its knowledge and its education.



Every year, the Italian Ministry of Education University and Research invests impressive sums, energies and skills to bring our teachers to the Yad Vashem seminars, and our high school students both to Auschwitz and to Israel. This is only part of an overall didactic work on the Holocaust developed by our Ministry, which includes school lectures, exhibitions and competitions, and visits to the Italian Remembrance sites and Museums.

In addition, the Italian Government is supporting the creation of a Museum of the Shoah in Rome and a Museum for the History of the Italian Jewry and Shoah in Ferrara.

We must however ask ourselves: is it enough?

How can we improve it? What can we do in a time when direct witnesses of that tragedy are leaving us? How can we better confront the new anti-Semite recrudescence? How can we all enhance our efforts? How can we connect our activities to those of our neighboring countries?

We have invited you to Rome with the intent to launch a European model of training on Holocaust studies. A model that should unite us under the goal of spreading the most correct knowledge on the past, in order to be vigilant in our present.

A model which is conceived to reach out as many teachers and students as possible, in a common effort to raise the right questions, both on our past and on our present and future.

We must not forget that in our present signs of anti-Semitic crimes are again a reality, and not by chance they strike where the mind is open to learning – as it happened in the attack to the “Ozar Hatorah” school of Toulouse in March 2012 – or where the memory is communicated – as in the attack to the Jewish museum of Brussels some months ago.

We strongly wish that all the European Countries will adopt this model, or at least that will take inspiration from it. Let me encourage you all to be in contact with us and with Yad Vashem in order to shape similar formulas of training seminars.



Our Ministry is doing a great effort in order to make of this network a sample for other countries: this network that is born today in Italy will be able to serve large and small European Countries and hopefully create a model also for the American organizations and the International ones, such the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, to which most of our States are active members.

But we see it as a part of a larger work. We hope that a greater cooperation may connect other EU network, like Refo500 which prepares the 5th centennial celebrations of the Reform: it will offer new studies on antisemitism's roots in Christianity. .

We endorse a stronger relation with the PhD programs like the one launched by professor Perani, which celebrates the discovery of the ancient Sèfer Torah; or the effort for a research infrastructure on religious studies which we hope to see in the Esfri roadmap, in order to give to our countries new intellectual energy in a society which suffers of religious illiteracy and new insight on the roots of antisemitism.

We, European educators in the global village, aim at creating concrete tools. We need to provide our youth with all possible instruments to distinguish the good from the bad, the truth from the lies, the urgent from the optional.

It is therefore our duty to ask experts to help us.

Today in Rome we are establishing a very important network between European Educational Institutions.

A correct education on what happened during the Holocaust in Europe, a fresh communication of the research concerning the root of cultures, actor, silences, in the preparation of the Shoah, a in-depth analysis of the attitude of indifference or rescue which marked our recent history – all this is not only an historical duty for all of us, but it serves today the pressing need to contain and to stem anti-Semite acts and thinking raising in our Continent.

The network makes us reflect today not on the option between memory and oblivion, but on a more complex relationship among collective memory, history, shared knowledge, oblivion and the identity of that “civitas europea”, which needs a higher political responsibility, a higher political ambition.

I might sound too ambitious today. Let me assure you that I am ambitious. I want to believe that in this room we have already developed enough motivation



to learn from the past, and enough awareness on what is happening in our present. Therefore, we must show the strongest will to improve our future, the future of our children and grandchildren.

As Shoah Survivor and Nobel Prize Elie Wiesel, of European birth, has reminded us: “But is there hope? Is there hope in memory? There must be. Without hope, memory would be morbid and sterile. Without memory, hope would be empty of meaning, and above all, empty of gratitude.”