



Vice-President of the German Parliament: “It is the duty of Christians to make the concern of their Jewish compatriots their common concern.”

01.02.2022 | European Coalition for Israel

Berlin, January 25th, 2022 – As the international community prepares to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust on Thursday, January 27th, the International Holocaust Remembrance Day, faith leaders from across the world gathered together in Berlin on January 19th at a symposium to mark the 80th anniversary of the Wannsee conference.

The 90-minute conference in Wannsee, just outside of Berlin, on January 20th, 1942, brought together senior Nazi and German government officials to discuss, plan and coordinate the implementation of the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question”, the extermination of eleven million Jews in Europe, of which six million were in fact murdered before the Nazis were defeated and the war came to an end.

Representing the Jewish community of Europe at the symposium in Berlin 80 years later, Gady Gronich, CEO of the Conference of European Rabbis Foundation, reminded the delegates not only to concentrate their thoughts and contributions on the tragedies of the past but also to carefully take into consideration the challenges facing European Jewry today. “Eighty years after the Wannsee conference, more and more Jews are asking themselves if there is still a future in Europe. The challenges facing the Jewish communities today are not only old forms of antisemitism, but new legislation which is restricting Jewish practice of religious freedom. Without circumcision and kosher slaughter there can be no religious Jewish life in Europe”, he said.

Responding to the plea from the Jewish Community, the symposium attendees issued a declaration which stated that “the criminalization of circumcision and kosher slaughter must be resisted, as they are central to Jewish religious practice and are protected by the right to freedom of religion and belief, as enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights”.

The declaration went on to note that: “The Holocaust did not start with the Wannsee conference but with a long series of laws and edicts which were passed to isolate, discredit and delegitimize Jewish culture and religion, and this declaration calls on national authorities and church communities to create conditions where Jewish life can flourish.”

The one-day symposium which was entitled: “The Contemporary Church and Antisemitism – what must we do?”, explored how the Christian tradition up to this very day has always struggled and is still struggling to relate to Jewish faith with respect and dignity.

“Neither good education nor religious faith makes anyone immune against antisemitism. Among the fifteen delegates at the Wannsee conference, eight held academic doctoral degrees, and many were members of the Protestant or the Catholic Church”, noted conference organizer **Tomas Sandell** of the European Coalition for Israel.

Professor Katharina von Kellenbach, from the Evangelical Academy in Berlin, presented concrete examples from the German school textbooks of today, which still misrepresent Jewish life and culture to the point of recycling old Jewish stereotypes.

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“Adopting the IHRA working definition on antisemitism is but one small step in addressing the issue of antisemitism within the church – but it is a necessary first step as we begin to explore the distinct features of Christian antisemitism”, Katharina von Kellenbach and conference organizers Tomas Sandell and Dr. Christian Staffa agreed. **Christian Staffa** is the National Commissioner against Antisemitism at the Evangelical-Protestant Church (EKD) in Germany and the Director of Studies for Democratic Culture and Church at the Evangelical Academy in Berlin.

Associate Dean **Rabbi Abraham Cooper** from the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, who joined the symposium online, pointed out that the organizers should not underestimate the significance of the symposium, even though it was small in numbers due to the corona restrictions. Looking around the symposium table, the organizers noted that there were fifteen men and women in attendance at the time, the exact same number as at Wannsee conference in 1942.

Among these fifteen attendees were the Secretary-General of the World Evangelical Alliance, Dr. **Thomas Schirmacher**, and the Chair of the Pentecostal Religious Liberty Commission, Dr. **Arto Härmäläinen**, representing hundreds of millions of Christian believers worldwide. In a recorded message, the Archbishop of Canterbury, **Justin Welby**, decried what he called the “profound evil of antisemitism.” For centuries antisemitism has been like a volcano in European culture, he said. From time to time erupting with absolute destruction – but always emitting noxious and terrible gases which has poisoned the atmosphere both in Europe and around the world. “We must constantly be vigilant against the first signs of an eruption coming. We can never ever tolerate any antisemitism. There is no acceptable level of antisemitism.”

Online presentations included a message from Reverend **Johnnie Moore**, President of the Congress of Christian Leaders in the United States, who reminded the audience that Jewish people still today face an existential threat from the Islamic Republic of Iran which is on the brink of acquiring nuclear capabilities.

Whereas there has been an active and ongoing Jewish-Christian dialogue over the last fifty years or so, the delegates agreed that this symposium, though small in numbers, had the potential of breaking new ground. Both co-organizer Christian Staffa from the Evangelical Academy in Berlin and the Vice-President of the German Parliament (Bundestag), **Katrin Göring-Eckardt**, who spoke at a special memorial service in the evening, noted that the fight against antisemitism needs new allies and a broad cooperation. “We need strong alliances that extend beyond individual concerns. It is the duty of Christians to make the concerns of their Jewish compatriots their common concern. To be united and be allies – just as today’s event shows”, said Katrin Göring-Eckardt.

The one day symposium also featured contributions from the President of the Conference of European Rabbis, the Chief Rabbi of Moscow, **Pinchas Goldschmidt**, the Bishop of the Evangelical-Protestant Church of Berlin, Dr **Christian Stäblein**, the Founding Director of the Forum for Cultural Diplomacy, Dr. **Gregory Lafitte**, the EU-Coordinator in the combat against antisemitism, **Katharina von Schnurbein**, and the Federal Commissioner for Jewish life in Germany and the fight against antisemitism, Dr **Felix Klein**, who also performed classical music pieces from Jewish composers at the evening ceremony together with the “Berliner Diplomatische Quartet”.

Source: [European Coalition for Israel](#).