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Leadership Talk by the Federal Chancellor of the Republic of Austria (2017 – 2019)

As a young person of thirty-two years, I can hardly imagine that nearly one hundred years after the Shoah, antisemitism still exists. And it is not just almost inconceivable to me that antisemitism still exists, but that newly imported antisemitism is constantly emerging in our society.

Being aware of all the efforts in Austria to ensure that awareness of our history is implemented at our schools, that what happened in Austria will never be forgotten, that everyone is aware that there were not just victims in Austria during the Holocaust, but also many perpetrators.

Given all that, I still believe that direct contact with Holocaust survivors is crucial, for only they can describe what they and their families had to suffer, what all those had to suffer who did not survive. Although listening to Holocaust survivors and their suffering can be difficult and painful—that was at least my experience when meeting Holocaust survivors for the first time—I do believe that it was encounters with Holocaust survivors that brought about a change of attitude here in Austria.

We have to admit though, that my generation most likely belongs to the last ones who have the privilege of encountering Holocaust survivors personally, and this is uniquely possible in Austria and Germany, but not all over the world. Being aware that the horrible crimes of the Holocaust, fortunately, were limited only to a few countries, it also means that students there are not given the opportunity to speak to Holocaust survivors.

Nowadays we must be aware that antisemitism and anti-Zionism are increasingly merging. Being a member of the young generation in Austria, I learned about the Holocaust and the antisemitism leading to it at school. My perception of today's actual dimensions of antisemitism, however, was sharpened when I was appointed State Secretary for Integration. I similarly recognized that antisemitism and anti-Zionism often go hand in hand and are just two sides of the same coin when I became Austria's Foreign Minister. I am convinced that today, it is not just our responsibility as Republic of Austria to look back and deal with our history in a straightforward manner by establishing memorials such as the Shoah Wall of Names in Austria. We also have a responsibility to look forward. Looking forward will, fortunately, reveal many opportunities for taking action—opportunities that are not meant to undo our own history, but that allow us to live up to the responsibilities stemming from our history.

In this context, I would like to thank David Harris who invited me to Jerusalem a long time ago and gave me the opportunity to participate in the AJC Global Forum. That was a moving experience for me, where David Harris and I together developed the idea for the high level conference “Europa jenseits von Antisemitismus und Antizionismus—Sicherung des jüdischen Lebens in Europa” on 21 November 2018 in Vienna. At that time we were considering what a small country like Austria, in concert with the European Union, could do to fight antisemitism.

It seems to me that our opportunities and options are sometimes larger than we realize. To give you one example, the *Catalogue of Policies to Combat Antisemitism* was developed during the conference “An End to Antisemitism!” in February 2018 in Vienna and was presented to the public in November 2018 at our high level conference.

Let me conclude by emphasizing the commitment of the Republic of Austria not just to assume responsibility for the past but also to look forward and to live up to our responsibility by implementing lasting measures. I strongly hope that the adoption of the IHRA definition of antisemitism—proposed at the “High Level Conference on the Fight against Anti-Semitism in Europe,” but hopefully also as one of the European Council conclusions of on the fight against antisemitism and anti-Zionism, scheduled at the end of Austria’s Presidency—will mark an important step ahead, so that Jews in Austria, in Europe and everywhere else will be able to live safely. Only then will we have lived up to our historical responsibility.

Following his positions as state secretary for integration in the Ministry of the Interior and Foreign Minister, Sebastian Kurz served as the Federal Chancellor of the Republic Austria from December 2017 to May 2019. In addition, Kurz has been the Chairman of the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) since May 2017.