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European Roma Holocaust Memorial Day, August 2, 2019

**Dream of a World Free from Intimidation, Bigotry and
Violence
By Rev. Jesse L. Jackson, Sr.**

OSWIECIM, Poland -- I wish to thank the *Central Council of German Sinti and Roma, the Association of Roma in Poland and the Auschwitz Birkenau State Museum* for your *kind and generous invitation* to be with you here today on this 75th anniversary of the murder of some 4,000 Roma people at the German concentration and extermination camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Pastor Martin Niemoller:

First, they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out— because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out— because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

The rise of German fascism and its spread throughout Europe, and the Holocaust stand as one of the greatest crimes against humanity. The world will always remember the genocide against Jews fueled by Nazi racism and nationalism – systematically targeting and killing six million people, 2/3 of Europe’s Jewish population. Overall more than 70 million people perished during WWII, more than half from the Soviet Union (25 million) and China (20 million).

Let this also be a time to cure amnesia about the history of Roma in Europe who were targeted for genocide - the “Forgotten Holocaust,” when up to 500,000 Sinti and Roma – classified and persecuted as “Gypsies” – were massacred by the Nazis.

Standing here next to the railroad tracks, the guard towers, the gas chambers, the atrocity of the Nazi concentration camp and campaign of genocide is seared into our hearts and minds. More than 4,000 men, women and children were slaughtered on a single day in the so-called “Gypsy family camp” at the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp on this day 75 years ago. All told, roughly 20,000 Sinti and Roma perished here.

We are horrified. We are at times in disbelief.

But always we are heartened, and our spirits rise time and again by the people's resistance. So today we turn our pain into power. We say NEVER AGAIN! Never again to anti-Semitism. Never again to anti-gypsy-ism. Never again to racism, fascism and white nationalism - here in Europe, America and around the globe.

So, it is critically important that we are here today for the European Roma Holocaust Memorial Day. This day underscores the importance of educating people about the Roma holocaust during World War II - Not just to look back but to surge forward with a renewed urgency to combat the discrimination the Roma community continues to face.

In the US in 2019, we commemorate the 400th year of enslavement of African Americans, forcibly brought to the shores of Virginia in 1619 – 246 of slavery; another 100 years of Jim Crow legal segregation, with 5000 souls lynched, others violently separated from their families. A legacy “of an inferior order and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations, and so far, inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect” – the infamous reasoning behind the 1857 Dred Scott decision.

In his letter from the Birmingham jail, Dr. King eloquently wrote,

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

In so many ways the history and plight of people – from different cultures, different races, different places – are so inter-connected.

The Roma people of Europe have confronted the same plight as African Americans – victims of genocide and violence; disenfranchisement, segregation, and marginalization. This legacy has left the Roma population in poverty, with unequal education and segregated housing, the target of violent assaults by right wing nationalists, torture, even murder, torture. Roma people – like African Americans and people of color, have long suffered from the denial of human and civil rights.

We have made progress in the US on racial equality and economic justice, just as the Roma people have in advancing progressive policies and platforms throughout Europe.

But the ugly head of racism, nationalism, and neo-Nazism is rearing up again in the US and Europe.

It may be a mass murder at a church in Charleston, or neo-Nazis and racists chanting “Jews will not replace us” in Charlottesville; or crowds demonizing our Congressional representatives today with chants of “send her back.”

It may be 30 Molotov cocktails thrown at Roma homes, or the murder of Roma in Hungary, or the rise of discrimination and violence against Roma people in Germany and France. It may be governments stopping migrants from crossing their borders and turning them back at sea.

Does this narrative sound too familiar?

The scourge of anti-Semitism is on the rise in Europe as the Far Right gets bolder and stronger on the streets and in the halls of government. Discrimination and hate crime attacks against Sinti and Roma are also increasing. The rise of the skinheads, neo-fascists, divisive and polarized nationalists must be confronted and stop in their tracks.

We are living in a time which is witnessing a shocking rise in the very forces of hatred that we had thought buried in the ashes of WW II, the Holocaust, and the extermination camps of Eastern Europe.

We are living in a world where there are those who would continue to divide us by religion, color, ethnicity, nationality. The extreme results of such misuse of power is the attempt to exterminate whole peoples and cultures.

The Nazis may have introduced ethnic cleansing and genocide, but 75 years later we continue to bear witness to crimes against humanity.

Where do we go from here?

As I've looked back at the experience of the civil rights movement, other social movements in the US and around the world, one thing stands out to me:

We've never lost a battle when we've fought. We never won a battle unless we fought. It's time to organize and fight back. If history has taught us anything, it is that where there is oppression, there will be resistance. People will go forward by hope and unity, not backwards by fear and division.

Elie Wiesel, a survivor of Auschwitz, reminds us:

“There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.”

The Roma have lived in Europe for over a thousand years. Despite the wave of terror unleashed on Roma communities in WWII, you are today Europe's largest minority group – you can break from the margins of society, and win your deserved dignity, respect and equality, free from scapegoating, racism and xenophobic attacks.

Walls built on fear, hatred, and ignorance were constructed – people behind these walls endured an unthinkable brutality.

Now new bridges must be built, based on hope and healing, unity and love. In today's world, there are no foreigners. We are all neighbors who must learn live together.

We've seen the face of evil through the genocide of the Sinti and Roma. The power and pain of this immoral and inhumane act must give way to an eternal resurrection of hope. The battle for the soul of humanity must never be surrendered. All we ask for is to follow the golden rule: human rights for all people and measure human rights by one yardstick.

When the Snake-dom of fascism and bigotry, and the inhumane forces of evil crawl toward us,

we must take to the wings of eagles and fly higher, and see further. We must never look down or stoop to their level, and spew poison and hatred.. We must find the wings of eagles, fly high, never stoop too low.

Let's dream bigger than our circumstances.

Dream of a day when we can live free from hatred and bigotry.

Dream of a world free from intimidation and violence.

Dream of a day where Roma people have jobs, equality education, and housing.

Dream of day when Roma people enjoy the right to practice their customs, religion and culture, free from repression.

Dream of a day when Roma people are FREE and EQUAL.

Just as we remember and continue the fight for civil rights in the United States, so too will we keep the fight for dignity and justice for the Sinti and Roma people close to our hearts.

Humankind is like a quilt: disparate patches, wool, silk, gabardine — only patches, but when sewn together into a quilt, we become a thing of beauty and power and culture. Jews, Protestants, Sinti and Roma, African Americans – a quilt, where we find common ground. Where we find love for one another. That's where we find hope. That's where we know that suffering breeds character, and in the end, we will, Keep Hope Alive, and peace and love and unity will prevail across the land.

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Rainbow PUSH Coalition *is a multi-racial, multi-issue, progressive, international organization that was formed in December 1996 by the Reverend Jesse L. Jackson, Sr. through merging of two organizations he founded Operation PUSH People United to Serve Humanity (estab. 1971) and the Rainbow Coalition (estab. 1984). With headquarters in Chicago and offices in Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, New York and Oakland, the organization works to make the American Dream a reality for all citizens while advocating for peace and justice around the world. RPC is dedicated to improving the lives of all people by serving as a voice for the voiceless. Its mission is to protect,*

defend and gain civil rights by leveling the economic and educational playing fields while promoting peace and justice around the world.

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