

## **HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE DAY**

### **2022 Speech – Vicki Soanes**

E ngā mana, e ngā reo, e rau rangatira mā  
Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa

*(To all authorities, all voices, to the many chiefs gathered here  
Greetings, greetings, greetings to everyone)*

Firstly, I wanted to say thank you to the Holocaust Centre of New Zealand for inviting me to speak today. It is an honour to be part of today's commemorations. As Secretary General for the New Zealand National Commission for UNESCO I have attended these commemorations for over a Decade and the Commission has a long history of supporting Holocaust Day.

It is a fitting relationship as our organisations are based on the same foundations, and our kaupapa align.

UNESCO was established after World War Two to ensure that such wars didn't happen again; particularly the persecution of peoples, such as occurred with the Holocaust.

At the heart of UNESCO is the belief that "political and economic arrangements will not produce lasting peace and the only certainty for world security is intellectual and moral solidarity".

Every year UNESCO reconfirms its unwavering commitment to counter anti-Semitism, racism, and other forms of intolerance that may lead to group-targeted violence.

Information sharing is central to all this, and today as we battle not only a pandemic, but also a barrage of disinformation, this has become even more important.

Since its inception 75 years ago UNESCO has worked hard to counteract disinformation. Unfortunately, it's never an easy job, even more so with the rise of social media and the associated ease of spreading ideas that are unsupported by robust evidence and that all too often promote views that denigrate particular groups.

Every person deserves to have access to quality information. Community-wide initiatives play an important role to share such information, particularly to ensure the people are able to develop fact-based views. Of course the New Zealand Holocaust Centre is an excellent example of this and I congratulate them on their ongoing efforts in this regard.

When I reflected on today's theme—Resistance--it stirred up a great deal of emotion. Thinking back to those that took part in the resistance movement, to their heart and their bravery, no matter what their role, I have such admiration.

Then there is the frustration knowing that the word Resistance has become the battle cry for those currently spreading disinformation. The Holocaust is being (mis) used as an emotive tool to further this spreading of disinformation. Holocaust distortion is rife. This is incredibly heartbreaking to witness, and it is why today, more than ever we need to continue to educate people about the Holocaust.

Last year UNESCO reconfirmed its commitment to advancing international Holocaust education during Director General Audrey Azoulay's first official visit to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum.

During her visit she stated, "There is no better long-term remedy for antisemitism than learning to think critically, learning to respect the dignity and freedom of others."

At the National Commission our approach is to work in partnership with communities to support freedom of responsible expression.

We want to bring together civil society and communities to discuss ways to celebrate diversity through an increased understanding of human rights and by supporting the building of a more inclusive society.

This is why we have made Freedom of Responsible Expression one of our five priority areas. It is why we allocate funding and support to days like today, to help educate New Zealanders about lessons to learn from the past and the work of organisations such as the Holocaust Centre.

One of the many ways that we bring together civil society and communities, is through our UNESCO Aotearoa Youth Leader programme.

We have a team of ten youth leaders who serve as advisors, negotiating inclusive ways for young people to be engaged and empowered in the National Commission's priority and programme areas.

As UNESCO ambassadors and change agents, the youth leaders work to build UNESCO's profile and identify where they can drive, support and collaborate with organisations, networks and initiatives that align with UNESCO's mandate. Our outgoing Special Advisor Youth Shahin Najak is here today while others represent the group in Auckland and Hamilton, including her successor Ethan Jerome-Leota.

Our youth leaders come from diverse backgrounds, and many of them joined our team because they want to defend human rights and contribute to a democratic and healthy society.

When we look at resistance in history, youth were at the forefront. Much like those that went before them today's youth play a crucial role in promoting human rights, in stemming the flow of disinformation, and ensuring that robust information reaches their fellow youth in all communities around Aotearoa.

Today we are celebrating the legacy of resistance groups such as The White Rose - a non-violent, intellectual resistance group in Nazi Germany led by students at the University of Munich, including Sophie Scholl.

Sophie personified the importance of acting according to one's beliefs and of following your conscience, even in the face of great sacrifice. Her story reminds us to not be silent, and fight for what Sophie wrote on the back of her indictment a day before she was killed: Freedom.

Her story is one that needs to be told today and into the future. We will be sharing her story today on our social media platforms. But of course, it is important to continue to share similar stories throughout the year, and we ask you to do the same.

Enabling people to understand the stories of those who have lost their lives for their cause, and to understand the true cause, goes some way towards fighting disinformation.

I think it's only fitting to finish with a quote of Sophie's that resonates strongly today.

"Just because so many things are in conflict does not mean that we ourselves should be divided."

Thank you.