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International Holocaust Remembrance Day: The fragility of freedom

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Shrnutí 'Auschwitz didn't appear from nowhere', remarked Marian Turski, Holocaust survivor and child prisoner in the Auschwitz death camp, in January 2020 at the solemn ceremony on International Holocaust Remembrance Day. The former Auschwitz prisoner described the path from tiny hardships in everyday life and growing discrimination and persecution laws, to the genocide of Jews, the Holocaust. The consecutive stages of shrinking freedom can be summarised as 10 stages of genocide, in a process that could happen anywhere, with perpetrators potentially from all walks of life and ethnicities. However, anyone with enough courage can stop it at any stage. Every year in January, the EU institutions honour the memory of the victims of the Holocaust and pay tribute to the survivors, of whom fewer and fewer remain to bear witness to the horrors of the Nazi persecutions. The EU bears a responsibility to keep the painful memory of those darkest days in Europe's history alive. Repeating 'Never again' is not enough, and that is why the EU, which emerged from the ashes of World War Two, and is based on the principles of peace, freedom, human dignity and fundamental rights, has a duty to protect minorities, the Jewish minority in particular, from discrimination, hate speech and violence. The EU strategy on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life, the nomination of the coordinator on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life, European Parliament resolutions condemning growing antisemitism and warning against neo-Nazi organisations making their come back across the EU, all demonstrate the EU's awareness of these dangerous phenomena and its determination to halt them.

Briefing [EN](#)

Jewish cultural heritage in Europe: Preservation as a means for understanding

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Shrnutí Jews have lived throughout Europe as an important minority for almost two thousand years, and their fate has varied from one period to another according to the changing political situation. Both their prosperity and their relatively peaceful enjoyment of some freedoms have, at times, suddenly been removed. Discrimination, expropriations, banishments, looting and even pogroms have been recurrent events in the lives of Europe's Jewish communities down through the centuries. The Holocaust, initiated by the Nazi regime in Germany, was the nadir of a spiral of hate and violence, rendered possible by pervasive antisemitism in many European societies. The physical, cultural and spiritual annihilation of the Jewish people became a state-sponsored process on an industrial scale. Synagogues and Judaica were set on fire, cemeteries desecrated and destroyed, and art collections looted or destroyed. The major Jewish cultural contribution to European culture and art seemed destined to disappear. The post-war years did not reverse the trend; reconstruction of war-inflicted damage to vital services was a priority, while millions of Jews had been annihilated. For decades, a decimated and traumatised community was unable to protect and safeguard what remained of their heritage. Protecting European cultural heritage is a common task for all Europeans; this applies all the more to Jewish cultural heritage, an integral part of European heritage, doomed to disappear. The EU has tools to help bring to life what remains. The preservation of traces of Jewish spiritual, artistic, cultural and scientific contributions to the development of the continent is a tremendous challenge. Various EU funding programmes can help form networks of experts – engaging volunteers in intercultural projects to gain and exchange experience and skills – and provide funds to finance reconstruction, research and revitalisation. Protecting and safeguarding Jewish heritage – and learning about its destruction and discrimination against Jewish people – can help us understand the mechanisms of hate that can take root everywhere, the vicious cycle of xenophobia and antisemitism, and their disastrous consequences for all.

Briefing [EN](#)

Ladino: Judeo-Spanish language and culture in Europe

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Shrnutí Europe has been home to Jews for thousands of years. They have contributed to the continent's artistic achievements and material prosperity despite discriminatory laws and recurring acts of persecution. With their 'final solution', the Nazis aimed to eradicate Jews from the continent and erase all trace of their culture, destroying synagogues, Jewish archives and works of art. Although the Nazis did not achieve their objective, they left ruins that bear architectural witness to Jewish presence on the continent, as well as decimated and traumatised Jewish communities. The courage of these communities to continue to bear witness to Jewish life and culture has been essential to the preservation of Ladino – a language condemned to death by the Nazis – and its culture, music and literature. The language itself testifies to the persecution of European Jews. The 1492 Expulsion Edict forced Jews living in Spain to either convert or leave. Most chose to leave, and took with them the language they had spoken in Spain – Judeo-Spanish, also known as Ladino. No longer connected to its Spanish roots, Ladino preserved the original structure of 15th century Spanish, together with Hebrew script and a vocabulary with Aramaic elements. The language evolved with the Sephardi Jews as they moved across North Africa, Europe and Türkiye, incorporating vocabulary from the local languages: Greek, Turkish, Arabic and Balkan languages. Ladino speakers who survived the Holocaust often left Europe and settled in Israel and the US. Although some linguists think the survival of Ladino – at least in Europe – is in doubt, a rise in online interest in the language during the COVID-19 lockdowns suggests that the trend is reversible. The EU meanwhile has an important role to play in preserving this valuable element of its cultural and linguistic heritage.

Briefing [EN](#)

Jewish art collections – Nazi looting

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Shrnutí When the Nazis grabbed power in Germany, they had clear ideas about what art is. The persecution of Jews allowed them to seize Jewish property, forbid Jews from running art galleries, push them out of their countries to exile, and send them to camps and death. All this enabled some prominent Nazis to start their own art collections. However, most of the looted valuable classical artworks were destined for existing or planned museums. Nazis and their collaborators looted art collections and moved them from annexed or occupied countries most often to Germany and Austria. This helped trade in looted art flourish not only in Paris but also in the United States. Due to cataloguing needs, storage requirements and Allied Forces' bombings, looted cultural property was displaced many times and finally moved to cellars and salt caves in southern Germany and Austria. Similar developments took place at the Eastern Front, leading to double looting. The Soviet army seized art looted by the Nazis in the territories it conquered and occupied, claiming them as war trophies, and further displaced artworks across the parts of eastern Europe it held. The division of Germany among the four occupying forces and the establishment of the Iron Curtain further complicated the task of locating looted art, as catalogues were scattered across the continent. Due to the huge efforts of the liberating armies, works of art found in Western-occupied zones were returned to the countries from which they had been seized. In their turn, the governments were expected to hand these items over to their rightful owners. However, this did not always happen; owners and their heirs, or the artworks they were searching for, were not always located. More than 50 years after WWII, to address the fact that the owners of many artworks had still not been identified, the international community adopted the Washington Principles, the Vilnius Forum Declaration and the Terezin Declaration, as a signal that progress towards resolving this difficult task requires museum searches and international cooperation. The aim is to help the few Holocaust survivors still alive, or their heirs, retrieve their artworks. Restitution of cultural property looted by Nazis and their collaborators is not only an act of justice. It is also a gesture of recognition of the Jewish contribution to flourishing cultural and artistic life in Europe.

Briefing [DE](#), [EN](#), [FR](#)