

**Statsråd Helgesen. Innlegg. Åpning av utstillingen «Yiddish far ale – Jiddish for alle»
HL-senteret 3. september 2015**

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank you for the invitation to open this unique exhibition. The works currently on display did not exist a few months ago. Eleven Norwegian and Polish artists, without any particular knowledge of Yiddish language or culture, were asked to create new works for this exhibition. When modern artists are given the opportunity to express themselves through paintings, drawings, photographs and installations after only a brief introduction to Yiddish language and culture, the result is bound to be exciting.

I look forward to seeing how they present their newly acquired understanding of this rich language and culture.

This exhibition is part of a three-year collaboration between Norwegian and Polish institutions financed through the EEA and Norway Grants. The project ‘Yiddish for all’ seeks to increase knowledge of Yiddish language and culture, to contribute to increased interest in this culture and to combat stereotypical perceptions of Yiddish culture as irrelevant for today’s Europe.

A prominent participant in the project in Poland is the Bente Kahan Foundation in Wroclaw; cooperating partners in Norway include the Oslo Jewish Museum, the

Jewish Culture Festival in Trondheim and the Center for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities.

A few months ago, an exhibition at the Jewish Museum in Oslo focused on the role of women as culture bearers in Yiddish culture and the shtetl tradition before the Second World War. Europe's flourishing Yiddish culture was nearly wiped out in less than 100 years. The bustling cultural life associated with Yiddish almost disappeared during the Holocaust.

Extensive emigration from Europe before, during and after the Second World War also contributed to the process whereby Yiddish language and culture were about to be lost to oblivion. Yiddish was the mother tongue of most of the Jews who came to Norway in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Yiddish and their Ashkenazi heritage were important

to Norwegian Jews, many of whom cultivated Yiddish literature, theatre and traditions. The project 'Yiddish for all' highlights the importance of Yiddish as a key element of the identity of Ashkenazi Jews.

The revival and preservation of Jewish heritage in Europe has been a priority in the use of EEA and Norway Grants. Prejudice and ignorance can be dislodged through art and education.

These efforts are closely linked to the wider struggle against anti-Semitism – a frightening example of prejudice and hatred that persist not only for decades, but for centuries. Anti-Semitic attitudes are not dependent on the presence of a large Jewish population; on the contrary, the strongest prejudices can sometimes be found in countries with a very small Jewish population.

All of us have a shared responsibility to combat harassment and hate speech targeting individuals and groups. Although we have laws, conventions and declarations that provide protection against these phenomena, they alone cannot prevent the emergence of anti-Semitic attitudes and prejudices.

An interview survey that the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights conducted in 2013 among 6 000 Jews in eight European countries revealed that about half of the respondents feared being subjected to harassment and hateful behaviour in public places. Three-quarters of those surveyed responded that anti-Semitism had increased in their country, and just as many considered anti-Semitic remarks to be a problem today. We have to take these results seriously. We have used the EEA and Norway

Grants to promote multicultural understanding and to combat discrimination and prejudice in Europe. Such work will continue in the years ahead.

Preservation and dissemination of Jewish heritage and history has been a priority in projects in Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Hungary. Synagogues and Jewish cultural centres have been restored in Poland, Lithuania, Spain and the Czech Republic.

In the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, which was established to present 1 000 years of Jewish history in Poland, the EEA and Norway Grants support the museum's programme for education and knowledge exchange. This has made it possible for the museum to offer lectures, courses for teachers and school visits.

We in Norway are not exempt from anti-Semitism and racism. When a child is derisively called a 'Jew' in the schoolyard, or leaves his or her Star of David pendant at home to avoid harassment, this shows that anti-Semitism is still alive.

A survey the Holocaust centre conducted in 2012 showed that 12.5 % of the Norwegian population had negative attitudes toward Jews. And a survey carried out by the Jewish community among its members showed that 54 % of Norwegian Jews have experienced anti-Semitism.

Knowledge in itself does not prevent the emergence of such attitudes, but knowledge and learning respect for others are essential in efforts to eliminate these attitudes.

Highlighting the value of Jewish heritage as an integral, long standing and fundamental part of our European culture is an important aspect of this work.

It is not the responsibility of a minority to combat such prejudices. This is the responsibility of the majority. The Government recognises the need for strengthened and systematic efforts to combat anti-Semitism in Norway. We are currently working on an action plan against anti-Semitism. One of the purposes of this action plan is to increase the general knowledge and awareness of anti-Semitism in today's Norway and in Europe.

Efforts will be directed towards schools, institutions of higher education, public agencies, NGOs and the media. The plan will be based on the most updated knowledge. In addition, we will draw on the experience of other countries. Jewish communities in Norway are also involved in this work.

We cannot legislate attitudes, nor can laws and regulations create tolerance, appreciation of diversity and equality. However, we are determined, through the dissemination of knowledge and other awareness campaigns, to combat all forms of racism and hate speech and actions.

Fortunately, there are reasons for hope. When young Muslims took the initiative to form a ring of solidarity around the synagogue in Oslo by joining hands, this showed a

heartfelt commitment against all forms of racism and intolerance. Coming in the wake of the terrorist attack in Copenhagen in February, this manifestation of shared humanity by Norwegian youths of different ethnic backgrounds resonated across Europe.

Once more, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to open this exhibition. It is the tangible manifestation of an exciting project, and one from which we can all increase our knowledge of Yiddish language and culture. Thank you for your attention.

