



## Preserving America's Heritage Abroad

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*The below is an article by Warren L. Miller, the chairman of a U.S. federal agency - the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, regarding acts of discrimination against Jews, Muslims and Gypsies in Europe.*

Two years ago, 131 gravestones were destroyed in the middle of the night at the largest Jewish cemetery in Bucharest. Soon thereafter, I proposed that the monuments be rebuilt as a message that such anti-Semitism will not go unchecked.

With funds donated by two members of the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, the federal agency which I am privileged to lead, the Federation of Jewish Communities in Romania was able to complete the work. Earlier this month, with the support of Romanian President Traian Băsescu, the Giurgiului Cemetery was rededicated. The damaged and destroyed gravestones were rebuilt, and the lives and life stories they represent have been protected.

That such a hate crime was publicly rejected by Romania's most senior officials is worthy of recognition. After all, it was only six years ago that Romania's government truly began facing up to its past. For three generations after the Holocaust, Romanians were taught that their nation was not complicit in the mass murder of Jews. Only after an international outcry were the Romanian people told the truth by their government: that between 280,000 and 380,000 Romanian and Ukrainian Jews were murdered or died during the Holocaust in Romania and the territories under its control.

And yet heartening as it has been to observe President Băsescu's effort to confront Holocaust denial and the extremist elements in his country, the attack at the Giurgiului Cemetery has only underscored how enduring and pernicious a threat anti-Semitism remains in Europe. The sad reality is that the attack in Romania was far from an isolated incident. Those responsible for the desecration in Bucharest — and their hate-filled brethren around the world — pose a growing menace.

Intolerance has seeped into mainstream society, and views that not long ago might have been denounced as discrimination are too often minimized, rationalized or simply dismissed. Negative opinions about Jews are widespread, and appear to be spreading.

According to research conducted by universities in nine different European countries, nearly half of Europeans believe that Jews take advantage of having suffered during the Holocaust. A quarter of all Europeans say that today Jews have too much influence. And two out of five say they can understand why people don't like Jews, given how Israel is acting.

As the history of Europe has made clear, such beliefs can easily turn into outright anti-Semitism — and anti-Semitism can all too easily turn into tragedy. The history of Europe is a testament to the danger of allowing intolerance to go unchallenged, and of allowing historical revisionism to go uncorrected.

Jews, of course, are hardly the only minority to suffer from discrimination in Europe. Muslims and Roma face it on a daily basis, as do immigrants from African countries. Bigotry and intolerance pose a danger not just to these minorities, but to the very values a free and democratic society cherishes.

As Ronald Reagan said nearly a half century ago, “Freedom is a fragile thing and is never more than one generation away from extinction.” I would add that pluralism and tolerance are much the same — they must be fought for and defended every day.

The sad history of Europe has shown that when one form of intolerance is allowed to flourish, other forms will eventually follow. Where the desecration of cemeteries is not beaten back with public condemnation and prosecution, attacks on other cultural institutions will ensue.

Left unchallenged, bigots will become emboldened, and attacks on cultural property like the Giurgiului Cemetery will lead to attacks on people.

*Warren L. Miller is chairman of the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, a federal agency that works with foreign governments to preserve endangered sites of cultural and historical significance.*