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Holocaust Memorial Day in Switzerland

Ladies and Gentleman, dear colleagues,

I am going to address two main issues:

1. Holocaust Memorial Day in **Swiss schools**. After describing the general framework, I will explain in more detail how it is organized in two cantons (out of the 26 that Switzerland has)
2. Other activities on a larger scale (**national level**). I will briefly describe two unique ceremonies: one in 2008, a tribute to the Righteous among the nations from Switzerland, the other in 2011, a tribute to the survivors.

And I will end with a few remarks.

1. Holocaust Memorial Day in Swiss schools

General framework

In Switzerland, education is mainly a cantonal matter; each of the 26 cantons or federal states has a ministry of education.

In the field of education, as well as in other fields with primarily cantonal competence, the cantons have agreed to set up **a coordination body**: the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (CDPE) with a permanent but rather small central secretariat in Berne. Bernard Wicht, the Deputy Head of the Swiss delegation to the IHRA, works there.

Decision of 2003: Introduction of a Holocaust Memorial Day

After the Council of Europe had initiated the introduction of a Holocaust Memorial Day, the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education made, in June 2003, the following decision:

- 1) To designate the 27 January as "Holocaust Memorial Day" in Swiss schools;
- 2) The topic will be "Teaching remembrance. Education for prevention of Crimes against Humanity" and will contain the three following fields of study:
 - Remembrance of the Holocaust tragedy
 - General remembrance of the genocides that have characterized European history in the 20th century
 - Discussing human rights, tolerance, as well as inter-religious and intercultural dialogue
- 3) Cantons will be free to decide themselves how to outline and shape the commemoration.

Information about Holocaust Memorial Day

Each year in early January, the secretariat of the CDPE sends a message to the Heads of education in every canton, reminding them of the decision and asking to be informed about planned activities.

However it is not compulsory to share the information and the cantonal ministries of education are not given information about every activity organized in every single school. So, information remains fragmentary.

National symposium

In 2005, the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education organized a national symposium on Holocaust Memorial Day in Swiss schools. The symposium aimed at bringing together the parties involved, sharing knowledge of international activities, and exchanging best practices. The organization of a second national symposium is under discussion.

Two concrete examples: Geneva and Lucerne

How is it organized in practice? Let us have a look at the activities in two cantons, one of them in the French speaking part (Geneva) the other in the German speaking part (Lucerne) of Switzerland. These two cantons are rather an exception, since there are usually less activities going on in other cantons. But these two approaches are also different from each other.

Geneva and Lucerne: Frequency and organization

The Holocaust Memorial Day is organized every year in Geneva, but every 4 or 5 years in Lucerne.

In **Lucerne**, it is believed that “less is more”. In view of the next Holocaust Memorial Day in 2015, the cantonal minister of education wrote to all schools in the canton in January this year, submitting an overview of all planned activities (such as exhibits, documentary films, etc.) and presenting the teaching material to be used in this context. The head of the education department also invites the schools to choose any day between December and January and to devote it to those activities.

In Geneva, several events are organized each year on or around the 27 January, such as the screening of a film, an exhibit and a panel.

In both cantons, a **small committee** is responsible for drafting the program. It consists of representatives of the ministry of education, of educational institutions and of teachers’ associations. In Geneva, it is called the *Commission de la mémoire*.

Geneva and Lucerne: Topics

When looking at the topics chosen throughout the years in both cantons we notice a **combination of approaches**, due to the fact that three core themes were defined in 2003: the Holocaust; other genocides of the 20th century; and finally human rights, tolerance, etc.

We can also see that the majority of the topics are directly linked to Swiss history. However, other ones **remain general**.

Let us look at the example of **Geneva**. Some ten years ago, the main event was the presentation of the film "Shoah", which the film director, Claude Lanzmann, attended. Selected sequences from the film were screened, discussed and commented. The screening was preceded by some preparatory work in the classrooms. Another year, the commemoration focused on the Armenian Genocide.

Other themes are more **directly linked to the history of Switzerland**. For example, the three following topics were recently chosen by the *Commission de la mémoire*:

- The Swiss refugee policy during the Holocaust,
- Carl Lutz and the question of moral resistance (the context was the opening of an exhibition)
- Dialogue between memories, based on a film about a Holocaust survivor from Hungary living in Switzerland.

Let me say a few words about this film named "Laci Bacsi". During an entire school year, a group of six students with different family backgrounds met several times with a Holocaust survivor, Laszlo Somogyi Singer, in Geneva as well as in Hungary. They asked questions about his past and they filmed him. It was not easy but very rewarding. The two film directors, a history teacher and a film-maker, made this encounter between two generations and their different realities the centerpiece of the film. So, the film is really tridimensional and the perspectives are intertwined: the survivor, the students, and finally, the film directors.

The same combination of topics can be found in **Lucerne**, too. Some are general, whereas others have a close link to the Holocaust. In 2009, the Holocaust Memorial Day focused on the internment camp in Gurs in France, more precisely on a very unique collection of more than 100 drawings made by prisoners of the camp and offered to, or collected by Elsbeth Kasser, a Swiss woman who worked in the camp for a charity organization. A special catalogue of the exhibit was edited as well.

The scope of the Holocaust Memorial Day in 2015 however, will be less specific and more general, focusing on Human rights violations and civil courage. The Teacher's kit will contain short studies on Carl Lutz, a former Swiss consul in Budapest who is credited with having saved tens of thousands of Jews, as well as on Edward Snowden. At each Holocaust Memorial Day commemoration organized in Lucerne, a book or a teacher's kit is always published as well.

2. Other activities (federal state): Righteous and survivors

We have just talked about the activities organized by the Cantons, which have a clear focus on education. Now, what does the federal state do?

Each year, the **President** of the Swiss Confederation delivers a **written message** on the occasion of the Holocaust Memorial Day. As you know, the president of Switzerland is elected for a one-year term.

I would really like to say a few words about two very special ceremonies which took place on Holocaust Memorial Day a few years ago, in 2008 and 2011.

Ceremonies for the Righteous and for the survivors: Similarities

In 2008, an evening ceremony honoring the Swiss Righteous among the Nations was organized in a school in Geneva. Three years later, a ceremony paying tribute to Holocaust survivors living in Switzerland took place in the Parliament building in Berne. What united the two events was a publication project. What both ceremonies also had in common was a high-level participation, because both a President and a former President of the Swiss Confederation delivered a speech. And last but not least, both ceremonies were the first of their kind in Switzerland.

Ceremonies for the Righteous and for the survivors: Differences

But otherwise there were great differences. The ceremony for the **Righteous** had been planned and organized by a Jewish NGO, the *Coordination intercommunautaire contre le racisme et la diffamation*. The second had been proposed by an NGO but organized by the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. The invitations were issued accordingly: a large public for the first event, selected invitees for the second event.

The differences are closely linked to the origin and the development of the projects.

Ceremony for the Righteous. An NGO had asked if I would write a book for teachers and students on this topic. When the time to present the book to the public had come, the NGO had the idea to organize an official ceremony paying tribute to the Righteous. Although attendance was upon invitation, in fact, anyone wishing to attend was allowed to come. Several hundred people attended the ceremony. The media were there, too.

Ceremony for the Survivors. In 2008, an association for Holocaust survivors in Switzerland called "*Kontaktstelle für Überlebende des Holocaust in der Schweiz*" (Contact point for Holocaust survivors in Switzerland) encouraged its members to write down their stories, if they had not yet done so. A series of twelve Holocaust survivor memoirs were printed in the following three years, with the financial support of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. The booklets were not meant to be sold in bookshops, but rather to have a limited audience.

When this project eventually came to an end, the project manager, a Holocaust survivor himself, suggested the planning of a ceremony during which the dissolution of the association would be announced. The idea behind this suggestion, which might be seen as surprising, was the following: We, Holocaust survivors, have done what was our duty: to write down our memoirs for the next generation. So now we can, and we must, dissolve our association. And it is much better to take an independent decision on our own than to have the association end because all the members have passed away.

The Federal Department of Foreign Affairs was very supportive and thought it was a good idea. It was willing to organize and fund the ceremony. The official ceremony took place on 27 January 2011 in a conference room in the Parliament building. Now, you will quite understand who the guests of honor were ... The ceremony was not open to the public or to the media. According to the wish of the association's members, only Holocaust survivors and

members of their families, as well as those who had been involved in the project of memoirs of Holocaust survivors had been invited.

3. Final remarks

A common characteristic for all these activities is a **bottom-up approach**. One of the advantages of such an approach is easy to see: it ensures an active participation, brings more substance into the projects and prevents ritualization of ceremonies or activities. On the other side, this approach may also prevent political authorities from becoming more active.

Activities in **schools** during the Holocaust Memorial Day create a strong link between Holocaust education and human rights. In comparison, activities at **national level**, as well as the annual messages by the President of the Swiss Confederation have a stronger focus on the Holocaust.

A **challenge** we face is that little is known in the French speaking part of Switzerland of activities organized and planned are in the German speaking part of the country, and vice versa.