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**HOLOCAUST
REMEMBRANCE**
ALLIANCE

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Address by IHRA Chair, Ambassador Benno Böttig at the Conference on the Mass Murder of People with Disabilities and the Holocaust

Dear participants to this IHRA conference,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear delegates and friends,

One of the methods of killing most closely associated with the mass murder of the Jews, was the gas chamber. This method of murder was carried out in the extermination camps and in some concentration camps.

But there was a predecessor: the “Aktion T4”, the Nazi Euthanasia program, and the Aktion “14 f 13”, the murder of concentration camp inmates categorized as sick and no longer able to work.

Starting in 1939, more than 200,000 people with mental and physical disabilities were systematically killed in gas chambers, by lethal injection, starvation and with other cruel means by the “Aktion T4”.

Although these official policies were only carried out within the Reich, people with disabilities also fell victim to the Nazi ideology of “life unworthy of life” in parts of occupied Poland and Soviet Union.

There, disabled patients were murdered by mass shootings, in gas vans, by explosives and in other ways by the SS and police forces, not by the physicians, caretakers, and T4 administrators who implemented the "Euthanasia" Program itself.

Many people are not aware of these first programmes of Nazi mass murder. The planners of the “Final Solution” drew on the gas chambers and crematoria, specifically designed for the Aktion T4, to murder Jews.



T4 personnel who had shown themselves reliable in this first mass murder program later figured prominently among the German staff of Aktion Reinhard stationed at the killing centers of Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka.

The murder of people with disabilities gave direction to how the Nazis dealt with those deemed unfit to live in a racially pure and productive society.

Holding this conference on the mass murder of people with disabilities sends an important signal. It is important because it is our responsibility to shed light on the aspects of the Holocaust we still know relatively little about. Indeed this commitment is enshrined in the Stockholm Declaration, IHRA's founding document.

It is important because it also offers insight on the origins of the Holocaust.

And it is important to remember long-forgotten victim groups, persecuted by the Nazis.

Let us keep at the heart of all our discussion today the memories of those murdered in Brandenburg, Grafeneck, Bernburg, Sonnenstein, Hartheim, Hadamar. Let us also remember those victims who were murdered where they lived.

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Brigitte Bailer, a member of the IHRA's Academic Working Group and the organizer of the conference, and to Prof. Rolf Gschwend from the *Pädagogische Hochschule Bern*, who is also member of the Advisory Group to the Swiss IHRA delegation, for making this conference possible. I would also like to thank IHRA delegates Dr Juliane Wetzel, Dr Otto Ruehl, Dr Thomas Lutz and Dr David Silberklang for their support in the organization and concept.

This is the second IHRA conference to be hosted in Switzerland and the Swiss Chairmanship is very pleased to support these important endeavours. The conference in



Lucerne about research on Holocaust education took place one month before Switzerland took over the chairmanship of the IHRA last year. The Lucerne conference, as well as today's conference, were organized in close and fruitful cooperation with Swiss universities of teacher education.

I would also like to say a few words about the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, under whose auspices this conference today is taking place:

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance is a unique organisation which unites experts and government representatives. Its mission is to strengthen, advance and promote Holocaust education, remembrance and research worldwide.

Through fruitful dialogue and exchange of knowledge, we aim to anchor the teaching and the commemoration of the Holocaust within our societies and to keep the subject alive for future generations.

In the current year, Switzerland is chairing the IHRA and has defined education and youth as two of its main priorities. The very valuable collaboration with the Bern university of teacher education is a sign of our commitment to teaching about the Holocaust and its related crimes, both in terms of research as well as in terms of what is taught to our future generations.

We are very pleased to see, within the framework of this conference, various contributions from many different countries being discussed today. I congratulate you on having gathered here today to find approaches and strategies to raise awareness of these unprecedented historical events.

I would like to conclude with mentioning how studying the crimes of the Nazis often also make us think of our contemporary societies. Today, as we discuss this rarely spoken of aspect of the mass murder of people with disabilities, let us be reminded and let us never forget of states' obligations to protect their citizens. Let us reaffirm that every human being has the inherent right to life. Thank you for your attention.