



English Translation of Speeches

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**Ambassador Benno Bättig, Secretary General
of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs**

We have all come here today to remember the voices that were silenced – those millions of men and women that a policy of systematic destruction struck down in the heart of Europe a little over 70 years ago.

Yet we still hear these voices today. What's more, we have an obligation to listen to them. These voices are heard most directly through the survivors. In a few moments we will have the privilege of hearing the witness of one of them, Professor Ivan Lefkovits, of Basel. I would very much like to thank him most warmly for his untiring commitment to preserving the memory of victims of the Holocaust.

I would also like to thank the organisers and those who have given their support to this Remembrance Day, as well as to our previous speakers for their most inspiring words.

Each year, the President of the Swiss Confederation publishes a message to mark today's anniversary. President Doris Leuthard is unfortunately unable to be with us today. Please therefore allow me to read out her message on her behalf:

Remembrance as a bridge

**Message from the President of the Swiss Confederation Doris
Leuthard to mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day on
27 January 2017**

On 27 January, which this year marks the 72nd anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, we remember the victims of Nazi persecution. Today, Auschwitz stands as a symbol of the great number of people who suffered and lost their lives in the many concentration camps in Europe. The few survivors, whose terrible experiences left their physical and mental mark often for life, settled in a variety of places. Switzerland was one of them.

Many discovered that their families had not survived the persecution, and coming to terms with the loss of relatives and friends was a further trauma facing large numbers of Holocaust survivors. The psychological scars are deep, and it often took decades before the survivors were able to break their silence about the Nazi atrocities. Their courage to face these traumas once again deserves our utmost respect.

"Also, I tell these stories for my grandchildren, for my friends, for all who want to know something of the Holocaust of yesterday, and for all who want to prevent the Holocaust of tomorrow."

These were the words of a survivor of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, Elisabeth Sommer-Lefkovits, who came to Switzerland in the post-war period. In 1994, she published her memories of the persecution suffered by her family. She died a short time later. The years since then have seen the publication of many more survivors' memoirs examining the Holocaust. Indeed, a new edition of eye-witness accounts, illustrated by Gerhard Richter, will be presented this very day in Bern.

With each year that passes, younger generations have an ever-declining opportunity to hear first-hand reports of what happened. The many tragedies which continue to take place around the world threaten to push remembrance of the Holocaust into the background. International Holocaust Remembrance Day is intended to show that we have not forgotten the millions of victims of Nazi persecution, and that we remain vigilant so that nothing like it is ever repeated.

It is an aim shared by the *International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance* (IHRA), which was founded in 1998. Switzerland has been a member since 2004, and will this year assume its chairmanship. In this role, Switzerland plans to focus on projects that bear witness to the memories of Holocaust survivors, and that also make them available via new media that appeal in particular to younger people. With its chairmanship of the IHRA, our country wants to help preserve the memory of the crimes committed by the Nazi regime against the Jewish community, the Roma, the Sinti and other minorities, thereby building a bridge between 'then', and 'now'.

Minorities are an important element of cultural and social diversity in Switzerland. This means that we have an obligation to keep our eyes open. In fact, today should also remind us that marginalisation, racism and anti-Semitism are still everyday experiences for large numbers of people. In Switzerland, values such as freedom and legal certainty, equal rights and tolerance are part of our national identity – and these values should be applied equally to all sections of the population.

Doris Leuthard

President of the Swiss Confederation

Ladies and Gentlemen

In a few weeks' time, I will have the honour of succeeding my Romanian colleague Mihnea Constantinescu as chairman of the *International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance*. Switzerland's involvement in this organisation and the Federal Council's decision on Switzerland's candidature is rooted in a particular set of values.

We do not accept discrimination. Respect for minorities and for cultural, political and social diversity is an essential part of Switzerland, just as it is crucial to its existence and to its functioning as a state under the rule of law, thereby ensuring peace, security and equality for all.

Switzerland thus takes a participatory approach to its work in the IHRA. The working group which advises and supports the Swiss delegation includes not only Jewish organisations, but also those representing the Roma and the Yenish peoples.

Educators and historians from French, German and Italian-speaking Switzerland alike meet in the context of this group to determine specific projects – of which I will give you a brief overview later – and to promote the activities of the IHRA in all regions of Switzerland.

In the same way, Switzerland's commitment to the IHRA also rests on values such as the free conduct of historical research, and the acceptance of a nuanced view of our national past and all of its aspects, without taboo.

Spared from the war, Switzerland made painful economic concessions. We have not always respected the principle of non-discrimination, which has sometimes had severe consequences. That said, we have also welcomed tens of thousands of people, both civilian and military, who were fleeing war and persecution, and the Allies valued Switzerland's representation of their interests in a number of countries.

Here in the present, it seems to me that the important thing is not so much to alternate between recalling the tragedy and recalling the glory. Rather, the government should ensure that the framework is in place to permit a democratic debate and unrestricted access to sources of information, without ever imposing an official version of history.

It is also important today that we do not wallow in complacency. Yes, we do have values, but they can never be taken for granted. We must remind ourselves what they are. In particular, we must work every day to raise awareness of them among the younger generations.

In the 21st century, the Holocaust may seem a long time ago. What happened to Jews, Roma, Sinti and Yenish, and to the countless other victims of the Nazi regime and its allies, seems to belong to a different, past world. Today's teenagers communicate via WhatsApp on a daily basis, and may seem far removed from the young Anne Frank, keeping her diary in an attic in Amsterdam.

And yet, marginalisation, racism, anti-Semitism, and persecution unfortunately remain all-too-common daily realities.

The IHRA offers a multilateral framework within which experts from diverse backgrounds, both professional and national, are able openly to discuss best practices to combat these phenomena, as well as other problems. This results in lively debate, fired by the conviction that solutions must be found in dialogue and in solidarity with each other.

These discussions are very frank, but always respectful. They avoid pathos, but not compassion. They are discussions which talk of the *past*, because the Holocaust was planned and executed on our continent, but also talk of *today* because prejudice and discrimination are still encountered on a daily basis.

I have announced three priorities for Switzerland's chairmanship of the IHRA: education, youth, and social media. It is time for discussions and conferences to give way to specific projects. Switzerland is committed to these projects and will continue to launch them. I would like to present briefly a few of these, which have been developed in a participatory process within the Swiss advisory group.

- '*Fliehen vor dem Holocaust*' ['Fleeing the Holocaust'] is the title of a web app that introduces young people to the Holocaust through the stories of the individuals who experienced it, as well as the historical background. The project was developed jointly by the Lucerne University of Teacher Education and institutions in Austria and Germany.

- The University of Teacher Education, Canton Vaud, is organising an international conference in collaboration with a variety of Swiss organisations. Its central theme will be 'Education and Youth', and it will examine how young people can be taught about the Holocaust.
- 'The Last Swiss Holocaust Survivors' is a travelling exhibition staged by the Gamaraal Foundation. It is designed to appeal to a broad audience, with profiles, short texts and interviews.

Holocaust survivors are also the focus of today's commemorative event.

These projects illustrate the commitment not only of the government, but also of private actors, to preserving the memory of the Holocaust and its victims in Switzerland, as it is preserved elsewhere.

This commitment extends beyond this Remembrance Day on 27 January, but today is nonetheless a powerful, symbolic expression of that work. We would particularly like to involve young people directly in these efforts. This will be a clear priority for me in my capacity as chairman of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, beginning on this coming 7 March.

As head of the Swiss delegation since 2013, I have had some unforgettable meetings and experienced very moving moments. One of these left a particular impression on me.

Before flying off to attend the commemorations to mark the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the President of the Confederation, Federal Councillor Simonetta Sommaruga, received survivors' representatives in the 'Salon du Président' in the Federal Palace.

Among us was Professor Lefkovits who presented President Sommaruga at this occasion with the series of 15 memoirs.

François Wisard, who works with and supports me, assisted with this project from the beginning. He will now speak about this fascinating journey and also about a follow-up project involving high school students in French-speaking Switzerland.

I would now like to handover the podium to Dr. Wisard.

**Dr. François Wisard, Head of the History Unit
of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs**

As indicated by Ambassador Bättig, in my speech today I would like to focus on one special project: the "Memoirs of Holocaust survivors" series. The concept for this series was developed on the initiative of the Board of the Contact Point for Holocaust Survivors ['Kontaktstelle für Überlebende des Holocaust'], an association founded in 1995 at the instigation of Mr Gábor Hirsch. He is one of the survivors of Auschwitz-Birkenau, who was rescued by the Red Army exactly 72 years ago today. To some extent, the presentation today of a new edition of collected memoirs of Holocaust survivors therefore brings things full-circle.

Professor Ivan Lefkovits, who will be speaking later, was also a key part of the process to create this series of memoirs. In the first few years of the new millennium, he observed with concern that more and more members of the Contact Point were dying of old age, and he began to wonder about the future of the difficult legacy that might be forgotten with the death of the eye-witnesses. Professor Lefkovits therefore appealed to the members of the Contact Point to put their memories of the Holocaust down on paper, to preserve them for future generations.

In 2008, Professor Lefkovits notified the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of the Contact Point's plans. Ambassador Jacques Pitteloud, then head of the Swiss delegation to the IHRA, immediately assured the members of the Contact Point of the FDFA's full support. In November 2008 I had the opportunity to join him at a meeting of the Contact Point in Zurich. This laid the foundation for cooperation between the FDFA and the Contact Point for Holocaust Survivors.

In line with our philosophy, the support that the Contact Point received from the FDFA was primarily financial in nature. No stipulations were made as to the content of the project. Great urgency was attached to publishing the series of short memoirs, as most of the Holocaust survivors were already well advanced in age. The initial print run for these memoirs was rather modest – partly as a result of their authors'

age, and also because revisiting the survivors' awful experiences awakened painful memories for many of the Contact Point's members. The first edition was distributed among the survivors themselves, their families, and interested parties in Switzerland and abroad, such as university libraries and Yad Vashem. However, to appeal to a broader readership, content summaries in French and English were added even to this first edition.

On International Holocaust Remembrance Day 2011, the volumes of memoirs that had not yet been published were handed over to former Federal Councillor Ruth Dreifuss in a room of the Federal Palace, and the Contact Point for Holocaust Survivors announced that the association was to be wound up. Nonetheless, certain indefatigable members of the Contact Point were already planning for the future: at the same time as the Holocaust memoirs were entrusted to Ms Dreifuss, it was suggested that efforts should be made to raise awareness of them on a broader stage. The final volume, which is illustrated, collates the stories of the Holocaust survivors and sums-up the history of the Memoirs. It has been published in three languages: German, French and English. The final phase of the project was then reached in 2015, with the additional publication of the final volume and three further edited memoirs. As Ambassador Bättig mentioned, the entire series of memoirs was presented to the serving President of the Confederation on 27 January 2015. The final volume was also made available on the FDFA website. Unfortunately, several authors have passed away since then. They remain in our thoughts.

To return to the image of the circle that I used earlier, the end of a cycle can also be viewed as a new beginning. This year will not only see the presentation of a new German edition of the memoirs of Holocaust survivors, illustrated by Gerhard Richter. At the same time, several volumes in the series will appear in French. They have been translated by high school classes in French-speaking Switzerland. I'm delighted to welcome those of you from Geneva and Biel, who supported the project enthusiastically. Engaging in direct exchange with young people about the Holocaust is both a key concern of the IHRA, and the profound wish of the members of the Contact Point. The students who were involved in the translation project also had the opportunity to meet a number of the authors in person and to speak to them directly.

However, neither discussions between young people and Holocaust survivors, nor the publication of biographies, are a new idea. In the final volume of the memoirs, Daniel Gerson, the son of a survivor, described the survivors' untiring work as follows:

"The fact that the Swiss authorities pay tribute to the Holocaust victims in their country in the context of the Contact Point is thanks to the commitment of the extraordinary men and women who, despite their terrible experiences, sought dialogue time and again with their fellow human beings."

Meetings between school students and Holocaust survivors have been organised since the 1990s. Both this personal contact with young people, and capturing of memories on paper, gives us hope for continuity in remembrance of the Holocaust. Its survivors, many of whom have lived in Switzerland for decades, have played a crucial part in making remembrance of the Holocaust part of Swiss history. In conclusion, I would like once again to quote Daniel Gerson, who was so succinct in expressing his thoughts on the publication of Holocaust survivors' memoirs:

"My father did not live to see his memoirs published. But his story, like those of more than a dozen other survivors, will live on thanks to this series of publications."

Prof. Ivan Lefkovits, Editor of the series “Memoirs of Holocaust Survivors” and Holocaust Survivor

Thank you for inviting me to this commemorative event. It is an honour for me to have this opportunity to say a few words. The remarks we have heard from FDFA Secretary General Benno Bättig, and François Wisard, have made my task considerably easier. I intend to discuss two issues:

- How the Suhrkamp edition of the collected memoirs, with pictures by Gerhard Richter, came about. The edition has generated an enormous response in a very short time; and
- The story of the persecution of my family, incarceration in Ravensbrück and Bergen-Belsen, and the experiences of the Holocaust suffered by my mother and myself.

I will show a few images presenting Gerhard Richter, and one surprising picture that will enable me to address our transportation and its consequences.

You have heard it from the previous speakers, but I would also like to repeat that the memoirs project would not have been possible without the help of the Swiss Confederation. The support we received was unprecedented. As we handed over the memoirs to then-President Simonetta Sommaruga two years ago today, I thought – as did we all – that our work was done. The result was a private – non-commercial – publication created with great attention to detail. Authors and readers alike responded positively to the way in which the memoirs had been presented, as well as to their elegant and dignified black cover. These were the special 'bibliophile' editions, and they would probably have remained in that form if an encounter with Gerhard Richter at the Fondation Beyeler hadn't changed everything.

When I met Mr Richter in Basel, I did not know that he had spent many years examining how the Holocaust could be represented. In fact, he had been working on it since 1967. I didn't know that he had just completed his four wall-filling 'Birkenau'

works. Without knowing any of this, in 2014 I found myself transfixed by these huge abstract pictures at the Fondation Beyeler in Riehen. They showed an enormous variety of colour and texture – variety that was visible from a distance and from close by. There was no repetition. It was a raw world. Hidden pictures and layer upon layer of paint.

I find it difficult to reconstruct what was going through my mind at the time. These coarsely textured abstract images appealed to me at a deep emotional level, and reminded me of my experiences during the Holocaust. Just as the screeching of railway carriages repeatedly takes me back to the events of that time, so too did these compositions. And so it happened that I approached Mr Richter at the right place and at the right time. A few days after outlining our project to him, and giving him our black-bound memoirs, we met for breakfast in Basel. He not only agreed to add his pictures to the covers, but also presented me with his ideas there and then. I remember his modest, likeable and unpretentious nature as the highlight of our meetings.

My visit to Mr Richter's studio in Cologne made me realise what he meant when he said that he wanted the pictures to speak for themselves. He had had a desk mounted on one wall of his studio, on which all 15 memoirs that he had just read were displayed. He had produced a portfolio, and drawn in exactly where the picture should be cropped. He had also carefully allocated a picture – in reality a section of a picture – to each memoir.

You might think that the 15 stories gave Mr Richter only 15 spaces in which to present these picture sections. Indeed, the primary objective was to have 15 pictures to bring the individual stories to life. Although abstract images remain abstract images, in this case they became portraits of their individual stories. It is a symbiosis which enables their inexpressible commonalities to be presented.

Over time, it became clear to me that Gerhard Richter's pictures would open publishers' doors, but I was still surprised when one of the most respected houses in Germany was prepared to publish the memoirs. The authors and I were delighted with the book's reception from all of its reviewers. The comment that "editor Ivan Lefkovits has succeeded in producing an important historical document that should be found on everyone's shelves" is still, to me, the highest praise.

On another occasion I spoke about meeting former President Ruth Dreifuss. At the time, she said:

"Mr Lefkovits, the collection of memoirs is much more valuable in the form of individual booklets than it is as a compact book. The individual booklets can be used for teaching purposes. Students can identify with one story each, while a book would almost be too much for them."

Ruth Dreifuss would certainly have been very pleased to be at the event at the Max Liebermann Villa in Berlin, when students from a secondary school class told the 15 stories in their own words on individual posters and with short presentations. These boys and girls identified completely with what they were reading and had truly absorbed it. Now this is the picture I mentioned earlier.

I was standing in front of a display board which had my name on it. Next to it was written 'Bergen-Belsen', and the date, 15 April 1945. There are also two girls, aged about 15, who said this:

"We read your story and talked about it. Could we tell you it?"

So now I will tell you.

I was seven years old on 11 November 1944, when the Gestapo and Hlinka Garde took us from our hiding place in Presov, Slovakia, at five in the morning. We were then transported to Ravensbrück and, months later, on to Bergen-Belsen. In Ravensbrück, my older brother Paul was separated from us, while I – aged seven – stayed with my mother. We never saw my brother again. He was killed. I discovered the circumstances 55 years later from historian Dr Bernhard Strelbel. Ravensbrück was a women's concentration camp, but a 'small camp for men' had been set up in the last year of the war. Ravensbrück was terrible – as terrible as most of the concentration camps in Germany – but what awaited us in Bergen-Belsen took things to a completely different dimension. It defies description. In Ravensbrück there were roll calls, but there was still a portion of soup, or bread, or something, every day. After we arrived in Bergen-Belsen it was clear that survival would be impossible there. There were bodies everywhere.

There were no longer any roll-calls, but no regular food either. It was dangerous to go to the latrine. Previously, the danger had been from the guards, their dogs, or the Kapos, the prison functionaries. Now, the danger was everywhere. You couldn't carry a bag or pouch around with you or it would have been torn away from you. Bergen-Belsen was liberated by the British army on 15 April, but 11 days previously, on 4 April, the Germans had abandoned the camp, switched off the electricity, cut the water pipes, and disappeared. They never surrendered. They simply abandoned the camp. Close to us was a reservoir of water for fighting fires, but it was completely contaminated, with faeces and bodies with distended stomachs floating in it. Anyone who drank from the tank died. Liberation was wonderful, but we did not get water until 48 hours later. Disinfection, a military hospital, recovery and finally return to Presov followed. My father had been killed in Budapest in the execution on the banks of the Danube.

It is worth noting that the guards, the SS and all of the camp command staff were arrested, held to account, and sentenced: to death by hanging. The sentence was carried out on 17 December 1945.

We did not talk about those events for decades. It was only at the age of 88 that my mother wrote everything down and published it through the Chronos Verlag publishing house. I wrote our story as memoir number eight in the collection, and 70 years after it happened, the two girls from the Berlin secondary school told it again at the Max Liebermann Villa in Berlin.

Although question-and-answer sessions are not planned at these events, I suggest you take the opportunity of the drinks that follow to ask me about the things that I have not been able to address just now for time reasons.