

Speech of His Excellency Mr Andreas Michaelis, Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany to the State of Israel, on the occasion of the inauguration of the Tel Aviv “Monument for the Memory of those persecuted by the Nazi Regime for their sexual preference and gender identity” on 10 January 2013

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When I was a boy in the 1960ies in Germany, gay people were addressed as “175ers”. I had no clue why that was the case.

Shortly after the unification of the German State in the 19th Century, a paragraph 175 was introduced into the German Penal Code. It called for severe punishment of “unnatural” sexual behaviour and sexual interaction between men. This paragraph stayed in the German penal code for over a hundred years. Enough time for “175er” to be coined as one of the many derogatory terms for gay people in our language. Boys thus became aware of the criminal dimension of homosexual life at an early stage.

Just like every other country of the Western World, Germany was a deeply homophobic society in the late 19th century. At the beginning of the 20th century, and especially after World War I, things improved a little. In spite of continued official criminalization, the Weimar Republic - Germany`s inter-war-democracy - happened to be a fairly modern, more progressive, more tolerant and in Berlin definitely more open-minded society.

German homosexual-rights activists became worldwide leaders in attempts to change the attitude of the international community. Scientists like Magnus Hirschfeld, the founder of the Scientific Humanitarian Committee, the first public homosexual rights` organization, writers and activists like Adolf Brand strived to change the legislation and public opinion.

Their commitment and the Weimar Republic`s tolerance alone were not enough to induce real change. All attempts to improve the situation of gay people came to an abrupt end when the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933. They quickly broadened the law in 1935. Convictions multiplied by a factor of ten to about 8,000 per year. The Gestapo was authorised to transfer suspected offenders to concentration camps without legal basis. In 1936, the

“Centre for the fight against Homosexuality and Abortion of the German Reich” was established, to be led by Heinrich Himmler.

Over the following years until 1945, some 46.000 gay persons were convicted of their “crime” and between 5.000 and 15.000 were killed in concentration camps.

The Germany of today assumes moral and historical responsibility for the terrible crimes that have been committed under Nazi rule.

Here in Israel we have to focus first and foremost on the Shoa. But in doing so we must not forget other groups of people who fell victim to the murderous machine operated by Germany in those fatal years.

Today we do so for those who suffered and lost their lives just because of their sexual orientation.

In the concentration camps, male gays were forced to wear pink triangles. This tag will now be displayed at the centre of a busy park in the wonderful city of Tel Aviv. The first ever memorial for gay victims of Nazi Germany to have been erected in Israel.

It has been noted by some of the organizers of this ceremony what special significance the location of this memorial has: Jews and other minority groups in Nazi-Germany were kept from using public space. Today, we use this public space to remember. By putting this memorial in a public space, the municipality emphasizes the importance of the message: persecution for whatever reason concerns us all.

A truly free society is a society that recognizes and respects the individual, irrespective of his race, gender, origin, religion, or sexual orientation. It is this total diversity that makes us equal. We can put up monuments and name streets, in order to remember things that happened in the past. But they must be first and foremost reminders for the future, like little notes that we write for ourselves and put up around the house. Monuments are just like those notes: only meaningful, when we really use them to be aware and to act accordingly. Recognition is a long social process. History moves fast, but our mind and our beliefs change slowly. Let us walk this path together. And let us walk very fast.

As German ambassador, I am proud that – against the background of the atrocities of our common past – we have reached such a high level of true friendship today.

Thank you very much.