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**STATEMENT BY AMBASSADOR FELIX KLEIN, SPECIAL
REPRESENTATIVE OF THE GERMAN FEDERAL FOREIGN OFFICE
FOR RELATIONS WITH JEWISH ORGANIZATIONS AND ISSUES
RELATING TO ANTI-SEMITISM, AT THE 1086th MEETING OF
THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

21 January 2016

Members of the Permanent Council,
Ladies and gentlemen,

We are commemorating the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp by Red Army soldiers almost 71 years ago now. Auschwitz – a single word that stands for millions of individual fates. Each tells its own tale of inconceivable suffering and unspeakable torment, culminating in systematic murder. Just how brutally all those lives were interrupted and brought to an end is ultimately too hard to imagine. But this we do know: the unimaginable came to pass – it was possible. The events in Auschwitz struck a fatal blow to the heart of our very humanity – human dignity. A delusional ideology stripped people of their humanity. The terrible intention to eliminate the Jewish people from Europe entirely found its expression in Auschwitz. When we think of Auschwitz, we also think of the many other concentration and extermination camps. The name Auschwitz has long since been synonymous with the entire National Socialist persecution and murder machinery. That is why the anniversary of the liberation of that concentration camp is the day of remembrance of the victims of National Socialism in many OSCE participating States, including Germany.

Today we turn our thoughts to all the victims of the criminal ideology of National Socialism, to all those who were cheated of their material, spiritual and physical existence and robbed of their dignity – those who were persecuted, tortured, humiliated and murdered. We turn our thoughts to the 6 million murdered European Jews, the Sinti and Roma, the forced labourers, the prisoners of war left to starve to death, the victims of government-sanctioned euthanasia, the homosexuals, to all those whose religious, political or quite simply humanitarian convictions prompted them to take a stand against the terror and who fell victim to totalitarian State violence as a result. We turn our thoughts to the millions upon millions of dead. We also turn our thoughts to the survivors, those whose souls were destroyed by the horrors of inhumanity who, in the words of the writer Jean Améry, could no longer be at home in this world after the breakdown of civilization that was the Shoah.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Days of remembrance can bring societies together in reflecting on their shared history. For whether we like it or not, cataclysmic events leave a trace, for the protagonists

and the contemporary witnesses, as well as for future generations. We must keep coming back to the question articulated by Auschwitz survivor and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Elie Wiesel: “How could intelligent, educated people shoot hundreds of children with machine guns during the day and enjoy Schiller poetry or a Bach musical score in the evening?”. Today we can only try to imagine the questions within the walls of the concentration camps, such as: Why? Why is no one stepping in or intervening? Where are our fellow citizens and where is the rest of the world? Has the world lost all common decency and humanity?

One of the most important lessons of dealing with the National Socialist past is without doubt: never again. This message is absolutely fundamental for all countries wishing to live in peace with their neighbours. Germany’s current commitment to a united Europe is therefore as firmly entrenched as an awareness of the immeasurable significance of freedom and the rule of law, and pluralism and tolerance. But these values are just as fragile as they are precious. They require our constant vigilance and commitment. The basic starting point for this is exposing old and new prejudices and bogeymen for what they are. The horrifying deeds that misguided convictions can spawn in the end were brought home to us once again by the attacks in Paris. And it is not only the Holocaust background that makes it such a disgrace that people in many European countries are verbally abused, threatened or attacked if they identify as Jewish in some way. That synagogues and Jewish institutions need police protection in many places is a blot on the landscape of Europe. The thinking that becomes apparent from attacks on Jews and synagogues as well as on Muslims and mosques, and also on Christian minorities and churches, is far removed from free and tolerant notions of statehood. Therefore we must take a stand against anti-Semitism and all other forms of hatred such as Islamophobia or prejudice against Sinti and Roma, through police and court proceedings whenever crimes have been committed, as well as through prevention and education through political and social programmes. Consequently, under its OSCE Chairmanship, in the human dimension, Germany would like to focus specially on the subjects of tolerance and non-discrimination. Three Personal Representatives will again support us in this. In that connection, we are planning several events, including a high-level Chairmanship event in Berlin in October, with a special emphasis on migration and integration issues. In addition, Germany is making a special voluntary contribution to support the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights project “Deeds instead of words” on combating anti-Semitism, which is particularly relevant just now, and we call upon the other OSCE participating States to join us in helping this important project to succeed by making a specific financial contribution.

Anyone who has the best future for Europe at heart knows that Holocaust remembrance comes with a perpetual obligation. Remembering this horrific chapter of our history shapes how we see ourselves. In Germany we have had positive experiences of taking a straightforward, open and critical approach to our difficult history. For we cannot escape the fact that while anti-Semitism itself was not invented in Germany, the Holocaust certainly was. We were certainly very slow to process our National Socialist past because following the Second World War, the top priorities were rebuilding the country and economic recovery. During the time of the economic miracle, too many Germans looked only forward, and too few also looked back. Most sealed themselves off, protecting themselves against feelings of guilt and shame by refusing to remember. The silence gradually began to be broken when court proceedings against Nazi criminals began at the end of the 1950s and the events of the so-called 1968 revolution led people in former West Germany at least to come to accept that even completely “normal” men and women had lost their humanity, conscience and morals in

the Nazi era. Every generation, indeed every decade, has had its own way of affirming its beliefs on the subject, often with impassioned debates such as the conflict among historians or through the controversy about the large Holocaust memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe right beside the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. And because future generations will also seek and find their own approach, I am sure that the memory of the crimes of the Nazi era will remain alive not only in Germany but throughout Europe.

Remembrance entails an obligation. And this is the message of Holocaust Remembrance Day: what is past will not be forgotten. Auschwitz challenges us every day to ensure that our work together meets humane standards. Auschwitz is all of our business, every day, not only on days of remembrance. No experience of injustice or disadvantage justifies insulting other people, setting oneself above them or even attacking them physically. Standing idly by while human rights violations are being committed is a false understanding of tolerance. This is of particular significance at a time when we in Europe must yet again come to terms with the coexistence of different cultures and religions. The community in which we all want to live will only flourish where individual dignity is respected and solidarity lived.

Many thanks.