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International Prize of Peace of Westphalia 2016

Laudatory speech by Thomas Oppermann

Chairman of the SPD parliamentary group in the Bundestag

Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste has been in existence for almost 60 years. Since then, more than 10,000 volunteers have carried out international peace services or taken part in summer camps. They accompany elderly people. They help the disadvantaged and campaign against discrimination or for political education. Currently, for example, they are supporting Holocaust survivors in Belarus and helping children who are suffering from the consequences of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Today, Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste is being honored with the Peace of Westphalia Award - for its outstanding commitment against racism and intolerance. And for their commitment to sustainable peace. I would like to warmly congratulate all the ASF campaigners and volunteers.

The foundation stone for this was laid in 1958 by committed Protestants from the Confessing Church. In a post-war Germany that was characterized by an upswing of the economic miracle and the inability to mourn, the founders of ASF fought against repression and forgetting. They believed that reconciliation could only succeed if the crimes of National Socialism were dealt with. After a long period of resistance - including from within their own ranks - they succeeded in bringing Aktion Sühnezeichen to life at the EKD Synod in 1958. In its founding appeal, ASF literally asks "the peoples who have suffered violence at our hands to allow us to do something good in their country with our hands and with our means". And that, ladies and gentlemen, is exactly what the countries allowed the young men and women from Germany to do. For example, volunteers helped to build a meeting place in the destroyed Coventry Cathedral in the UK and a school for the blind in Israel. They helped to build a synagogue and the Taizé Church of Reconciliation in France. To this day, they run a youth meeting place in Auschwitz and the Beit Ben Yehuda guest house in Jerusalem.

The ASF volunteers are in no way personally responsible for the National Socialist tyranny. But they nevertheless take responsibility by understanding history as an obligation for their actions in the present. Democratic Germany could not have wished for better representatives to win back trust! Young people full of optimism and drive and with the firm belief that the world can be made a better and more peaceful place. It is people like the three young volunteers who are accepting the award today on behalf of ASF:

- Sally Eshun,
- David Sustzkowski,
- They stand here on behalf of the other young people before them, for volunteers and full-time staff and for foreign partner organizations, which are so numerous that they cannot all be here.

I am all the more pleased to be here today because I personally have one of the most important experiences of my life with ASF. Almost exactly 40 years ago, I interrupted my studies in literature to complete an 18-month peace service with Aktion Sühnezeichen in the USA as a conscientious objector: First I worked as a community organizer in a neighborhood project in Washington (DC), then in the spring of 1977 I joined the United Farm Workers: a union primarily for Hispanic American farm workers. Agricultural corporations exploited these workers without restraint; they had no health insurance and were sometimes exposed to extremely dangerous conditions;

- Child labor was widespread.
- Spontaneous strikes were usually unsuccessful because the plantation owners used violence and hired strikebreakers.
- Finally, consumer boycotts had an effect - and brought the workers their first collective agreements

Social justice does not come about by itself, but is always the result of political intervention. When I returned to Germany, I switched to studying law and was determined to get involved from then on - and I was by no means the only one who felt this way. Many things shaped me on my path into politics, but nothing as much as my time as a volunteer with Aktion Sühnezeichen.

Ladies and gentlemen, Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste not only works abroad, but also in our own society. It has been an important part of the German peace movement from the very beginning and remains so today. In 1981, for example, ASF and others organized the largest peace demonstration in the Federal Republic of Germany to date. More than a quarter of a million people came to the Hofgarten in Bonn to say: We don't want rearmament! As painful as this demonstration was for those in power at the time, it may have required many realpolitik considerations: It was an astonishing sign for the world that the Germans spoke out so clearly against war and militarism. The award to Aktion Sühnezeichen reminds us how relevant its mission still is today. We are stunned to see the bombing war in Syria, children dying in Aleppo, millions of people on the run. We see democracies in Europe and North America that must once again increasingly defend themselves against right-wing populism, racism, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism.

But we also see the big difference to the founding year of Aktion Sühnezeichen, 1958: our civil society is strong today, many people are standing up to hatred and hate speech - they help others and are committed to social cohesion. We also have ASF to thank for that! It was a role model for many other volunteer services. But above all, it was a pioneer of this modern, responsible civil society. It is its trailblazer and reliable companion. Even today, ASF is still committed to combating all forms of misanthropy. The organization currently supports migrants in understanding the history of National Socialism and enriching the discourse with their own experiences.

The work of Aktion Sühnezeichen is not finished and will never be finished. From the courage of those who fought against oblivion in post-war Germany to those who help abroad today or who now come to Germany from abroad to do their service here: you all keep the past alive, practise solidarity in the present and thus create the foundations for a peaceful future. For this, you have my utmost respect and my warmest congratulations on winning the 2016 Westphalian Peace Prize!