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Speech: Exhibition „Lawyers without rights“ 05.12.2004, Leo Baeck Institute, New York

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On the occasion of the opening of the exhibition „Lawyers without rights“ at the Leo Baeck Institute in New York I would like to address a few words to you as member of the executive board of the German Jurists Association, which is the association of the various legal professions in Germany. Our president, Paul Kirchhof, is unfortunately not able to join us today, but he has asked me to convey his best regards to everyone present here today.

The German Jurists Association is since its beginning, according to its statutes and understanding, neutral in terms of political opinion, religion, race and culture, and was founded more than 140 years ago. In 1933, the Association's twenty four board members – many of them Jewish academics and advocates – were requested to resign from office and hand the Association over to the Nazi government. They decided not to co-operate in order to avoid any misuse of the organization by the Nazis, and this led to their decision to close and terminate the organization which could not be re-established until 1949.

The history of post war Germany is also the history of a long lasting silence on the expulsion from the bar of German advocates of Jewish origin in that darkest period in Germany's past.

There are some books in Germany which deal with the life and the fate of Jewish advocates in Germany and which have kept alive the memory of those citizens. In most cases, the individuals dealt with were well-known or prominent lawyers of the time. Unfortunately, however, over a long period of time data was not collected about the large number of, so to speak, ordinary Jewish advocates in Germany. It has taken more than 60 years but now and due to the commitment of Bernhard Dombeck and the research of Simone Ladewig-Winters we have documentation, part of which is on display here today. The written documents and photos are evidence of the terrible events of April 1933 when Jewish advocates were expelled from the bar in Germany, which meant a loss of their professional existence and soon after of their social standing, but also, and finally for many of them losing their life along with their family members. A great number of them were also forced to go into exile in the UK, the United States or other safe havens abroad.

The German Federal Bar Association together with the German Jurists Association wants to revive the memory of all those people who have been forgotten for so many years. The exhibition which is here today had its first opening during the sixty-third convention of the German Jurists Association in Leipzig in 2000, and has since then travelled to many German cities. Last year the exhibition was also shown in Israel, a source of particularly personal pleasure.

The exhibition describes the life and fate of the Jewish Advocates in the 3rd Reich. It is not only a rational historical documentation about the terrible events in the darkest days of German history ever. It also reminds us today of the importance of human rights, the standards of a constitutional state and the culture of law as a fundamental element of social life in society. The exhibition is therefore also addressed to all those who have responsibility in society today to commit themselves to respecting law and justice now, and in the future.

As I have already mentioned, the exhibition has been shown in cities all over Germany, and has been visited by many people. I am especially pleased to report

that the exhibition has also found widespread attention and interest among school classes and students. In some universities seminars have even been organized to research the life of Jewish colleagues of 1933. These facts make me feel especially confident and optimistic. It is not only evidence that the names of the Jewish colleagues of 1933 will not be forgotten, but it is also confirmation that the young generation in Germany is conscious of both their political and historical responsibility, and their awareness of the importance of a free society.