

## Award of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany to Simone Arnold-Liebster

Uwe Klages (President of the Arnold-Liebster Foundation): So, dear friends here in the hall, a warm welcome to everyone. And to our dear friends, wherever they may be in the world, who are now connected to us through Zoom, we also extend a warm welcome. We are very happy to be here today with our dear sister in the faith Simone. Simone, a warm welcome to you too, because this is a special day for you, which we greatly appreciate. Because you are not only an example of faith and courage for us, but also an encouragement that we can live out the things we stand for, no matter what. And that is why we are here to honor you, and that is especially through Mr. Consul General. A very warm welcome to you, too, for being here. That makes us very happy, indeed!

Consul General Thomas Pröpstl: Thank you!

Uwe Klages: But I also don't want to miss the opportunity to welcome the two representatives of the French branch, or the religious organization in France, Jean-Claude Pons - where is he? There he is! - with his wife Séphora, and from Germany, Walter Köbe with his wife Veronika. It is also nice that you are here with us to share this honor and this joy with Simone. It really is a great privilege, because we must not forget one thing: The fact that we are talking today about what Simone and many other of our fellow believers experienced under the Nazi regime of terror was not so well known in the early decades, after the war was over. You could almost say that the victims who suffered all this were forgotten victims. This also had to do with the fact that the victims themselves could not and did not want to talk about it. Some of them told their families, saying: "We couldn't talk about it in our families." But in 1996 something extraordinary happened: the religious international community of Jehovah's Witnesses released a video called "Stand Firm Against Nazi Assault," and in this video the brothers and sisters, a large part, not all, suddenly got a voice and a face—and reported on what they had experienced—also on behalf of the many others who were not in the video. And then something happened--suddenly they were able to talk and really report on what happened and what we can learn from it. And Simone Liebster ... and her husband Max Liebster, the two of them together, understood this and took it up immediately and became active in many events and exhibitions and tried to get this message across of not forgetting and learning, with great success. That was a wonderful time, which we also shared in part. Simone, it was quite exciting in many European countries. Max, your dear husband, was honored for this. He was made an honorary citizen of Reichenbach, where he was born. A town that was the first in Hesse to announce: "We are free of Jews." And then the Liebster family [Max's father] was driven out of the town naked. And now, many years later, Reichenbach has made Max an honorary citizen and has also erected a beautiful memorial there to commemorate his actions as a peacemaker after this time of hatred is past. And now we know that this is still very relevant. Just two figures that I received here: At the moment there are still 200 Jehovah's Witnesses in prison worldwide because they believe in their God, Jehovah, and speak about it. Of these, 116 are in Russia alone. We are completely banned in Russia and we have to suffer many other reprisals there. And we have to fight against that. And that's what Simone, you've done wonderfully in recent years. Two more figures: Over 27,000 pupils and students reached, in over 21 countries around the world. With a laptop at home, a computer, she chats with them, which is brilliant to see. So, when I see you sitting in front of that computer every time, my heart just soars and I can only rejoice. Well done, Simone!

Simone Arnold-Liebster: There's more!

Uwe Klages: Yes, there's more. That's it! It goes even further. So, and that's why I'm coming to the end now. And finally, I would like to quote something from the Bible. Mr. Consul General, in Romans 13, Paul describes the relationship between people and the authorities, i.e., the governments. And then in verse 3, in the second part, he says a very special sentence, an interesting message that he leaves behind. It says in Romans 13 verse 3: "Do you want to live without fear of the superior authorities?" An interesting question! Answer: "Always do good and you will receive praise from it." And Simone, you have always done good and now you will receive praise. With that, I hand over to you.

Consul General Thomas Pröpstl: Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren, Mesdames et Messieurs, ladies and gentlemen, I have been asked to speak German, so I speak German with a slight Bavarian background. I come from the beautiful city of Regensburg on the Danube, which I have never forgotten, but I have nevertheless traveled the world and finally ended up here in Lyon. And, of course, it is a very special pleasure for me now, dear Mrs. Liebster, to be with you today, in a very beautiful setting, and above all together with many people, people who are particularly close to you. It is therefore with great pleasure that I have traveled from Lyon to meet you in person today and to honor you in my capacity as German Consul General. Your life story, Mrs. Liebster, is known to all of us in this room. I therefore do not need to repeat it. You have led a very eventful life, were confronted with numerous injustices, subjected to undignified repression, and had to endure much suffering and persecution with your family during the Nazi era. But - and this is what sets you apart: You didn't let it get you down! As a Jehovah's Witness with your personal compass and firmness of principle, you have unwaveringly gone your own way and remained true to yourself. And with incredible personal strength, as I have been told, you have achieved many positive things in your life. Remembrance work, the work against forgetting, has been a particular concern of yours for many years. Yes, in 1986 - just a few details - you were co-founder and first chairwoman of the "Cercle Européen des Témoins de Jéhovah Anciens Déportés et Internés," the first initiative dedicated to the memory of Jehovah's Witnesses persecuted by the Nazi regime. Since the end of the 1980s, you have appeared at commemorative events at concentration camp memorials and participated in the first exhibitions and conferences organized by the aforementioned Cercle Européen, as well as numerous appearances as a contemporary witness and interviews with historians. In 1995, you made important contributions to a conference at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington and to a conference on Holocaust education in Florida. From 1996, you worked as a contemporary witness as part of the historical exhibitions, as you mentioned, entitled "Jehovah's Witnesses - Forgotten Victims" and "Stand Firm Despite Persecution" in numerous European countries. Together with your husband, you also founded the Arnold Liebster Foundation in 2002 with the mission of preserving the memory of the victims of Nazi persecution, educating future generations about Nazi crimes and generally keeping alive the memory of the victims of dictatorships and religious persecution. The activities of the Liebster Foundation bear witness to the Arnold-Liebster couple's commitment to peace, tolerance and humanity and to combating racism, xenophobic nationalism and violence. With these goals in mind, and this has also been mentioned, you regularly speak at events commemorating Nazi persecution, and in particular, which is very, very important, to

young people, to schoolchildren. And as you have just said, during your decades of activities, dear Ms. Liebster, you have reached many thousands of people in this way, many thousands of people, especially in the USA, but also in Europe and in Germany. And that's not all, a few years ago you also launched an initiative for a memorial to the Jehovah's Witnesses persecuted and murdered under National Socialism in Europe, which will be built in Berlin. The course has been set for this important project. I have certainly not listed all your achievements, and it is not possible to do so, because there really are so many, but with the wealth of your important activities over a very long period of time and with your admirable commitment as a contemporary witness, you have made a truly extraordinary contribution to preserving and communicating the memory of the victims of National Socialist tyranny and persecution. It is particularly remarkable how you were able to draw strength from your personal story of suffering to carry out this work of remembrance for decades, especially with young people. You have always done this with an open heart and a conciliatory, positive view of the future. I pay you my great personal respect for this. Thank you very much!

Simone Arnold-Liebster: Thank you!

Consul General Thomas Pröpstl: I am here on behalf of the Federal President to present you with the Cross of Merit, it has already been awarded, but may I read you the award certificate: "Award certificate. In recognition of the special services rendered to the Federal Republic of Germany, I award Mrs. Simone Liebster the Cross of Merit on Ribbon of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany. Berlin, July 21, 2023 - The Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier." My heartfelt congratulations!

Simone Arnold-Liebster: Yes, thank you!

Consul General Thomas Pröpstl: Now I'll give you a little something else.

Simone Arnold-Liebster: Do you know what I'm thinking about right now? My teacher once said: "You can't go on like this. You won't get anywhere in Germany!" It's a shame he's not here.

Consul General Thomas Pröpstl: Yes, that's right. So, now I'm going to give you another infection. It doesn't hurt.

Simone Arnold-Liebster: Thank goodness!

Consul General Thomas Pröpstl: So, it looks great on you. And these are the little details that you wear, but we can discuss that later. Congratulations once again!