



Address by the President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Dr. Josef Schuster, on the Inauguration of the Federal Military Rabbi, 21.6.2021, Leipzig

Embargo: Monday, 21st June 2021, 15:00 hours (CEST)

The spoken word shall prevail!

Last year in August, there was an event that touched me profoundly. Fighter planes from both the Israeli army and the Bundeswehr jointly flew past the memorial of Dachau concentration camp. This is the concentration camp where my father and my grandfather were imprisoned in 1937. With a lot of luck, they were able to emigrate to Palestine in 1938. I was born in Israel.

75 years after the end of the Second World War, German and Israeli armies made this gesture of reconciliation – here of all places.

This was only possible due to the close connection that has been formed between the two countries, and because the Bundeswehr is the army of a democracy and has nothing in common with the Wehrmacht.

And only thus is it possible that we can celebrate the inauguration of Zsolt Balla as first Federal Military Rabbi today. Other military rabbis will also take up their service in the Bundeswehr.

This seemed inconceivable for decades, and even now is anything but a matter of course. So today we have every reason to rejoice and to be grateful!

Above all, I would like to thank the Ministry of Defence, starting with you, Madame Minister.

I would also like to thank the two Churches who have been open to our concerns from the beginning.

I would also like to thank the General and the Orthodox Rabbinical Conference who have been supporting us very constructively with the appointment of the military rabbis.

And at this point, I would also like to thank Marina Balla. Dear Mrs. Balla, in future, you will have to do without your husband even more than before, while keeping the family together at the same time.

Ladies and gentlemen,

most of all, we must thank Rabbi Zsolt Balla himself for accepting the challenge of being the first to take on the office of Federal Military Rabbi.

Mr. Balla is already experienced in being the first to take historic steps. In 2009, Zsolt Balla, along with Avraham Radbil, was the first orthodox rabbi to be ordained in Germany after the Shoah. At the ordination, Wolfgang Schäuble – who was the Federal Minister of the Interior at the time – spoke about an “historic and theological event that will have an impact far beyond the borders of Germany and Judaism.”

Today again, Zsolt Balla is making history – and I can see it in his eyes that he feels that me saying this is too much honour. He is not taking these steps to be enshrined in history books. But rather, because he is acting out of religious conviction and in the service of the cause.

It is indeed a service that the rabbis want to perform in the Bundeswehr. They will be available to the soldiers and their families as contact persons and as persons of trust. The soldiers can turn to the rabbis with ethical questions, with religious concerns, and during personal crises. And not only in times of crises. A rabbi will also gladly share the joy of the birth of a child or a soldier's recent marriage.

Catholic and Protestant military chaplains equally perform this service. Now, there is the addition of the Jewish perspective. This means that the rabbis will make sure that Jewish soldiers can carry out their service according to the religious rules that are important to them. Furthermore, they can introduce non-Jewish soldiers to Jewish holidays and traditions.

This reduces foreignness vis-à-vis Judaism, so that – I am convinced – prejudice will not occur, or will be nipped in the bud. For us, this is an important side effect of Jewish military chaplaincy.

The Jewish community would like to take on responsibility. Responsibility for our democracy. And that includes an army living these democratic values. An army, where there is no place for political extremism and intolerance.

There has been far too much disturbing news from the Bundeswehr recently. The court case against Franko A., the officer who pretended to be a refugee and allegedly planned attacks, is currently underway. The case also brought to light right-wing extremist networks inside and outside the Bundeswehr. One wonders with trepidation whether this is just the tip of the iceberg.

It is crucial for the future of the Bundeswehr that careful investigations are carried out and nothing is concealed, not only in this case. We owe this to the thousands of soldiers who perform their duty with integrity and responsibly. People such as Franko A. harm these soldiers most, as right-wing extremists in uniform damage the reputation of the entire Bundeswehr.

Therefore, it is not only necessary to ban right-wing radicals from the Bundeswehr, but also to strengthen all other soldiers and consolidate their democratic sentiments. Just as the Bundeswehr is supposed to be a reflection of our society, it also has a reverse effect on our society. Zsolt Balla put it very nicely at a conference of the Central Council of Jews in Germany two years ago. He said:

“It is essential to integrate ethos and ethics into the daily reality of an army in order to make the world a better place.”

Those unfamiliar with Judaism may think that Rabbi Balla’s aspiration to create a better world is latently megalomaniac. However, he has only taken up the Jewish commandment of Tikun Olam – making the world a little better.

A military rabbi can contribute to this just as much as a soldier, or you and I.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the end of my speech, I would like to address the servicemen and women. I can just about imagine what picture came to mind, when you heard that there was now a federal military rabbi.

You probably imagined an old man with a white beard, side curls and a big hat. Perhaps also a man, who pays very strict attention to morals.

Indeed, morals are important to Rabbi Balla.

But apart from that, I can reassure you that as a trained industrial engineer, he knows the pitfalls when things get tricky in logistics.

As a father of three children, he is also used to having to change all plans at the spur of the moment.

And as a gifted singer and bass player, he could easily rock the barracks.

We are curious to find out if he will do so.



Dear Rabbi Balla, I would like to wish you a good start and lots of success in your new position, both in the name of the Central Council of Jews and on my own behalf!

