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Honorable Member of Parliament,  
Honorable Major of Darmstadt,  
Sir,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Karl Plagge is a son of the City of Darmstadt, Here he was born in 1897, went to school, studied at the Technical University and after a brief time as a free-lance engineer he became technical director of the Hesse-Werke in Darmstadt, where he worked until the end of his life in summer 1957. 1916, immediately after finishing college, he joined military service, fought as a lieutenant at the Western Front and was captured there by the British, held as a POW until 1920. There he got ill of poliomyelitis, throughout his life one leg kept shortened. Just back from the war he started to study, not as dreamed medicine – his father and grandfather had been well known military surgeons – but as engineer, because after the early death of his father he lacked the funds for a lengthy study. Determined he finishes the University after 3 years and started after a brief extra training in chemical processes a laboratory. It was a difficult time for him to succeed economically and since the general crisis past 1929 the business is down. Everywhere is unemployment, the political unrest doesn't stop in Darmstadt, communists demonstrate, the bourgeois society fears a soviet republic and a revolution like the one in Russia only a few years earlier. In Darmstadt a strong local NSDAP group grew and Plagge joined the party. He trusted in the promises for jobs, peace and a new strength for Germany – like so many others in bourgeois-conservative circles. He really must have believed in the respectability of the party, at his wedding photo in 1932 he as well as his father-in-law is seen in the party's uniform. Karl Plagge had married his assistant Anke Madsen. In 1933 at first he takes over lower party-appointments, has to be on his feet a lot, which soon becomes too much because of his disablement. He offers to give scientific lectures at the party's education centre and here first he got into conflict with the party-bosses, because he denies the Nazi-race theories as non-scientific. In the same way he denies to dilute his lectures with party-ideology – at least he is relegated from the education centre. In the mid-30ies Kurt Hesse– owner of the Hesse-works – has engaged Karl Plagge as the technical manager. Kurt Hesse is not a Nazi and he is married to a – according to the Nuremberg laws – “Jew”. The party has set him under pressure and therefore he decided to employ the party-member Plagge, whom he knew since some time – also not to be forced to employ a Nazi-fat cat. Soon Hesse and Plagge are connected by more than the daily work, they become friends and confided. Here already Karl Plagge has got into a role, which later on stamps the decisive years of his life: he uses his position to moderate and prevent party-activities within the factory.

Briefly after the November-pogrom almost demonstratively he becomes the god-father of Kurt Hesse's new-borne son. Also then the god-father was noted into the official family-book and at least the registrar would have been obliged to report such closeness of a party-member to a “Jew” and her child to the party or the Gestapo.

Kurt Hesse reports that Karl Plagge after an engineers conference in Stuttgart had been disgusted and horror-stricken. The Reich's Minister for Work Ley had ranted there about the soon subjugation of the East – war! Karl Plagge as the former combatant recognized that the NSDAP is not the party of whom he had expected jobs and peace.

1939, immediately after outbreak of the war he, although disabled, is drafted into service and soon at the rank of a captain became commandant of an engineer-unit in Darmstadt and after the attack on Russia in summer '41 he was appointed the commandant of HKP 562 in Vilna, occupied since the 11<sup>th</sup> of June. That is a unit, which has a very similar mission like the local "Heeresinstandsetzungswerk 850): complete renewal, repair and refurbishment of military vehicles. Under his order are 250 soldiers and many local civilians. As the army suffers a permanent shortage of vehicles and the war in the East did not end after a Blitzkrieg, HKP grows fast. The workshops are distributed all over Vilna. At first Poles are working there aside of the soldiers, but soon more and more Jews.

Immediately after the occupation wild pogroms against the Jews had taken place all over Lithuania, soon they had to wear the star of David, the SS and Gestapo started to displace and massacre by masses the political leaders and those young men, able to resist, together with energetic support of Lithuanian police.

The Jews of Vilna had been a large – more than 30% of 200thousand inhabitants – and manifold group. Rich and poor, intellectuals, craftsmen and traders, pious Jews and secular – many artists, writers, painters, actors you could find. Because of its vivid cultural and highly esteemed religious life Vilna was named the Jerusalem of the East. Formative had been the educated upper-class, of whom many had studied and lived in St. Petersburg, in Vienna, Berlin or even in Darmstadt, worldly-wise and multi-lingual. In autumn 1941 they all were driven into the ghetto and there they had to suffer the repeated selections and massacres by the SS and their helping hands. Only those in possession of a work-permit from a German office or Wehrmacht, was partially secure against imprisonment.

With his eyes open Karl Plagge saw what happened. The Holocaust in the East in no way took place in the hiding, although the site of the massacres had been out of Vilna at Ponary. 19-year old private Alfons von Deschwanden, coming to Vilna in summer '41, already at his arrival hears with horror the volleys of the executioners. Now Karl Plagge hires to his work-shops as many Jews as possible – regardless whether teacher, shoemaker, tiler or doctor, they all get the life-saving "Gele shain", the work-permit. They all are rated by him as vehicle specialists. This got about in the ghetto very soon and he is asked to employ the father, the cousin or a friend, seldom he rejects the quest. Even more, with a guard in arms he retrieves already imprisoned from the Gestapo-jail, claiming them as irrecoverable labourers. Not always he succeeds, but at a special case he fakes an urgent repair order, to save 110 men from detention and killing.

Karl Plagge makes the HKP a well organized muster-factory. As a well trained engineer in work-organization and experienced industrial manager he controls diligently exact work-flow, reports and personal management. Nobody should get the impression that anyone in HKP would be superfluous. If need, he raises new jobs. He sets up a building commando, on duty to repair the worn-down buildings, doors and

windows, ovens, even water supply and sewage. He sets up an apprentices training, a chemical laboratory – what connection has such thing with vehicle repair? – a medical ward with doctors and nurses. He manages to get 100 sewing machines from the Netherlands and gets 2 uniform-makers into HKP to employ the women, rabbit- and cattle-stalls are kept by HKP, served by his Jewish labourers. However the Wehrmacht in the East mainly was set on local self-supply. In late summer 1943 it became apparent – at least Plagge anticipated so – that the SS planned to liquidate the last living in the ghetto. He travels to the highest SS- and police commander in the Baltic states Piffraeder, whom he possibly knew from Darmstadt, where Piffraeder had been the Gestapo-chief before the war and from there gets the written permission, to collect all his workers together with their women and two children into an own special camp. The women and children are taken as well, because he argues that only by this the morale of his labourers could be kept up. Days before the final liquidation of the ghetto after diligent examination by the SS 1.500 men, women and children are brought by trucks from the ghetto to the Subocz-street camp, two 5-storey buildings, fenced by barbed wire in the vicinity of Vilna. The guards are Lithuanian SS and officially the camp is under command of SS-officer Goecke in Kaunas, his supervisor in the camp is SS-sergeant Richter. All the Jews were property of the SS, the Wehrmacht paid to the SS for renting the work of the prisoners.

From the very beginning Plagge was known for his human treatment of Jews. At his responsibility there were no kicking, whips and snappish dogs like in all other slave-camps to drive the workers forward. Life-conditions in Subocz-street were bearable – not by today's measures - but at least there were regular working hours, lunch-breaks. The prisoners are allowed to set up a black market for food – the guards are corrupt. The rooms are small and cramped, but everyone has a bed, linen can be washed and there is piped water. Maltreatments of the prisoners in single work-shops happen, but are exceptions. A sergeant, who was caught kicking a Jew is called by Plagge. When he defended himself, the Jews in all would be enemies, Plagge displaced him to a front-line unit, to fight the enemy there with a gun in his hand – although the sergeant threatens with his membership in the general SS. Bill Begell, who worked in the blacksmith shop as a youngster said it as such: “We feared the Germans. But seeing Plagge I never had to fear that he would draw his luger and shoot me.”

Life in the camp was no picnic, as survivors report, but it meant life. Other than in the ghetto, where death could hit everyone at any time, in the camp hope on survival was possible, even such thing like safety for the prisoners was there – overshadowed by two brutal incidents. In November 1943 a couple had fled from the camp and was caught in the city. SS brought them back to the camp. All prisoners had to line up in the courtyard at the gallows. In the same moment a 10-year old girl called from a window “Mama” and a minute later ran to her mother, standing already under the gallows. When the husband should be hanged, the rope tore twice and the SS-officer shot the man and the woman, another one the child. Plagge did not interfere, we do not know, whether he was informed about. But even if he knew, he could not stop it. The couple had broken the rule, the assurance to stay in the camp – that was the condition for the existence of this special camp. Also Karl Plagge was bound to this rule. We know that Karl Plagge had many sleepless nights in Vilna – that he hardly could bear the burden of responsibility.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 1944 the SS broke into the camp, all had to line up and all non-working children were snatched, thrown on trucks and transported to Ponary. Mothers, who desperately clung to their children were shot on the spot or disappeared also in Ponary. About 250 children were killed in this "Action". Even the next day the SS grabbed another 36 women and killed them. This "Kinder Aktion" had shaken the camp to the roots. The fastidious work-reports of HPK state for the following days "not worked". To all we know Karl Plagge was not in Vilna at that time.

On 1<sup>st</sup> of July the Red Army is at the gates of Vilna, liberation is near on arms length. At this Saturday evening Karl Plagge collects some prisoners in the Subocz-street camp and tells them that HPK will immediately relocate to the West and he says: "Now you will be under the supervision of the SS, which as you know is an organization to protect the refugees". Aside of him stands SS-sergeant Richter. This is the signal for the prisoners to escape now into the malinas, prepared since weeks or to prepare for the getaway. Not all have prepared themselves for this day. About 500 people pack basement-holes and sewage-pipes, hidings between walls and under the roof-top, they know that they must hide there for days and therefore it is so important to learn the right moment to hide – not too early, the SS should recognize their disappearance as late as possible and the provisions in the hidings must reach for days – not too late, to get into the malinas often only by creeping one by one. In the same night about two dozen prisoners escape through a precautionary cut window in the blacksmith shop. Private von Deschwanden recognizes the escaping from his machine-gun post, where he is ordered to in this particular night. He and his comrade do not fire, they know, that are their Jews, with whom they had worked hand in hand for three years.

Only on Monday morning an SS-commando orders all prisoners to a roll-call. About 500 turn up and are shot immediately. Then the search of the buildings starts and another 200 are found and killed. About 300 survive under unbelievable conditions in airless dark holes, without water and threatened by insanity.

HPK packs up – tools, spare parts, vehicles – from Saturday evening until Monday in great hurry. Having been the commander of a unit of similar strength I can imagine well, what a dramatic task this must have been under enemy pressure. Partially HPK was already on the move, when Karl Plagge is reported that there is shooting in the camp. For a last time he drives there, but is rejected at the gate. He hears the shooting inside.

Even years after the war he must assume that all his efforts to help at least those Jews under his responsibility were futile – up until his denazification trial, when absolutely unexpected an advocate appeared to search for and thank Major Karl Plagge in the name of former HPK prisoners.

Men like Plagge – "Jewfriends" – lived after the war in an unfriendly society. He was rated a fellow-traveller of the NSDAP, had to pay a fine and the costs of the trial and by this was branded, entirely other than those many real Nazi-perpetrators, which escaped denazification entirely unharmed. He was forgotten, until in 1999 Dr. Michael Good, son of survivors of HPK began to search for this man. Has Karl Plagge been a hero? My thesis in German in the examination 1962 was: "How do you explain the dilution of heroism nowadays". I got a miserable mark for my thesis – the term hero at that time was occupied with some war-heroes. I had well in

my mind the former fighter-pilot and bearer of the knights cross, who with his horribly burned face lived only as a human wreck. There was the uncle, fighter pilot as well, knights-cross with swords, drowned in alcohol after the war. Heroes had been in war time, men in fight, who performed brave and heroic deeds, who after the war for us youngsters had nothing less but heroism. Then – reluctantly Stauffenberg and the men of the 20<sup>th</sup> of July were built to heroes of the late German history. But they had dared a brave deed and were shot for. Who can be asked for such? Everyone? I cannot exclude the idea that the White Rose and Stauffenberg at that time were presented as heroes with the aim to point out the singular, exceptional, death neglecting bravery needed to withstand the Nazi-regime and that regularly one was shot, hanged or killed otherwise for that. Hence it is something for the very few, selected – nothing to be questioned for the normal citizen.

Here Karl Plagge was entirely different. He himself has written “I only did, what I was allowed to”. He used his freedom of action. He had seen that the Jews were the mostly endangered, they needed his help, so he had employed them in HKP, there they were protected within boundaries. He had used the urgent need of the Wehrmacht for vehicles, to make as many Jews as possible work for the Wehrmacht and “for the final victory”. He organized his unit perfectly, to offer protection for as many as possible. He denied by administrative tricks too deep insight to the SS into his proceedings and he also had to protect himself, as he knew that his prisoners were lost, if he would be denounced as a “Jew friend”. The military jurisdiction was easy at hand with such trials, at least 20.000 death sentences against soldiers of the Wehrmacht because of “dilution of the fighting will” and lesser things are frightening witnesses for the treat to any oppositional deeds or even thoughts. Hence Plagge was not the hero, who stood with open vizier and drawn gun against his enemy – here the SS. He acted in silence, pretending conformity with the system, he convinced his opponents with the correctness of his action, he set them “at ease” by his realistic arguments. And exactly this it is, what the majority of the Germans under Hitler’s rule had lacked: the little amount of bravery to help the neighbour at least with those resources, which were, as Plagge wrote, “allowed” to all.

Why has he acted like that? Karl Plagge was not a believer, later he has avowed himself as an atheist. But he had a basic believe in moral and humanism, a child of his bourgeois-conservative education, possibly of his humanistic school. Karl Plagge's deeds should make us understand that the true hero is the one, who never forgets in his doings the humanitarian background, who understands that such behaviour must be trained in daily life, such as Karl Plagge did as a manager in the Hesse-Werke and by the god-father ship for Konrad Hesse. That is the heroism we can expect from every citizen here and now.

Major Karl Plagge is an exceptional example for military leadership. He was responsible for 250 soldiers and he has led them in a time and in an army, when the attitude of a “Herrenmensch” and deadly antagonism against any Jew was demanded officially – explicit by the Wehrmacht’s High Command – in a way that they followed his example, partially according to own convictions, partially under his influence. He had kept distance, he did not mix up, but his men knew his basic demands: No maltreatment, the Jews are co-workers. In HKP – today one would say – he was present. He walked through the work-shops with a view for details. There were daily meetings, he demanded detailed reports. His orders and directives were aimed solely on effectiveness. Any ideology was strange to him.

I am on pension from the army since years, but I will never forget the oath I swore at the peak of the Cuban Crisis: "... to serve the Federal Republic of Germany with loyalty and to defend the right and the freedom of the German people bravely." Our rights and our freedom is doubtlessly defined by our constitution, integral part are the general human rights and the Geneva Convention. They demand the human rights as the utmost value, standing above all orders. Exactly this is the demand to all soldiers, to understand human rights above all orders. Moltke<sup>1</sup> has said: "Discipline is a gratitude to all, but above discipline stands the man (human being)". Karl Plagge has lived and dared as such. Therefore he is an exceptional soldier and a worthwhile eponym to these barracks.

Here I thank all, who have co-operated in unveiling Plagge's history, especially the survivors of the camp, who have travelled far for this ceremony. Simon Malkes will speak to you later. And in particular I want to thank Alfons von Deschwanden, the then private, who in HKP – like Plagge – once he could help and save his brethren had the bravery to act.

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<sup>1</sup> General von Moltke, Bismarck's Chief of Staff and founder of the modern Prussian army.