Speech by mayor Van Aartsen at the commemoration of the victims of chemical warfare in theYpres Hallof the OPCW (Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons), 29 April 2013

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It may have been a brief message, but these few lines concealed a tragedy. Nearly eighty years ago, on the 4th of May 1933, the Hague-based newspaper*Het Vaderland* reported the following: “the director of the*Kaiser Wilhelm Institut für physikalische Chemie und Elektrochemie*, the famous Nobel Prize-winner and*Geheimrat,* Professor Fritz Haber has offered his resignation.”

A month earlier, the*Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums* or the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service,had come into force, the cynical name for the measure by which the new Nazi regime rid itself in one go of all Jewish civil servants. Due to his long service record and his status as a veteran of the First World War, the Jewish Professor Haber was granted permission to stay temporarily. But he refused this offer, partly because as director, he would have had to sack all the other Jewish staff. His colleague and friend, the great Max Planck, triedin vain to change Haber’s mind, because he wanted to retain him for German science. ButHaber’s decision stood firm and he resigned. His world fell apart.

A world in which chemistry had played a leading role, the highlight being the discovery,together with Carl Bosch, of the synthesis of ammonia from atmospheric nitrogen. This Haber-Boschprocess had made the production of fertiliser possible - a real blessing for mankind: at last we had an effective way to tackle food shortages and thushunger. In 1918, Haber was awarded the Nobel Prize for his discovery of ammonia synthesis.

But in that ill-fated spring of 1933, Haber not only lost his job and his colleagues. He also lost his fatherland, Germany, the country that he had served,*Kaisertreu,*and withgreat personal sacrifice, particularly during the First World War. And afterwards too, during theWeimar Republicwhen, as a modern-dayalchemist, he had tried to extract gold from seawater. Gold that Germany could have used to pay the sky-high reparations to the Allies.

However, Haber’s name will always be associated with the name of this room, the Flemish town of Ypres, where he personally supervised the very first use of chlorine gas. Haber himself said that he wanted to use the gas to bring a quick end to the hopeless deadlock of trench warfare. An end in the form of a victory for Imperial Germany, of course. Here, Haber’s views were diametrically opposed to those of his good friend Albert Einstein, who saw the war as asuicidal drama and an eruption of insanity, in the words of historian Fritz Stern –Haber’s godson. Unfortunately Einstein was right and since then, the 22nd of April1915 has been a symbol for one of the modern atrocities which were so typical of the First World War: chemical weapons.

Wilfred Owen, the famous war poet, described the terrible reality of chemical warfare in the following words:

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,

Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,

Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs

And towards our distant rest began to trudge.

Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots

But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;

Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots

Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

The tragic and somewhat Faustian character of Fritz Haber is the subject of a moving play,*De scheikundige* or The chemist, part of which was performed to mark the centenary of thefoundation of the Fritz-Haber-Institut der Max-Planck-Gesellschaft. It was written by Chrétien Schouteten. As a teacher, this Dutch chemist was very interested in the ethical dilemmas facingHaber as a man and a scientist. Dilemmas which are universal and timeless.

Lutz Haber, Haber's youngest son and well-known historian who wrote about chemical warfare, lived to see the founding of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in The Hague 15 years ago. A unique institution: the onlyinternational organisation responsible for banning an entire family of weapons. And a successful organisation: 188 countries are members of the OPCW, nearly every country in the world. Since 1997, 80 percent of all chemical weapons worldwide have been destroyed. Thanks to the OPCW and all the men and women who have worked or still work worked there, our world is a much safer place. The fact that this has been achieved from our city makes us very proud.

But even when the last gas grenade has disappeared from the Earth, the world will have to be vigilant. Vigilant to safeguard the future of our children and grandchildren. Vigilant out of respect for the many victims of chemical warfare, fromYpres to Halabja. As an international city of peace and justice, The Hague will continueto pursue this mission.