Dear Theo, I am very happy and honoured to be your laudator at this landmark event, the 14th World Congress on Public Health here in Kolkata India, awarding you for your lifetime achievement in Public Health.

In a long and successful career as a public health professional you made outstanding contributions to health. As most of us you set your first steps guided by a role model, in your case a pioneering school doctor, who advised the pupils on healthy living. A few years later as medical student and boy-scout-leader your doctoral thesis focused accordingly on physically overstrained young people\(^1\). As a research fellow in Zuereich under Prof. Etienne Grandjean you could show that orchestra musicians developed medical symptoms not because of physical but mental stress due to sometimes highly autocratic conductors\(^2\).

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After these first exercises you moved forward to Harvard in 1962 and – after graduation as a MPH at the Department of Epidemiology – you joined for six years the faculty of the Harvard School of Public Health, exactly half a century ago. These years in the United States were decisive for you, professionally as well as privately. However, the first of the two big themes of your professional life – the tobacco epidemic – you had started already some years earlier with a careful review of over 90 publications, leading you to the conclusion that a causal relationship was beyond any reasonable doubt\(^3\).

You returned to your homeland in 1971 to accept the chair of the Department of Social and Preventive Medicine in Bern, the capital of Switzerland. In the next years you continued the fight for tobacco control, adding health services planning, health monitoring, health promotion, and finally since the nineties environmental epidemiology with a focus on the nuclear disasters in Chernobyl and Fukushima, the second big theme in your life\(^4\).

\(^3\) Abelin Th: Rauchen als Ursache von Lungenkrebs. Stuetzen und Luecken der Beweisfuehrung. Z Praev med. 6 (1961):349ff.

Nowadays some people think that universities are outdated and should be replaced by targeted short courses. That is to some degree understandable as our university systems urgently need to be reformed and equipped for the 21st century, - not by administrative overregulation but by fostering independent thinking. You were pioneering the new thinking through a survey of Medical Schools in most countries of Europe, demonstrating together with colleagues, that teaching of social medicine as a precursor of modern public health was assigned only a negligible number of hours in the Western part of Europe⁵. As a consequence you introduced very early what you called in that time clinical social medicine with patient interviews to be discussed with yourself or your collaborators with a focus on social determinants of disease and recovery⁶.

In a few words those were the main lines of your remarkable professional life.

⁶ Abelin Th. Das sozialmedizinische Gespräch im Rahmen der ärztlichen Ausbildung. Schweiz. Ärztezeit. 58 (1977): 1251
However, you always devoted also a significant part of your time to non-governmental and professional organisations in epidemiology, public health, tobacco control, lung disease, care for the elderly, and last but not least to the WFPHA, advised by well-known Milton Roemer, the noted American pioneer of public health. For us - the WFPHA community - over the years you grew into the role of a trustee who in our sub consciousness has always been there and will be there for many years to come, a trustee who guarantees a correct legal framework, initiating revisions when and where necessary, and providing kind of a safety net or fall-back position for our activities.
Theo is not only a distinguished peer but a well balanced personality, open
minded, collegial, always controlled, hiding his superb intellectuality behind
modesty and friendliness. Nevertheless he is also able to follow over decades
his objectives until they are reached, an iron character. I cannot exactly
remember when I visited you the first time, then in Bern. It must have been in
the later seventies when – as a young medical researcher – I looked for
epidemiological advice and at that long time ago you were one of the very few
in the German speaking countries. I do not remember exactly when, but I
remember very well what my first impression was. I thought for myself, this
guy speaks so slowly, on how did he get the chair for what nowadays we would
call public health or health sciences. But only a few hours later I had learned
that Theo speaks slowly because - he thinks twice! And then he is right! -
Almost always! I think that is why he was elected to the boards of very many
organizations: the US Society for Epidemiologic Research, the International
Epidemiologic Association, and the Swiss Society for Public Health, the
European Public Health Association, the Swiss Society for Research on
Problems of the Elderly, and our WFPHA. Theo received the Andrija Stampar
Medal of ASPHER in 2004 and in several instances Theo served also as chair
and president: Home at home and home in the world!
Let me conclude with a citation referring to the trustee he is in addition to the scientist he is:

Sokrates stated in Platon’s Republic:\(^7\) “Then from among the guardians we must select those men who we think, on inquiry, have excelled all their lifelong in doing zealously whatever they thought was for the city’s interests, and in refusing resolutely to do what they thought was to its harm? And Glaukon answered: “Yes, these are the men we want”.

\(^7\) Heron books, London, p. 97