Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

As the director of the Hessian State Archives in Marburg I have the honor to welcome you here in Marburg and in the Hessian State Archives Marburg.

I welcome you, as experts, to our conference titled “Technology meets Scholarship, or how Handwritten Text Recognition will Revolutionize Access to Archival Collections”.

It is remarkable that this headline is a statement and not a question!

This is perhaps the reason why so many experts are curious and came to Marburg from many countries all over the world – overall 22, if I counted correctly – among them our immediate neighbors in the east, in the north up to Norway and Finland, in the west including England, and in the south Morocco, Greece, Israel, Malta, the Balkans and even the USA.

I greet in particular the representative of the European Commission, Mister Wim Jansen, who came to us from Brussels, and the coordinating head of the project READ (Recognition and Enrichment of Archival Documents), Dr. Mühlberger from the University of Innsbruck, and Mrs. Muff from ICARUS (International Center for Archival Research), Vienna.

Let me also take the opportunity to thank everyone who contributed to the organization of this meeting – in Vienna, here in Marburg and, last but not least, my colleague Dr. Roberg.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

As you have noticed we ordered beautiful sunny winter weather just for you, best conditions to take some nice souvenir pictures. I hope you will enjoy our small town, which lies geographically in the middle of Hesse, of Germany and of Europe.

You should know that through the middle-ages till the 16th century, Marburg was the residence of the Hessians landgraves (the princes of Hesse). They lived – as you might have already assumed correctly – in the castle above the old part of the town. Then the landgraves transferred their residence to the town of Kassel, nearly 100 km in the north from here.

Our landgrave Philipp – you see him just behind me – ruled in the 16th century and introduced the emerging protestant religion. He modernized his country Hesse on many
levels. He transformed, for instance, catholic monasteries into hospitals and – amongst a lot of other things – founded a university here in Marburg, which is today the oldest protestant university in the world. (Our current exhibition "Luther and Europe" conveys much more information about this key time in the history of Marburg and Hesse.)

Old buildings, the castle and the university with many of its institutes scattered all over the town are typical elements of traditional German university towns.

What is unusual is – and if possible you should spare some minutes for a visit – the so called “E-Kirche”, "E-Church", a famous and pure example of German gothic sacred architecture with a shrine of the holy Elisabeth. You will also find there the tombs of the older Hessian landgraves (it looks very similar to the tombs of the French Kings in St. Denis near Paris).

Another unusual feature for a German university-town is the existence of a rather big und famous archival institution like the Hessian State Archives Marburg. It was created by the Prussians who annexed Hesse after their war against Austria in 1866, because Hesse had fought on the wrong – the Austrian – side.

The Prussians resumed all the archives of the former territories in their new province called "Hessen-Kassel". These archives soon gained importance for historical research, because the charters of two famous and powerful early medieval monasteries, Fulda and Hersfeld, a lot of other convents and, last but not least, the documents of Philipp of Hesse, who was an important and decisive leader of the protestant movement in the 16th century, were assembled here in Marburg.

The Prussians chose Marburg to be the seat of the Hessian State Archives because they expected a fruitful cooperation between the archivists and the historians of the University of Marburg.

During the Second World War the Hessian State Archives suffered no damage, and therefore the German archivists reconstructed their central archival educational institution, which had been located in Berlin before, in this building. Since 1992, the so called "Archivschule Marburg", the Archives School Marburg, is an independent institution just across the street and is cooperating with us in various ways.

Today, my colleagues and I continue our responsible work in this great tradition of the Hessian State Archives in Marburg. This means that we do not only take care for the preservation of our large stocks of historical documents, consisting of more than 130.000 charters, round about 300.000 plans and maps and more than 70.000 shelf-meters of files. And we do not only consider our archives to be a safe for historical documents.
The last ten to fifteen years, we have put our focus on the enhancement of the user-friendliness regarding the access to our documents and on the establishment of networks with professional historical research institutions. We have found a lot of German and, since some years, also international partners with whom we cooperate successfully. We have initiated a lot of projects, mainly to expand our financial and simultaneously our personal resources. Our aim is to represent 100% of our archival materials in our new data base called Arcinsys that was installed only last year.

At the moment, users have access to more than 2 million units of description in Arcinsys, which represents substantially more than 50% of our archival holdings. We have also launched projects with our partners in order to produce several million digital images. We hope that digitization of archival documents makes it easier to work with them, to explore them. Researchers can work at home and do not need to come to our reading room. But we are also aware that it is no solution to just provide a large, even a very large number of documents and old manuscripts that nobody can read. On the other hand, we know that if researchers are interested in certain documents – like genealogists – they make great efforts to understand the messages even of the most difficult manuscripts. So our first aim is to make it easy for our users to find the documents they want to find, and to supply them with more, a lot more information about the content of the digitized documents. And if they could receive technical assistance to understand the contents of the texts they find, that would be fantastic.

So I’m not the only one who is curious about the contributions to this conference and the resulting discussions. Therefore, I finish my welcome words here. I would only add ... and do not forget: A big thank you to all speakers and presenters.

Thanks for your patience and your attention.