

The speech of the Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the 80th Anniversary of the Outbreak of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising ceremony in Warsaw

“ZEIT GEZUNT CHAVEYRIM UN FREIND, ZEI GEZUNT YIDDISH FOLK, DERLOZT NISHT MER ZU AZELCHE CHURBOYNES”

[Farewell, my friends. Farewell, the Jewish people. Never again allow such a catastrophe.]

It is difficult to address you today, here where the Warsaw Ghetto once was. And for this reason I don't want to begin with my own words, but rather have one of the heroines of the Ghetto speak, in the language that was spoken by so many Jews here in Warsaw, in Poland, in Europe. In the language that Germans wanted to eradicate. The painter Gela Seksztajn left us this devastating will and testament before she was deported to Treblinka with her little daughter Margalit.

It is so necessary, yet so difficult to come here as a German and as Germany's Federal President. The terrible crimes that Germans committed here fill me with profound shame. But it also fills me with gratitude and humility to be able to participate in this commemoration, as the first German head of state to do so.

President Duda,

Thank you for inviting me to come. It means more than I can say for me to be here today together with you and your compatriots, to join in remembrance together with you, President Herzog, together with you, Marian Turcki, Krystyna Budnicka, Elżbieta Ficowska.

I stand before you today as Germany's Federal President and bow down before the brave fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto. I bow down before the dead in grief and sorrow.

“Steely and ruthless, the first cold days sweep away those who are already living on the street, who have sold all of their clothing and are weak as autumn flies. The incredible vitality of Warsaw's Jews is in vain. They cry out and defend themselves to the end, to the last hour and minute, but this hour and minute will come.”

Rachel Auerbach, who was herself forced to live in the ghetto, wrote these lines in her diary. How much pain fills these few sentences. How much grief. But also, how much composure. Rachel Auerbach knew that the Jews of Warsaw were lost. It is to her records and those of the other contributors to the Ringelblum Archive that we owe our knowledge of the atrocities the Nazis perpetrated here – and the memory of a world that they obliterated.

„A city is destroyed and a people is destroyed,” wrote Rachel Auerbach. It is shocking to read of the horror that was suffered by the people behind the high walls of the ghetto. It is a report straight out of hell. But it is also deeply moving to read of the strength, the humanity, the courage that so many people retained. Even love had its place in the ghetto, as the great Marek Edelman so poignantly recounted.

The young people around Mordechai Anielewicz, Marek Edelman, Yitzhak Zuckerman and many others, the heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto, showed unimaginable courage in darkest night. They wanted to send a message: a sign of unshaken dignity in the face of certain death. They rose up against brutal injustice, against despotism, terror, murder. Their courage shone out far beyond Warsaw and encouraged others. Their courage shines out into our present, too.

Rachel Auerbach and Marek Edelman were among the few survivors of the ghetto. Their whole life long, they saw it as their task to bear witness. Rachel Auerbach in Israel, Marek Edelman here in Poland. „We who survived leave this to you, so that the memory [...] will not be lost.” That is their legacy to us: to preserve and pass on this memory. So that what happened will not happen again, as the great Primo Levi said. That is the duty that they leave to us. That is the duty that the POLIN Museum has taken on. To preserve the memory of Jewish life in Poland and Europe. Jewish life that has flourished once more and will continue to thrive.

This is why it is so important for us to remember. This is why it is so important for us Germans to remember. Gela Seksztajn, Rachel Auerbach, Marek Edelman, Mordechai Anielewicz, Emanuel Ringelblum – who knows their names in Germany today? Reflecting on the crimes that the Germans committed here in occupied Poland, here in the Warsaw Ghetto, deserves a greater space in our memory.

That is why it is so important to me to be here today. I am here today to say to you that we Germans are aware of our responsibility, and we are aware of the duty the survivors and the dead have left to us. And we accept it. For us Germans, no line can ever be drawn under the responsibility imposed by our history. It stays with us as a warning and a duty for both the present and the future.

Germans invaded Poland. They attacked Wieluń on 1 September 1939. It was the beginning of the Second World War – which we commemorated together in Wieluń and here in Warsaw four years ago. A war that was to claim the lives of well over 50 million people, including millions of Poles. A war that, here and in the east of Europe, became a murderous war of annihilation. A war that led into barbarity.

Germans meticulously planned and carried out the crime against humanity that was the Shoah.

Germans persecuted, enslaved, murdered Europe's Jews, the Jews of Warsaw, with a cruelty and inhumanity for which we have no words. The fact that the man primarily responsible for the liquidation of the ghetto, the brutal and cynical butcher Jürgen Stroop, was from the city where I was born is a historical coincidence, but one which compelled me repeatedly to consider the hell of the Warsaw Ghetto, the victims and the diabolical perpetrator and his accomplices. It is also true that far too few of the other perpetrators were held accountable after the war.

I stand before you today and ask for your forgiveness for the crimes committed here by Germans.

President Duda, President Herzog,

Many people in your two countries, in Poland and in Israel, gave us Germans the gift of reconciliation despite these crimes, despite the crime against humanity that was the Shoah. What an unspeakably precious gift that was! A gift that we could not expect and had no right to expect. It was this gift that made it at all possible for our countries, Poland and Germany, Israel and Germany, to now be united in deep friendship. This friendship between our countries is truly a miraculous achievement! It is miraculous after the unprecedented crimes of the Germans – and it

is the achievement of the generations before us, the brave, painstaking work of Israelis, Poles and Germans who reached out to one another across the abyss of the past – for a better future.

Today, 75 years after the State of Israel was founded, almost 60 years after the Polish bishops' letter, more than 50 years after Willy Brandt fell to his knees here in this square, almost 40 years after the first Israeli state visit to Germany, by your father Chaim Herzog, we stand here, dear Andrzej, dear Bougie, in this historic place, in remembrance of those who were murdered and in acceptance of our responsibility for the miraculous achievement of reconciliation. I know that all three of us are bound by the same commitment. We must and we will preserve the miraculous achievement of reconciliation and carry it forward into the future.

The most important lesson to be learned from our history is:

Never again!

Nigdy więcej!

לעולם לא עוד!

Never again racist fanaticism, never again unbridled nationalism, never again a barbaric war of aggression. Never again – this is the basis of our shared Europe. All of us here joining in remembrance today believe in our shared future and our shared values: the respect for international law, the peaceful coexistence of all human beings in freedom and democracy.

With Vladimir Putin's illegal attack on a peaceful, democratic neighbouring country, he has made a mockery of these values and destroyed the foundations of our European security order. The Russian President has violated international law, called borders into question, committed land grabs. This war is bringing immeasurable suffering, violence, destruction and death to the people in Ukraine.

In Poland, in Israel, you know from your history that freedom and independence must be fought for and defended. You know how important it is for a democracy to show that it is vigilant and capable of defending itself.

Yet we Germans, too, have learned the lessons from our past. Never again: that means that there must be no brutal war of aggression in Europe like that waged by Russia against Ukraine. Never again: that means that we stand firmly by the side of Ukraine – together with Poland and our other allies. We are providing Ukraine with humanitarian, political and military support – together with Poland and our other allies. Never again: that means that we, the liberal democracies, are strong when we act together and in unity.

This is what I mean when I speak of the responsibility imposed by our history. We Germans will fulfil this responsibility for defending peace and freedom. And I am convinced that our countries, our liberal democracies, have grown even closer in the past months. Our friendship now rests on an even firmer foundation.

Here in this square, by the memorial to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, I stand before you in grief and humility. I affirm our responsibility for the crimes of the past and our responsibility for our shared future!

Thank you.