



**Subject to change.  
Translation of advance  
text.**

**Read the speech online:  
[www.bundespraesident.de](http://www.bundespraesident.de)**

Berlin, 29/01/2020  
Page 1 of 5

**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at the ceremony to mark the Day of Remembrance for the  
Victims of National Socialism in the German Bundestag  
in Berlin  
on 29 January 2020**

"There were no cheers or cries of joy. When the first Red Army soldiers opened the camp gates, we no longer had the strength to cheer." That is what Giselle Cycowicz, one of the survivors, recalled in Jerusalem last week. "We are survivors today," she said. "Seventy-five years ago, we were more dead than alive, doomed to follow the millions before us. The soldiers called out to us: 'You're free! You can go wherever you want!' Us? Us – the last people left in our families? With no parents, no children, no sisters, no brothers, no home, no name – where were we supposed to go?"

When the Soviet soldier Alexander Vorontsov walked through the gate beneath the words "Arbeit macht frei" with his comrades from the 1st Ukrainian Front in the afternoon of 27 January 1945, he had his camera with him.

The sights he filmed are what we know as the first images after the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp. Images of children reaching out their arms to the cameraman to show him the numbers tattooed on their skin identifying them as prisoners; images of the fateless, stamped with material numbers, brands of the attempt to dehumanise them. These are images of immeasurable horror, images of a German crime.

Decades later, when Alexander Vorontsov spoke about what he had seen that day through the lens of his camera, he said: "Time has had no power over these memories of mine."

President Rivlin, the day before yesterday we walked together through the camp gate in Auschwitz. Never before did I find it so

ADDRESS	Bundespräsidialamt 11010 Berlin
TEL	+49 30 2000-2021
FAX	+49 30 1810200-2870
E-MAIL	<a href="mailto:presse@bpra.bund.de">presse@bpra.bund.de</a>
WEBSITE	<a href="http://www.bundespraesident.de">www.bundespraesident.de</a>

difficult to put one foot in front of the other. Never before was I so grateful to have a friend at my side.

In our minds, we saw the images taken by a Soviet soldier. The stories of the survivors echoed in our ears. Three of them joined us in Auschwitz and told us how they had survived alone as children, brutally torn from their parents, in a hell that promised only death. If you imagine – even for a moment – the utter despair a child would have felt in Auschwitz, you may have some inkling into what it means for a survivor to return there. Mr Gardosch, Mr Höllenreiner and Mr Taussig, thank you for accompanying us. And thank you for being here today.

Esteemed President Rivlin, I also owe a debt of gratitude to you for allowing me to speak in Yad Vashem a few days ago as a representative of this country, for allowing me to be at your side when we commemorated the liberation in Auschwitz and for travelling with me to Berlin to speak here in the German Bundestag today.

It fills me with profound humility that an Israeli president is willing to take the painful steps of remembering the past with his German counterpart and that an Israeli president is speaking in this building today, in the heart of our republic. My dear Reuven Rivlin, this is a gift. On behalf of my country, thank you!

Your presence is a sign of the friendship between our countries, between Israel and Germany. I am grateful for this sign. But more importantly, I see it as a duty – as a duty to prove ourselves worthy of Israel's willingness to seek reconciliation with us. This reconciliation expresses the grace that we Germans could not hope – let alone expect – to receive. But we want to do justice to it! President Rivlin, we will not forget! And we stand shoulder to shoulder with Israel!

The joint commemoration over the past days and the remembrance ceremony here in the Bundestag are moving moments, and not only for me personally. After all, we know that time has power over us and over our memories. It is our duty to resist this. It is our duty to defend remembrance and the responsibility it creates against any form of denial. I want to stand up for that, as Federal President and as a citizen of the Federal Republic of Germany.

My generation grew up with Alexander Vorontsov's images. They accompanied us. We were confronted with the desire to repress them, the attempt to deny them, and the urge to ensure they were forgotten. And despite all that, we became witnesses to their power over time.

There can be no denying what these pictures show or the words spoken by people such as Elie Wiesel, Bronislaw Geremek, Jorge Semprun, Simone Veil, Arno Lustiger, Shimon Peres, Zoni Weisz, Daniil Granin, Ruth Klüger, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch and Saul Friedländer in this very place, here in the German Bundestag. Repressing, forgetting,

concealing or downplaying their testimony would show contempt for the victims. And by refusing to acknowledge this part of its history, our country would be denying its own identity.

The Shoah is part of German history and identity. My predecessors were able to trust in this democratic consensus here in the German Bundestag. This was a long process, one that took decades and was marked by resistance and setbacks. Many Germans of my generation were only able to make their peace with their own country thanks to this process of facing up to the past. Democrats in this building do not deny that addressing our historical guilt is now part of what defines our country.

That was what Roman Herzog meant when he initiated this day of remembrance over 20 years ago and said here that the question was no longer whether, but rather how, we remember the past.

We will need to find new forms of remembrance for a young generation that asks what the past has to do with them and their lives.

We will need to find new answers for young Germans whose parents or grandparents came here from other countries. "You have your history, we have ours," cannot be an answer. No, the lessons from our past can and must form part of all Germans' identity because all of us are responsible for the here and now!

And we will need to pay attention to the words we use if we want to prevent our remembrance from becoming an ossified ritual. Remembrance tends to become formulaic. But that is the very reason why we can never allow the words we use to become hackneyed. We cannot content ourselves with reiterating how incomprehensible the Shoah was. Instead, we want to measure the immeasurable, to comprehend the incomprehensible and to mourn what was lost. We want to do this for the sake of the victims – European Jews, Sinti and Roma, political prisoners, homosexuals, the sick and disabled, and those who were humiliated as so-called "anti-social" people or "career criminals".

Those who want to understand the crimes must retrace the long paths that led to the gates of Auschwitz. The railway lines that ended at the ramp, the train timetables, the logistics of death were devised in ministries in Berlin, a stone's throw away from here.

All of this was carried out in over 1000 camps and thousands upon thousands of execution sites, in far-off places in eastern Europe whose names are still unknown to many Germans to this day – Paneriai, Maly Trostenets, Mizoch, Chełmno.

And especially because we know that the impact of these crimes reverberates there to this day, we need to spell out our historical responsibility to our neighbours, and say that it was Germans who did this.

And we must also resist when remembrance is used for ulterior motives. Politicians must not be allowed to decree history. Historiography needs freedom and open discussions between historians. History must not be allowed to become a weapon!

And finally, those who want to understand the past must recall the roots of National Socialist ideology – the völkisch ideas, the antisemitism and racial hatred, the ever more brutal language during the Weimar Republic, the destruction of reason, the way violence became a means of doing politics, the contempt for parliament, the crushing of the rule of law and democracy.

The first sentence of our constitution tells anyone who is willing and able to read it what happened in Auschwitz. The free and democratic state based on the rule of law is the reverse of völkisch thinking. It places the human dignity of each and every person at its core. Those who want to remember the past and to honour the memory of the victims must protect democracy and the rule of law any time they are called into question.

A few years ago, my speech could have ended at this point. We agreed with one another about the lessons of the past and the culture of remembrance we wanted to nurture.

I am afraid, however, that this sense of certainty was deceptive.

I truly wish that I could say with conviction today, not least to our guest from Israel, that we Germans have learned from the past. But how can I say that when hatred and abuse are spreading and the poison of nationalism is seeping into debates once again, including here in Germany? How can I say that when wearing a kippah has become a risky undertaking or when Jews have to put their menorah away before someone comes to read their heating meter? How can I say that when a right-wing terrorist murdered two people in Halle on Yom Kippur and the synagogue's heavy wooden door was the only thing that prevented a massacre of Jewish men, women and children? How can I say that when those who take on responsibility for democracy in town halls, parliaments and newspapers are attacked, when they no longer dare to take on voluntary positions in their communities? And how can I say that when a Member of the German Bundestag receives death threats because of the colour of his skin?

No, my concern is not that we Germans deny the past. My concern is that we now understand the past better than the present.

We thought that the spectres of the past would vanish with time. But no, they are raising their ugly heads again in a new guise. Moreover, they are presenting their völkisch and authoritarian ideas as a vision for the future, as better answers to the open questions of our time.

I fear that we were not prepared for this – but that is the very test we face in today's world. And we must pass this test! We owe that to our responsibility for the past, the victims and the survivors?

Primo Levi said: "It happened, therefore it can happen again."

He – a survivor – saw this stark sentence as "the core of what we have to say". And we do not regard this sentence as theoretical, as a formula for remembrance ceremonies. No, Levi's words are our test – and not in the far-off future, but rather in the here and now! That is why no line can be drawn under the past! That is why, Mr President, we say today, 75 years after the liberation of Auschwitz, that we will not forget what happened. We will not forget what can happen.

I firmly believe that the vast majority of people in our country support democracy.

The vast majority are aware of our responsibility. So let us take it on! Let us stand up to the old evil forces in the new era! Let us fight against antisemitism, racial hatred and nationalist zeal! Let us withstand the seduction of authoritarianism! Let us use arguments, not hatred, in our discussions! Let us live and act as good neighbours in Europe!

President Rivlin, we want to show Israel and the world that our country is doing justice to the trust bestowed on it again. That is what remembrance tasks us with doing. So that what can happen will not happen.