



# "There is no German identity without Auschwitz"

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*Federal President Joachim Gauck on the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of National Socialism on 27 January 2015 at the German Bundestag in Berlin:*

Seventy years ago today, Red Army soldiers liberated the Auschwitz concentration camp. Nearly twenty years ago, the German Bundestag first convened to dedicate its own day of remembrance to the victims of the Nazi regime. Roman Herzog, who was the Federal President at the time, insisted that remembrance had to continue forever. Without remembrance, he said, evil could not be overcome and no lessons could be learned for the future.

Many prominent witnesses to this history have since spoken here before this House – survivors of concentration camps, ghettos and the underground resistance, as well as survivors of starved, besieged cities. In moving words, they have shared their fate with us. And they have spoken about the relationship between their own peoples and the German people – a relationship in which nothing was the same after the atrocities committed by the Nazis.

Permit me to begin today with a witness account too – these are, however, the words of a witness who did not survive the Holocaust. His diaries did survive, though, and were published, albeit not until 65 years after his death.

I am referring to Willy Cohn. Willy Cohn came from a prosperous merchant family and taught high school in what was then Breslau. He was an Orthodox Jew, and he was deeply connected with German culture and history. He had earned the Iron Cross for his distinguished service in the First World War. Under the Nazi regime, Willy Cohn lost his job; he lost friends and relatives to suicide and emigration; he sensed the end approaching when news reached him of the ghettos being established in occupied Poland and of the mass executions in Lviv. But despite his knowledge of all these things, Cohn maintained his staunch faith in the country that he understood as his own. "I love Germany so much", he wrote, "that this love cannot be shaken, not even by all these troubles. [...] One has to be loyal enough to submit to a government that comes from a completely different political camp."

The unconditional nature of Cohn's loyalty is almost inconceivable to us, given that we know what came next. Cohn's loyalty was betrayed most bitterly. On 25 November 1941, willing helpers loaded his family onto one of the first deportation trains that carried Jews from Breslau to their deaths. Willy Cohn's youngest daughter Tamara was just three years old. Four days later, SS Standartenführer Karl Jäger recorded that 2000 Jews had been executed by firing squad in Kaunas, Lithuania.

The Jewish German writer Jakob Wassermann, who was among Germany's most popular authors in the 1920s, wrote in a spirit of disillusionment after the end of the First World War that it was futile to offer one's hand in friendship to the "nation of poets and thinkers". Wassermann wrote, "They say: Why does he take such liberties, with his Jewish obtrusiveness? Vain to live for them and die for them. They say: He is a Jew."

In the anti Semitic imagination, Jews were not human beings made of flesh and blood. They

were regarded as Evil Personified; every sort of anxiety, stereotype and concept of the imagined enemy was projected onto them, even when these stereotypes were mutually exclusive. However, nobody went as far in their anti-Semitism as the Nazis. In their racial fanaticism, they made themselves masters of life and death.

This so called "master race" did not hesitate to annihilate the human lives they considered "worthless", sterilise people and eliminate their political opponents. All of these people fell victim to the Nazi obsession with "cleansing": the Sinti and Roma, the Slavic peoples, forced labourers, homosexuals, disabled people, communists, social democrats, labour unionists, Christian resisters, Jehova's witnesses and everyone else who stood up against their reign of terror.

What appals us most is that never before had a state so systematically stigmatised, segregated and annihilated entire groups of people in such large numbers, with specially created death camps and a precise, relentless, elaborate and efficient killing machinery – like at Auschwitz, which became a symbol for the Holocaust. Like at the other death camps in occupied Poland: Treblinka, Majdanek, Belzec, Sobibor and Chelmno. And in the other camps where hunger, forced labour and inhumane cruelties took the prisoners' lives. And in the occupied cities and towns of the East, where tens of thousands were shot in massacres in places like Kamenets-Podolsk and Babi Yar, their bodies dumped unceremoniously into mass graves.

Advancing Allied troops were the ones who put a stop to this murder. The death camps in the East were liberated by Soviet soldiers. The Red Army lost 231 lives just in liberating Auschwitz, and we owe them our respect and gratitude.

Remembrance days bring a society together in reflection on the shared past. For whether we like it or not, formative experiences leave their traces – in the actors and in the witnesses, but also in future generations.

One of the most important lessons we can learn from dealing with the Nazi past is undoubtedly that silence does not erase blatant crimes or blatant guilt. East and West Germans experienced this in very different contexts, but essentially in a very similar way.

Right after the war, Germany was focused on reconstruction. In West Germany in the years of the Wirtschaftswunder, too many people only looked forward, and too few of them looked back. The justice system pursued Nazi crimes only sluggishly and in individual cases. While some individual intellectuals and writers tackled the subject of the Nazi era, and some individual films, novels and journals – such as Anne Frank's diary – pointed out the fate of the Jews, the majority remained untouched by such testimony. They shut themselves off from knowing about it, protecting themselves from feelings of guilt and shame by refusing to remember.

In retrospect, it is shameful that the onetime victims now had to become supplicants. It is shameful that the suffering of victims of the Germans counted for less than the suffering of German victims when it came to restitution. The population of the fledgling Federal Republic had little compassion for the victims of Nazi rule. The Reparations Agreement with Israel was highly unpopular with the public.

The silence was only broken gradually, when the major trials of Nazi perpetrators – the Ulm Einsatzgruppen trial, the Adolf Eichmann trial, the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials – began in the late 1950s. These trials made the scale of the crimes apparent. At the instigation of the intrepid Hessian State Attorney General Fritz Bauer, hundreds of witnesses reported the atrocities that proved that there existed an entire system of annihilation. A system that many

had considered unimaginable. The public was deeply shocked, but did not yet become really involved. Most Germans absolved themselves of any wrongdoing by shifting the blame and responsibility onto a small number of fanatics and sadists: Hitler and his innermost circle. Everyone else was regarded as supposedly helpless cogs in a machine, as mere followers of orders who were compelled to carry out something that was fundamentally alien to them.

The judicial system's reckoning with the Nazi past always remained deeply unsatisfactory. Very many judges and public prosecutors were people who had held positions of responsibility in the Nazi regime. They saw no need to prosecute Nazi crimes or they relativised their criminal law responsibility.

The situation was quite different when it came to critical selfreflection. In the 1960s, intellectuals such as Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich continued the trail that had been blazed by Hannah Arendt. They asked questions about the complicity of ordinary people who had dedicated themselves to a criminal leader and did not want to accept any responsibility for the consequences. Only then did grappling with Nazi crimes begin to take on broader meaning in German society.

Spurred on and supported by a growing chorus of the critical voices of intellectuals and artists, West Germans slowly learned to accept that completely "normal" men and women had also lost their humanity, their consciences and their morals – many of them next-door neighbours and even friends and family members.

Through the television series "Holocaust", the general public finally encountered the victims' perspective in the late 1970s. Never before had so many Germans – in the West and the East – faced the fate of a Jewish family. Never before had so many Germans been so deeply moved by it.

Since that time, remembrance of the victims of the Nazi regime has become an integral part of our self-perception. Every generation, indeed every decade, has grappled with the topic in its own way – often in heated debates such as the Historikerstreit of the late 1980s or the dispute surrounding the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. And because future generations will also seek and find their own approach, I am confident that the memory of the crimes of the Nazi era will remain alive.

And what about the other part of Germany? I know that the nascent East German state was able to win over many people by appearing to be the anti-fascist German state, that is, the better German state. Many of those with troubled pasts were in fact replaced by communists and anti-fascists in East Germany. Anti-fascist reading matter and films inspired sympathy with murdered resistance fighters. Loyalty to the GDR appeared to be a moral imperative.

*"The GDR, my fatherland, is clean, it's clear,*

*There's no chance of Nazi rule coming back here",*

East German dissident singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann wrote in the 1960s.

The official anti-fascist stance of the GDR, however, also served as a substitute for the democratic legitimization that was absent. And its wholesale absolution of East German society

from legal and moral responsibility for Nazi crimes also encouraged the suppression of the failure and guilt of the rank-and-file.

It spared the individual from critical self-reflection and enabled those with fraught or guilty pasts to place themselves on the side of good, of the anti-fascist victors. What is more, commemoration was devoted almost exclusively to the resistance fighters. It is only since the end of the GDR that memorials in the former East Germany have included appropriate remembrance of the Jewish victims, who were annihilated for reasons of racist ideology.

The "second guilt" of which Ralph Giordano spoke – that is, the unwillingness to confront and grapple with the crimes of the Nazi regime and to compensate the victims – was doubly present in Germany: in the early Federal Republic and also in the GDR.

Over the course of time the Federal Republic of Germany – both before and after reunification – has made confronting the crimes of the past an integral part of its historical narrative. In doing so, it has made itself into a credible partner in the peaceful and equal coexistence of people and nations, which is even accepted as such by many of the victims and their descendants. In the 1990s, thousands of Jews from the former Soviet Union reinvigorated and founded Jewish communities in Germany, because they believed in this Germany. And former Israeli President Shimon Peres spoke here in this place of the unique friendship between Germany and Israel. Without revisiting the past, we would not have been made this gift.

At the same time, we know that remembrance days can ossify into a ritual, an empty husk that we fill with the same old incantations that serve primarily to assuage our own consciences. We also know that remembrance days do not protect us from becoming indifferent in our daily lives.

I recall the ceremony on the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. The speakers at the event included Thomas Buergenthal, who had survived the death march from Auschwitz to Sachsenhausen when he was not quite eleven years old. He emigrated to the United States after the war, where he became a lawyer specializing in international law and human rights, and took part in the prosecution of genocide as a judge at the International Court of Justice.

At the time I was haunted by his words, for he confronted the audience with an uncomfortable truth. Buergenthal asked how much the vow of "never again", the core promise after Auschwitz, was really worth. Has genocide not occurred many times since? What about Cambodia, Rwanda and Darfur, Buergenthal asked? What about Srebrenica, we might have added? Today, we could ask: what about Syria and Iraq? Even if the crimes here have not occurred on the same scale as the Nazis' deeds, Thomas Buergenthal said, it is terribly dispiriting when genocide and mass murder become almost a matter of routine, when the world says „never again“, but shuts its eyes to the next genocide.

Might I ask that we move beyond simply establishing this depressing fact, and inquire further: are we capable of preventing mass murder from happening in the first place? To what extent are we able to end or punish such crimes? Isn't the will to take action against such crimes against humanity perhaps lacking sometimes?

The fact that genocide has been a prosecutable offense since 1948 – that is, since the adoption of the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide – is a great success. International criminal tribunals have taken action on multiple occasions. They can investigate anyone who intends to, I quote, "destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group as such".

At the same time, this development confronts us with the bitter realisation that punishments rarely have a deterrent effect and that prevention has thus far rarely taken place soon enough. Once murderous acts have begun to gain momentum, it is difficult to stop them. In many cases, it is even impossible to help. Because we are not all-powerful, we must live with the moral burden of knowing we are unable to protect human life always or everywhere. Just as shalom, the state of boundless happiness, cannot be attained on earth, the vow of „never again“ cannot be entirely fulfilled. However, it remains indispensable as a moral imperative and an internal compass. Striving for the peaceful and just coexistence of people and nations is an important – likely the most important – guiding principle of our actions. And while we are unable to hold evil completely at bay, we are called upon to proscribe it and to work to stop it from getting so far.

Future generations will certainly seek new forms of commemoration. And while the Holocaust will not necessarily be among the central components of German identity for everyone in our country, it will still hold true that there is no German identity without Auschwitz. Remembering the Holocaust remains a matter for every citizen of Germany. It is part and parcel of our country's history. And something specific remains: here in Germany, where every day we walk past houses from which Jews were deported; here in Germany, where the annihilation was planned and organised; here, the horrors of the past are nearer and the responsibility for today and tomorrow more present and more binding than elsewhere.

In many a conversation and many a study, I encounter the fear that the younger generation will lose interest in Nazi crimes. I do not share this concern, but I am aware that the examination of the past will continue to change and that it has to do so. Many direct witnesses repressed the past, and their children bemoaned this repression. What we are seeing now with the generation of the grandchildren is that greater distance can also be an advantage. Today's young people can more openly and fully face a past that is tainted with shame. I never cease to be surprised by the extent to which grandchildren and great-grandchildren are willing to research taboo-ridden, buried family histories; investigate the Jewish history of the buildings and neighbourhoods where they live; and immerse themselves in the biographies of the persecuted and their persecutors. And in the stories of people who rescued Jews they do not only see moral examples; they also see a rebuttal of the old assertion that there was nothing that could be done to stop it.

Even in the future, when we will have to do without direct encounters with witnesses, we need not lose our emotional involvement. People three or four generations removed from the Holocaust, and people without German roots, also feel moved when they see the names of Holocaust victims written on the suitcases of their former owners at Auschwitz, or when they stumble upon the ruins of the destroyed crematorium in the forsaken expanse of Birkenau, or when they read The Diary of Anne Frank or watch the film The Pianist. What we see time and again is that autobiographies, documentaries, feature films, interviews with survivors and visits to former sites of horror can make past suffering accessible to young people and inspire them to open up their souls to it.

Young people with a familial connection to the Nazi past are not the only ones who feel moved. The stories of the Holocaust also affect people who recognise in German history what human nature is capable of, and see that hatred of humanity, fanaticism and murderousness can be repeated elsewhere in a different guise.

“People dealt this fate to people“: in these plain yet disturbing words, Polish writer Zofia Nalkowska took stock of what she had seen right after the liberation of the concentration camps as a member of the international special committee for the investigation of Nazi crimes in Poland. This universal dimension of the Holocaust led the United Nations to decide in 2005 to designate 27 January as an annual International Day of Commemoration to honour

the victims of the Holocaust – as a duty of people to people.

Approaching the Holocaust as a crime against humanity offers a point of access for immigrants who do not – or do not yet – identify as German. This approach is not always easy. Some immigrants experienced persecution themselves in their home countries. Some come from countries where anti-Semitism and hatred of Israel are prevalent. In cases where such attitudes have a lingering influence on immigrants and affect their perceptions of current events, we must never tire of imparting the historical truth and obligating them to the values of this society.

All of us who call Germany our home are responsible for what path our country will take. A young woman from an immigrant family put it beautifully, writing in a letter, "I don't have German ancestors, but I will have German descendants. And they will hold me accountable for all the injustices and brutalities that are carried out on our soil today."

With this statement, she has entered into a community of shared responsibility that is independent of any community of shared experience. And yet we are united in a community with a shared will.

For as long as I live, the fact that the German nation, despite its admirable culture, was capable of the most horrific crimes against humanity will cause me suffering. Even a convincing interpretation of the Holocaust, that appalling abandonment of all civilised values, could not calm my heart or my mind. This rupture is woven into the texture of our national identity, and it remains hauntingly present in our consciousness. Anyone who wants to live in truth cannot deny this.

And yet, after the dark night of dictatorship, after guilt and shame and regret, we have been able to formulate a credo that is bright as day.

We have done so by restoring the dignity of the force of the law. We have done so by developing empathy for the victims. And we do so today when we stand up against every form of exclusion and violence, and when we offer a safe haven to those who are fleeing persecution, war and terror.

Our moral obligations cannot be fulfilled solely at the level of remembrance. There also exists within us a deep and abiding certainty that remembrance bestows a mission on us.

That mission tells us to protect and preserve humanity. It tells us to protect and preserve the rights of every human being.

We say this at a time when we in Germany must work to reach a new understanding of the coexistence of different religious and cultural traditions. The community in which we all want to live will only flourish if we respect the dignity of the individual and if we live in solidarity.

Source: [www.bundespraesident.de](http://www.bundespraesident.de)