I am the child that Hitler feared

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Speech on the occasion of the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of National Socialism (January 27) in the Parliament of the Federal Republic of Germany at the memorial ceremony on January 28, 2026.

Good afternoon, Federal President Steinmeier, President of the German Bundestag, Klocker, federal Chancellor Mertz, His Excellency Ron Prosor, Ambassador to the State of Israel in Germany, members of parliament, Honored Survivors, and Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am deeply honored to address you on this solemn and significant occasion.

I stand before you to share a truth that is painful, but essential. I don't have any sisters or brothers, I have no uncle or aunts, and I never knew my grandparents or my great-grandparents because of what was done to millions of Jews during the Second World War in the name of a dehumanizing ideology—antisemitism—an ideology that corrupted moral judgment, hollowed out institutions, and ultimately turned ordinary people into participants in extraordinary crimes.

I speak today not only for myself, but in memory of the six million Jewish men, women, and children who were murdered merely because they were Jewish—among them one and a half million children. Many were deported to death camps, where within hours of arrival they were stripped of their belongings, their identities, their dignity, and their lives. Others were murdered by bullets in villages, fields, forests, and ravines across Europe—entire families erased where they stood.

I am among the diminishing number of survivors who can still bear witness. We do so not to reopen wounds, but to prevent amnesia. History has shown us that forgetting is never neutral; it is dangerous.

Who could have imagined that a child known only as prisoner number A-27633, once designated for death in a gas chamber, would stand here eighty-one years later before leaders committed to remembrance and responsibility? I am here because witnesses survived. And because witnesses survived, truth still has a voice.

I am the child that Hitler feared. His motto was LEAVE NO WITNESSES. I speak for those 6 million souls whose voices were muted. I am your witness. Let me take you on a journey of to hell.

My earliest memories are of hiding beneath a table in a small, overcrowded apartment in the ghetto of Tomaszów Mazowiecki. I recognized the voices of my parents, my grandmother, and my uncle, but I knew not to emerge unless told. It was dangerous. The SS targeted the elderly and the children—the most defenseless. My grandmother was shot outside our home while I was hidden. I heard the gunfire, the dogs, her screams, then silence.

When the ghetto was liquidated, most of its population was murdered or deported to Treblinka. My family was forced to remain behind to erase all traces of what had taken place.

My father later described in his testimony, the scene before the deportation, "Mothers clutched their small children, their despairing and pitying eyes fastened on those of their tiny ones, full of

grief and sadness, they sensed that their end was near, and with powerless hands raised to heaven, asked. Lord of the universe, why have you inflicted on us such a horrible death sentence?" A rabbi that my father knew yelled out to him just as the doors of the cattle were closing, "Don't forget us," repeated in Yiddish, "farges Unz Nisht."

We arrived in Starachowice on September 5th, two days before my 5th birthday. It was a slave labor camp surrounded by barbed wire and lookout towers everywhere. No place to hide. My parents worked in an ammunition factory from dusk to dawn. I remember the sound of my mother's voice: "Take care of yourself until I get back." She began teaching me my first survival skills: "Remember, don't run when you see the dogs. Don't look directly into anyone's eyes, not the dogs or the soldiers. Keep your eyes down; let them pass you by. Try to be invisible…." Those were some of the survival skills that kept me alive.

I lived with the other children on the street, trying to avoid the dogs and the guards. We felt lucky to have temporarily escaped the dreaded Selections. "Mom, where are all the people? "I asked one day. The camp seemed emptier. "Selections," my mother answered. She didn't have to say more. At 5, I knew. People were selected to be put to death.

I became more cautious and often stayed in our room alone. Then I heard something very frightening. "Children's selection. " A shiver went through every parent. Where to hide them? My parents hid me in a crawl space in the ceiling prepared for this event. The hunters with their guns uncovered almost every trembling, hidden child. To the scream of their parents, they were hauled into trucks and driven to their deaths. My life was now confined to our small, dark room with covered windows, awaiting the next decree. "Am I the only Jewish child left on earth?" I wondered in my innocence.

My memories of that period are very vague. I slept a lot, cried very quietly, and waited for my parents to come home from the factory at night and give me something to eat. Then, on a beautiful summer day, I was permitted to leave the dark room to enjoy the sun. But my mother was packing. "Where are we going?" I asked her. "To Auschwitz," she answered.

At 5 I was familiar with the name. We all were. I knew that no one returned from there, but my mind was concentrating on the light and sunshine I was experiencing after weeks of darkness, so I didn't react too much. Half an hour later, we were standing at the open doors of the cattle car. This was the second time I saw my father cry. The first time was when he told my mother that he had just helped his parents on a truck and kissed them goodbye. They all knew that they would never see each other again. And now standing, he was crying and telling me to be a good girl. It's the first time our small family has been separated. My mother and I were shoved into a cattle car for women, and my father went with the men. 36 terrible hours of darkness, thirst, and hunger without bathroom facilities. I tried to talk to my mom to be comforted, but the terribly loud cries, moans, and prayers of terrified women made it impossible to speak.

Upon arrival, the doors flew open, and the sudden sunshine hurt my eyes, but it was the smell that overwhelmed me. "What is that smell?" My mother pointed to the dark, thick, noxious smoke that I breathed for the rest of my stay in Auschwitz. I understood.

Head shaven, skimpily dressed, hungry, and tired, we were led to our new "home", a middle bunk in a large, dark, and depressing barrack.

Again, my mother taught me survival skills: "Take good care of your bowl, cup, and spoon. Or you will go hungry." It's impossible to convey the hunger we endured. I was starving on 1 ½ rations as my mother gave me half of hers.

"Don't cry no matter what happens. You will be considered weak. The weak don't survive." I

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didn’t cry when I was beaten for not standing still at an Appel, a roll call. I didn't cry when I got very sick, and everything hurt, and I didn’t cry when I was taken away from my mother, tattooed, and placed with other children in a barrack to await our deaths. And I didn’t cry when naked, freezing, and starving. I was waiting with other children for the door to the gas chamber to open.

Against all reason, my mother and I survived. As we left Auschwitz, walking hand in hand, she whispered one word: “Remember.” I have remembered it every day since.

After liberation, the future she promised me no longer existed. One hundred and fifty members of her family were murdered. She alone survived. My father returned from Dachau shattered in body and spirit. He could rarely speak of it. My mother died at 45. Though she had survived physically, her heart never left Auschwitz. She once said to me, “This is not a world meant for human beings.”

I learned about her death while on a college trip to Israel, a lifelong dream. For us, Israel is not simply a place on a map. It is the heart of a three-thousand-year-old story—a story of faith, longing, loss, and return. Even in our darkest moments, Israel symbolized hope, continuity, and the belief that despair would not have the final word. After the Holocaust, it became a moral and existential necessity—the assurance that Jewish life would never again depend solely on the mercy of others.

Now, 81 years later, much of the world has turned against us. I walked out of Auschwitz thinking I’ll never have to be afraid to be Jewish again, but here we are… my grandson needs to hide his Jewish star on campus, my granddaughter was forced to leave her dormitory to avoid harassment. Shouts of “Hitler was right” and “gas the Jews” are heard on the streets of New York, Paris, and Amsterdam. Jews around the world once again, feel exposed, targeted and hated. Is this the world that young people have inherited? A world filled with hatred and fear, where Jews are once again made the scapegoats for society’s ills? This is exactly how it began in the 1930s in Germany. Antisemitism has not disappeared; it has adapted. It now often disguises itself in new anti Zionist language, spreads with alarming speed through social media, and finds acceptance in spaces that should stand for critical thinking and moral clarity like universities and other academic institutions. These are warnings we must heed. History teaches us that hatred never confines itself to one people. When antisemitism is tolerated, democratic values themselves are weakened.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks reminded us that while armies defend nations, education defends civilizations. Education, leadership, and moral courage are therefore not optional—they are obligations.

I acknowledge, with gratitude, Germany’s sustained commitment to confronting antisemitism through education, remembrance, and policy. Germany understands, perhaps more deeply than any other nation, what happens when hatred is normalized and responsibility is deferred. Your “National Strategy against Antisemitism “and your resolution “Never again is now” protect and strengthen Jewish life. Your programs of sending both teachers and students to Israel and to concentration camps provide an appreciation and better understanding of our people and our history. Germany has learned from bitter experience what unchecked hatred towards an entire people can do to the moral and emotional fiber of a nation. Unfortunately, antisemitism is growing in Germany. It is therefore imperative for the government to intensify and strengthen its campaign against it- on every level- through policy, education and protection of its Jewish citizens.

The younger generation, are not responsible for the heinous and ghastly behavior of your ancestors that took place in Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek, Bergen-Belsen, Dachau, and other Nazi camps. But you, especially those in positions of leadership, are responsible for the world you are shaping now — for your own future and for your children’s. And that means taking this pestilence, this epidemic of hatred, this antisemitism, very seriously. Neutrality in the face of hatred is not neutrality; it is permission.

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In our synagogues, every Sabbath, we pray for our leaders—that they govern with wisdom, courage, and compassion; that justice, security, and dignity may prevail; and that people of all faiths and backgrounds may live together without fear or exclusion.

May remembrance lead to responsibility. May responsibility lead to action. And may action ensure that “Never Again” is not a slogan, but a lasting commitment.

I spend my days trying to educate others, especially the younger generation, by speaking at schools and through social media like TikTok. I will continue to do so until the day I die.

Thank you.

Tova Friedman was just four years old when she was deported to a concentration camp with her mother; at the age of six, she arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau. What she experienced there would shape her entire life: unspeakable suffering, but also unshakeable hope and a love whose power achieved the unimaginable. She is one of the very few who knows what it means to have seen a gas chamber from the inside and to be able to talk about it today. Today, Tova Friedman is one of the most committed voices of the survivors, educating future generations about the horrors of war and the evil spirit of anti-Semitism—including on TikTok, where she quickly became a viral sensation with videos she produces together with her grandson. See: https://www.tiktok.com/@tovafriedman

Source: German Parliament.

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