

Speech in the Knesset by the President of Germany, Johannes Rau

Jerusalem, Wednesday, 16 February 2000

(Translation to English from the website of the Federal President of Germany*)

Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, ladies and gentlemen,

I know what it means for some among you to hear the German language spoken in this High House. Your decision to invite me here fills me with gratitude. It testifies, I believe, to your determination never to suppress the past and to your courage in seeking, despite that past, to overcome the paralysis induced by its horrors.

Before the people of Israel I pay humble tribute to those who were murdered, who have no graves at which I could ask their forgiveness. I ask forgiveness for what Germans have done - for myself and my generation, for the sake of our children and children's children, whose future I would like to see at the side of the children of Israel.

I do this before you, the representatives of the State of Israel, which was reborn after 2000 years and has given refuge to Jews around the world, but above all to the survivors of the Shoah.

II.

There can be no life without memory. The fate of future generations is always bound up with the fate of those no longer with us. This continuity President Weizman highlighted for us in his memorable address in 1996 in Hebrew to the German Bundestag. For Jews it may seem self-evident. It is important, however, that also we in Germany and Europe, with our very different history, should not lose sight of this. Permit me to quote here from his parable about the people of Israel, since I could not say it any better:

"... one hundred and fifty generations have passed from the Pillar of Fire of the Exodus from Egypt to the pillars of smoke from the Shoah. And I, a descendant of Abraham, born in Abraham's country, have witnessed them all.

.....

... just as I escorted them there and then, so do my forebears accompany me and stand here with me today."

Thus spoke President Weizman in his Bundestag address.

We Germans, too, will be accompanied for all time to come by the images of the murders for which Germans bear responsibility. Between Germans and Israelis this memory forges an inseparable link.

The perpetrators may take their personal guilt with them to their graves. But the consequences of a guilt that shook the very foundations of human morality must be borne by the generations to come.

Long before the Shoah this knowledge was part and parcel of the traditions common to the Jewish and Christian faiths. Also in Western ethics this was a key concept.

Today we are concerned about how younger generations will deal with the guilt of their fathers. We must explain to our children time and again what exactly this involved. Raising their awareness of history is one of our most important political and cultural challenges in the context of German-Israeli relations. When those who witnessed the past at first hand are gone, their knowledge needs to have been safely passed on to the young generation.

That we owe also to those Germans who, at the crucial moment, knew what was right and acted accordingly.

III.

The question is often asked whether, given the past, there can be such a thing as normality between Germans and Israelis. Put in such undifferentiated terms, the only answer I can give is "no". The relationship between our countries will always be a special one. By acknowledging what took place we keep the memory of it alive. By learning the lessons of the past we build our common future. That is German-Israeli normality.

IV.

History must mean responsibility. That begins with education in school and the establishment and care of sites of remembrance.

After a long period of reflection, as the Prime Minister recalled, we finally set the stage on 27 January, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz and now a day of remembrance in Germany as well, for building the central Holocaust Memorial in Berlin. You, ladies and gentlemen, will have followed the debate on this memorial. I ask you to see it as what it actually was: a searching for the right form of remembrance. Never must we let building a memorial be misunderstood as some kind of symbolic attempt to cleanse guilt. Remembrance does need sites of remembrance. But the sites are no substitute for remembrance itself.

Nor can material payments ever compensate for the injustice suffered by millions of forced laborers. That German business and the German Government have established a foundation to provide humanitarian assistance for these victims of the Nazi regime is important, for it constitutes a recognition of our responsibility. On this issue, however, much work still remains to be done.

Remembrance would be an empty gesture, were it not accompanied by responsible action. One facet of this active remembrance is our shared responsibility also for the country in which the survivors of the Shoah found the homeland they yearned for. Shared responsibility for Israel has since the foundation of our state been a basic tenet of German foreign policy.

V.

In both Germany and Israel a new generation is coming to the fore: there are still survivors of the Holocaust in our midst, yet soon it will be their grandchildren who in thought and deed will

dominate the political stage. That is why it is so crucial that knowledge of the past is handed down from one generation to the next.

That means above all that our countries' young people must get to know each other, together come to grips with the past and together build their future. Here I am thinking firstly of the many thousands of young Germans who visit Israel every year - as tourists or volunteers on humanitarian projects. To these young people particularly, of whom some are your guests here today, I would like to pay tribute: you are true ambassadors for our country.

But I am thinking also of young Israelis who - understandably - are much less keen to visit Germany.

I would indeed like more young Israelis to see and experience Germany for themselves. When I hear of a young Israeli woman who out of shame long kept secret her annual visits to see her grandfather who had returned to Germany, that pains me. I can well understand the reluctance to make contact with Germany. However, unless our young people meet and get to know one another, there is little prospect of developing our unique relationship as we hoped, in a direction that holds promise for the future.

For people in Germany and Israel, learning how to get along with each other and working on it is bound to be a never-ending process. I would ask you to join with me in doing everything possible to foster such learning. Over the next few days we will be signing an agreement on a German-Israeli youth forum to be set up for this purpose. We will be launching a scholarship programme which should help young Israelis to get to know Germany better.

Without the political will of those in positions of responsibility, however, the most worthy efforts will not bear fruit. That is why I say to you: these initiatives need your help if they are to be a success.

VI.

What kind of Germany is the country young Israelis today can encounter?

The Federal Republic of Germany is a vibrant, pluralistic democracy. After all the horrors of the past, our Basic Law places the value of human dignity above all else. The first article states: "The dignity of man is inviolable."

In our society minority communities can thrive; different cultures can express themselves in myriad ways. Some people view us as a multi-religious and multicultural country.

Of course we have xenophobia, too, and problems with integration and anti-Semitism exist as well. To deny that would be dangerous and wrong. Here we still face major challenges. Sometimes, however, these problems are in fact less acute where the largest communities of people of non-German origin live, in Berlin, for instance, or in the big urban centers of Western Germany. It seems simply easier to hate the stranger you do not know.

Another aspect of contemporary Germany are the Jewish communities, which are growing once more and are now an integral part of life in our country. Ignatz Bubis, who has found his last resting-place in the land of his faith, made a point throughout his life of being a German and a Jew.

Germany seeks to be an outward-looking, liberal and hospitable country where people of different creeds and cultures can all have their place and live in harmony with each other. That requires a willingness to be good neighbors and to translate that willingness into real life. Hence we must focus not on what separates us but on what brings us together. Whatever our cultural and religious differences, we should seek and cherish those values we have in common.

VII.

Good neighborliness should apply not just at home but also to relations with other countries.

Thus over the past fifty years Germany's path has been closely associated with that of Europe. It is a story of hope and for young Israelis interested in German history after the Holocaust could offer some important insights:

Fifty years ago where Germany was concerned the Europeans, too, had to make a completely fresh start. Germany was accepted back by its neighbors in Europe - from whose humanistic traditions it had cut itself off - initially with a measure of understandable mistrust, yet later in the spirit of good neighborliness that was to become a key to European integration.

European unification is one of the political success stories of the past decades. And it will continue as such, a pole of attraction well beyond the borders of Europe.

Europe has at last consigned to the historical archives the conflict-oriented concept of the state that dominated its history for centuries. The national interests of participants in the unification process are now so intimately entwined as to yield them greater benefits than they would stand to gain on their own. With European integration, Europe is experiencing an era of peace and prosperity such as it has never known before.

Europe is a community of shared values founded "on the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law", to quote the Treaty of Amsterdam. Europe will not allow this to be called into question by one of its members. We will not allow xenophobia, racism and nationalism to gain ground again in Europe.

VIII.

Could the European experience serve as a paradigm for other parts of the world, including Israel and the Middle East?

That is a question which is often asked. Yet conflicts are never the same; the solution to one particular conflict will seldom provide a blueprint for solving others. That is particularly clear at the present time, when violence has erupted once again. There is, however, one conclusion we can draw:

To move from warfare to an order of shared welfare is possible only if, beyond what is written in treaties, there is a common basic consensus: national egoisms must be translated into productive common action. That is the core of the European success. Out of supposed irreconcilable enmity there may grow orderly relations and eventually real human ties and interaction.

The specific situation in your region precludes of course any hasty assumptions about the relevance of European unification to the search for ways to end Israeli-Arab divisions. It would be foolish to forget that your country's very existence has been jeopardized time and again.

Nevertheless, there need be no such thing as "perpetual enmity". History has a brighter side, too.

I am convinced therefore that today in your region as well those of good will are in the majority and that makes me hopeful for the future. Despite all the setbacks hope for an end to the conflict is growing, the product of a long and difficult labor starting with the peace negotiations of the seventies - here I recall Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin -, a labor carried forward by the great Itzak Rabin and continuing in the efforts currently under way.

However tough the going may be, people's hopes for peace are now raised as never before. I am convinced for my part that peace can be achieved.

IX.

Europe and the Middle East are regions intimately linked in multiple different ways.

This region played a key role in the evolution of European culture as we know it today. Stability in the Middle East and across the whole region is crucial to a peaceful and prosperous future for Europe. No one can live a quiet life if his neighbors are threatened with political and social insecurity.

Only the parties to the conflict can make peace in the Middle East. But Europe will do its share to build that peace and offers you its willing support.

X.

Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen,

I deemed it an opportunity and a special honor to have been invited to address this High House. This state visit will, I trust, give new momentum to our relations. I place my hopes in the young people of both countries. If we pass on the memory of the past to the young generation and encourage them to meet, I am convinced we need have no worries about the future of relations between Israel and Germany.

I hope that you and all of us share this confidence. This new century should become a century of peace: peace for the sons and daughters of Abraham and for our whole world!

* <http://www.bundespraesident.de/en/dokumente/-,5.59075/Rede/dokument.htm>