

## Welcome Speech

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Just over two months ago, on 18 November 2008, I met with Avi Dicter, Israel's Minister of Public Security, in Berlin. On that occasion, we also visited the Holocaust Memorial and the Jewish Museum and talked about history. We agreed that, no matter how much knowledge a person accumulates, it will never be possible to completely comprehend the murder of six million Jews in Europe. And we agreed that the only way to move ahead into the future is by remembering the victims.

In our everyday lives in the Western world of the 21st century, we are rarely forced to ask ourselves existential, life-and-death questions. Those who try to comprehend the reality of genocide come up against such questions. So it is all the more important for us to create occasions which remind us again and again of this reality and everything about it which is so impossible to comprehend.

Today, on the anniversary of the liberation of the few thousand survivors of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp, we remember the victims of National Socialism. They remind us to regard our lives in freedom, democracy and prosperity as a constant responsibility and shared task.

This task also requires us to concern ourselves with the perpetrators. But we should take care that our attention to the perpetrators does not force the victims into the background. So I am sometimes annoyed when the media, with a sort of fascinated horror, focuses entirely on the perpetrators. And for this reason I welcome the decision by the conference organizers to open this conference on a day devoted to remembering the victims.

In the meantime, historians have arrived at a more nuanced view of the perpetrators in the Third Reich. According to this view, it would be wrong to put all the blame on a small, clearly defined group of sadists or psychopaths with no connection to "normal" society. Not so long ago, there were often attempts to limit the blame in this way. They were probably also intended to deflect a certain amount of guilt and responsibility.

Based on everything we know now, some of the perpetrators did indeed have personality disorders. In Himmler's case, for example, the evidence indicates a pronounced inability to form personal relationships and a marked tendency to suppress emotions. And yet: someone like Himmler with possible psychological problems found a whole set of structures in place which allowed him to kill, thus making his psychopathic tendencies seem somewhat less abnormal.

We must assume that the perpetrators were largely normal, ordinary people. They did not come from the fringes of society. Their actions were largely voluntary. Despite dictatorship, repression and peer pressure, which was certainly also involved, not everything was rigidly controlled. It was still possible to decide for oneself; there was still some space for individual action.

We also know that ideology played a huge role in filling this space, whether as a response to a crisis situation, as a promise of salvation or as a way to legitimize violence and destruction. "They were all anti-Semites": This statement seems to describe almost every National Socialist perpetrator. Civil society was ultimately transformed, or more precisely: transformed itself, in some cases willingly transformed itself into a *Volks- und Rassengemeinschaft*, the Nazi term for a community based on shared racial characteristics. There was widespread willingness to exclude others in order to belong to this community. And, fed by an aggressively promoted identification with this community, exclusion of others was only the first step.

The killing was the last step in a gradual, self-refining and constantly changing process. The actual act of killing was often so unspectacular that Harald Welzer refers to "the job of killing" – complete with routines, set working times and coffee breaks. Killing became a job to do, like any other.

We know much more about all this today thanks to the tireless efforts of many generations of researchers – even if it remains beyond our comprehension. Yet it is still necessary to keep asking one key question again and again: Why do perpetrators do what they do, causing others immeasurable suffering?

The answers to this question help us better understand and oppose extreme violence in its

various forms. They can help us recognize troubling developments early on. Not long ago, unimaginable abuse was committed at Abu Ghraib. It seemed that everything was permitted, and in this situation, the abusers obviously no longer had any moral inhibitions. We must learn from this experience too and find ways to create or maintain structures which prevent the complete loss of such inhibitions. We must find ways to help people respect themselves and others, and to feel they are part of a society which values respect, openness and tolerance rather than exclusion.

When we have a better understanding of the risk factors for careers of violence, we can also take targeted preventive action. This includes giving people the tools to deal with openness in our society and not be seduced by ideology. This is at once a responsibility and an organizational task.

Unlike dictatorships, our Western democracies today are based on the rule of law, protection of minorities and a system of checks and balances. Our aim is not to concentrate authority, but to set limits on authority. The free and democratic state is intentionally a state with limited power. For such a state to exist, individuals must act on their own responsibility – aware of their own fallibility and in accordance with institutional checks set up to ensure that one individual's freedom does not come at the expense of others.

From Karl Popper, we learn that in the open society, there is no absolute truth. This is the necessary foundation on which freedom can unfold in a process of trial and error. Perhaps the best remedy for ideological closedmindedness and abuse of power is ultimately the realization that we humans are imperfect beings, and that human nature is capable of many things, both good and evil. This is why we need to make rules and take precautions to help keep us from going to extremes.

The basic error of ideologies is that they cannot accept the imperfection of human existence. Instead of openness and provisionality, they postulate unquestionable truths. From there, it is but a small step to exclusion and violence in the name of these truths. We must counter this with the openness and tolerance of a liberal constitutional system in which no one has the right to force his beliefs on others.

Today we know that violent behaviour is usually the result of a combination of mutually

reinforcing risk factors in a person's background, regardless of that person's origin, religion or ethnic group. But this also represents an opportunity: Individual influences reinforcing a tendency to violence can apparently be cancelled out by other, positive influences.

I believe, we can all agree, that monocausal explanations are not very helpful when it comes to understanding extreme forms of violence. Extreme violence is determined by personality and personal history, along with a number of situation-dependent, social, historical, political and cultural factors. It is by no means a product or temporary remnant of the pre-modern period – the causes of violence are both old and new. State and society are therefore continually called on to take the prevention of violence seriously and to be especially vigilant when it comes to groups which use violence as a tool.

Recent neurological research indicates that one of many factors encouraging a tendency to violence consists of physiological changes which usually occur in childhood or youth. Combined with the experience of insecurity in childhood, such as unstable relationships, violence or abuse, these factors may contribute to violent behaviour. They may, but they do not have to.

For example, in the case of young, violent right-wing extremists today, we find that almost all of them have experienced violence at home and that they have no positive experience of stable family structures, of feeling secure or valued. They have almost no suitable role models and may thus feel a sense of liberation the first time they use violence to defend themselves, for example against a father or step-father who beats them. Young men like these are susceptible to anti-Semitic and xenophobic ideology, also as a way to legitimate their own violent outbursts. To prevent extremism and violence, knowledge about perpetrators must find greater application in social praxis. To this end, our prevention policy needs a paradigm change: We need to move away from a short-term approach oriented on individual anti-violence projects and towards more comprehensive support at an earlier stage. Such an approach, I am convinced, would yield greater results in the fight against right-wing extremism, for example, than outlawing political parties, as everyone keeps demanding. The chances of enacting a party ban should be carefully examined in individual cases, but bans do not get to the root of the problem.

This new approach to prevention should aim at strengthening people's sense of being part of society and at encouraging the development of basic social skills essential to peaceful

co-existence. International studies tell us to start teaching such skills as early as possible in order to prepare children for a complex and open society.

Now, one might look at the Nazi era and say there was more than enough sense of belonging then, and it would be better to leave emotions out of the equation. There is no question: The kind of community that existed during the Nazi period is indeed totally unacceptable.

On the other hand, however, we will not succeed at integrating people into society, so that they feel at home and are willing to assume responsibility, without any emotion whatsoever, as in a purely constitutional patriotism. People who do not feel at home, do not feel they belong – whether in their own family, in a club or a religious community – will have a harder time becoming involved. This is why our liberal society depends on identification, on role models, positive emotions, shared values and memories, a shared sense of commitment to a free society. In an open society, a sense of community based on these things automatically includes a commitment to diversity, tolerance and respect for differences, whether of a religious, cultural or philosophical nature. Right now in America, such a sense of community seems to be developing, and I believe it will help the Americans more than many other things to weather the coming economic crisis.

Of course, we should not give in to such feelings naively. Your conferences are rightly dedicated to examining history with a critical eye. We need these constant reminders, we need this confrontation which always includes a challenge to do better and step in wherever openness and freedom are threatened.

We Germans can also draw positive lessons from our history. It took a long time before the deeds of the resistance fighters and the spirit which motivated them, the spirit of the Kreisau circle, for example, were accepted as ethical foundations for Germany's new liberal democracy. Germany's democratic system has been more successful than anyone could have imagined in the late 1940s, and it would not have succeeded if we had not had a tradition of liberalism and the rule of law in which our institutions today are grounded.

Moltke, Stauffenberg, Father Delp, Bonhoeffer and many others were motivated by a sense of moral obligation to do more than just look out for their own interests: to take responsibility for others, for their neighbour, for their fellow humans, for the common good.

This sense of responsibility is a model for us, even if – thank goodness – resistance is no longer necessary to live in freedom in Germany. Anyone who calls for resistance today – and there are some who do – anyone who wants to claim the right to resistance guaranteed by our constitution, has got things backwards.

Today, our democracy seems to us Germans to be self-evident. Nearly sixty years after our democratic rebirth, we can be grateful and a bit proud of what we have achieved. But we can see certain trends in our society which go against the basic consensus of our liberal order. These problems range from a growing tendency to violence, especially among children and young people, to an increase in extremist attitudes and criminal offences, to growing political apathy and shrinking participation in the democratic process. In daily life, inconsiderate behaviour and an “it’s nothing to do with me”-attitude are on the rise. We are also having trouble integrating immigrants. This should teach us that a sense of community doesn’t just happen by itself, but rather that we must work to create it.

Especially in the case of extremist violence, those involved – largely young men – become radicalized because they feel rootless and unwanted in our society. An investigator told me once: “These young people are looking for something to believe in. It is just a question of who gets to them first – the Scientologists, the Neo-Nazis or the Islamists.” And with regard to Islamist-motivated violent offenders, we need to realize that they are being radicalized in Germany, and that attacks are being planned by people born and raised in this country.

The more obvious the negative impact of these trends becomes, the louder the calls for the state to take care of everything. More state intervention, more regulation – the state is called on to create social consensus, if possible without limiting individual liberty in any way. Such self-contradictory demands must necessarily lead to the state doing too much while society and individual citizens don’t do enough.

And yet, domestic policy has some room to manoeuvre when it succeeds in gaining broad support for its aims. Families, clubs, churches, kindergartens and schools should work together to provide comprehensive, early-childhood care to reduce the chance of violence in later life, before it can develop and be reinforced. In the same way, the state and civil society should encourage individual civic engagement. Here, civic education plays a key role: Through education, information, opportunities to participate and new approaches to

groups which are not usually politically active, it can help people live and work together in peace and seek solutions together.

As a society, we must sincerely desire the social integration of all. But we must be clear about our conditions: Tolerance, respect, acceptance of basic values and rules are essential for co-existence. We need to do something, not only to oppose violence, but also to strengthen our sense of community, in order to send the message to young people: You are part of the community, we need you, you can do something meaningful for yourselves and for society.

Social cohesion and democracy flourish wherever individuals are willing to work to improve how we live together as a society. This commitment is something that Ursula von der Leyen, Germany's minister for families and youth, and I as minister of the interior want to support. To do so, we have launched a joint initiative which openly names the existing problems and presents model solutions.

In connection with this initiative, I recently visited a project dealing with extremist violent offenders in prison. This project is run with a great deal of commitment by the Violence Prevention Network and receives funding from the Federal Agency for Civic Education, among others. I was impressed by their work with young men sentenced to prison for serious violent crimes motivated by extremism. By combining pedagogical resources and approaches taken from civic education, their project shows that even violent extremists are capable of learning, that they can analyse their violent acts and their political ideologies, that they can develop empathy. If we had offered these young men similar opportunities at an early age, some of them might not have gone on to make a career of violence.

To stop such careers of violence before they start, we must start to encourage social skills in early childhood, if possible, and provide ongoing opportunities for children, young people, new parents and families as well as teachers and trainers.

A few weeks ago, the German Bundestag passed a cross-party resolution to coordinate and strengthen efforts to promote Jewish life and fight anti-Semitism. The Federal Ministry of the Interior is committed to carrying out this resolution. But it is even more important for

individual citizens to support this effort.

Our liberal democracy is based on the individual's right to develop his or her full potential. In ordinary life, this doesn't take much courage, much less the willingness to defy death. Maybe this is the reason we sometimes come to the faulty conclusion that our democracy can get by entirely without the civic engagement of individuals. We can certainly always think about specific possibilities for state action, and there are some things that only the state, and no one else, can do. But when people are no longer willing to get involved, to express their opinion, to make clear that there are some boundaries which should not be crossed, then there will be trouble. In this sense, we must demand civil courage of ourselves – even today – and should encourage it in others.

Our history also shows again and again what civil courage is capable of achieving. I have already mentioned the resistance against the National Socialist dictatorship. And without civil courage and the confidence of many, no one in autumn 1989 would have shouted “We are the people” and then “We are one people”. Without civil courage, the Berlin Wall would still be standing and Germany would still be divided.

Those who get involved do so from their own individual standpoint – a standpoint which should be grounded without being absolute. Civic education is important in this respect, because it shows that democracy does not mean spreading values by declamation, but that democracy is an ongoing process of learning. Finding one's own standpoint also means being aware of one's own history. It teaches us that freedom is rooted in responsibility. Civil education and the study of history together help each of us develop our own standpoint in contact with history. This is why knowledge of history is essential; as schools concentrate on the natural sciences and modern technologies, they must not neglect the teaching of history. And educational institutions other than schools should also play a greater role in conveying knowledge of history. To this end, we need well-educated teachers and researchers and well-informed, cooperative parents.

We should not be motivated by the idea that everything will get better somehow. We should be motivated by the knowledge that action taken by individuals can make a difference.