



**Federal President Joachim Gauck  
to open the exhibition commemorating the  
70th anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising  
29 July 2014  
Berlin**

I am delighted to be with you today, to join you, Mr President, in opening this exhibition on the Warsaw Uprising – here in Berlin. I am aware that this is an important event for you today not only in your capacity as President but also as a member of a famous family, for the leader of the Warsaw Uprising, General Bór Komorowski, is a relative of yours; he was commander in chief on the Polish side. I am also glad that you, the eye witnesses, have joined us from Poland. It is important that you be here with us as we open the exhibition. After all, our intention with this exhibition is not only to focus our minds once again on the crimes committed by German perpetrators, but also to seek contact with you. By opening our hearts and minds to your suffering, we hope to learn empathy for the suffering of others. That is why I am especially glad that you are with us today.

Let me begin with a personal experience that brought the Warsaw Uprising home to me anew. In 2004, shortly after it was finished, I visited the Warsaw Rising Museum in the red brick building that used to house Warsaw's tram power station. I expected to find a quiet place of remembrance with information panels about the crimes Germany had perpetrated, the resistance fighters who had lost their lives and the civilians who had been murdered. Imagine my astonishment when I found myself in the multimedia exhibition there, surrounded by loud noises: the voices of eye witnesses, the whistle of bullets, the explosion of bombs. You could hear all of that plus a dull beat, droning, loud and as continuous as a cantus firmus – something like a heartbeat. It was as if a doctor's stethoscope had been connected to a huge loudspeaker to let the whole world know, this city is alive!

I saw then, if I hadn't understood it before, that the fact they had vanquished their helplessness carried more weight for many Poles than the military defeat. I thus encountered an almost normative constant in the Polish attitude – namely that it is seen as a virtue to struggle and to fight in such an existential situation even when victory is highly uncertain. One of the most outstanding gifts that Poland has given its European neighbours is the message, reiterated by several generations, that freedom is so valuable, so vital, that people not only dream of it but fight for it and defend it too, even to the death if need be.

I am convinced therefore that this exhibition in this place is essential. It's overdue too. I say that for at least two reasons. Germany's attack on Poland on 1 September 1939 has become deeply rooted in the German consciousness as the start of the Second World War. I am grateful to you, Mr President, that we can be together in Poland for remembrance on that day.

The five year occupation of Poland that followed is not so much at the forefront of the collective memory. It is primarily over shadowed by what happened in the Soviet Union during the war and by the genocide perpetrated against the Jews. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943 is better known in Germany than the Warsaw Uprising late in the summer of 1944.

The second reason why I find this exhibition particularly important is the specifically Polish perspective which the Warsaw Rising Museum has provided. It helps us understand what key role the Warsaw Uprising plays in Polish history. It helps us understand why matters of freedom and independence remain so essential for so many Polish people to this day.

The Warsaw Uprising takes its place in a series of uprisings ending in defeat which can be traced through Polish history. For many Poles, however, these losses by no means led to defeatism and despondency. In 1944, most people were of a mind with the young poet Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński when he wrote, "Now we must die so that Poland may live again."

Poland wanted to demonstrate to itself and to the world that it was capable of throwing off the German oppressor on its own initiative. And, as with the resistance fighters in another place, in Paris, the hope was that support would come from the advancing Allied troops. As we know, however, that help from outside almost wholly failed to materialise. More than 170,000 of Warsaw's inhabitants paid for the uprising with their lives.

After 63 days full of fervour and frustration, triumph and pain, full of hope and bitter losses, but above all full of bravery and sacrifice – after 63 days, the only remaining option was surrender. One of the

last radio messages from the fighting home army to the Polish government in exile in London ran as follows: "Those who have died have triumphed, and those who yet live will fight on, will triumph and give proof that Poland lives while Poles live."

I was able to see for myself what an important touchstone the Warsaw Uprising was for Polish opposition forces during the more recent era of oppression. In Communist times, hundreds and thousands used to process on 1 August to Warsaw's Powązki Cemetery, where those who fell in the uprising lie buried. Those fathers, grandfathers, husbands and wives were examples to the generations which followed them.

The Solidarność trade union was also inspired by the Warsaw Uprising. It too fought for a free and independent Poland, for the right of each nation to make its own way. And we in East Germany felt something of the force of that Polish tradition as well. It gave us courage when we were still despondent; it gave us hope when we as yet had none. That Polish example may well have helped us take a risk in autumn 1989 although we could not foresee that our movement, which became a revolution, would end in peace and liberation.

In all of Germany, there can surely be no more fitting place for this exhibition on the Warsaw Uprising than the Topography of Terror documentation centre – this place that grouped the main offices of the Gestapo, SS and Reich Security. This is where the fate of the Polish capital was ultimately sealed, when Hitler gave the order to completely crush the uprising and destroy the city. Now, in this place that was the perpetrators' command centre, the descendants of their victims recall to mind the particular brutality of the Nazi regime in Poland – for visitors from Berlin and Germany, and for visitors who come here to Berlin from around the world.

With the exception of part of Czechoslovakia, the Wehrmacht occupied no other country during the war for longer than it did Poland. No other country was so systematically depopulated by abduction and murder so as to serve as "Lebensraum" for the German nation. Polish statehood was dissolved and the country was economically pillaged. It was on Polish soil that the Nazi regime built most of the concentration camps in which millions of Europe's Jews, millions of Poles, were murdered.

The terror and violence reached especially horrifying dimensions during the uprising. Resistance fighters and civilians alike were bombed from the air and shelled by tanks and mortars. Men, women and children were massacred indiscriminately. After the surrender, the houses were blown up or burned down. The city lay in ruins. The Warsaw Rising Museum has used computer animation to reconstruct that lunar landscape. No one who watches the film "The City of Ruins" will fail to be moved.

In view of that past, and in view of the hesitancy and patchiness of the young Federal Republic's prosecution of those chiefly responsible, it seems almost miraculous to me that Poles and Germans should today be not only good neighbours who get on all right but even friends who actually like each other.

Poles were able to show forgiveness when Germans showed regret. Poles were able to overcome hatred, anger and distrust when Germans acknowledged their guilt and their shame. We find that deeply moving – and I want to say that particularly clearly with you here, ladies and gentlemen, who lived through that time. What a beautiful thing it is that we can all bear witness together, that our peoples are united not only in friendship but also in the European Union. We share military alliances too. Nowadays, we seek to protect peace, freedom and democracy together.

That, to me, is the most important thing to have achieved after a century with two world wars and totalitarian regimes: our shared European house is built on respect for human dignity and respect for others. This is a Europe that is worth breathing life into, constantly reinvigorating – and defending again and again when this proves necessary.

At Topography of Terror today, we are opening an exhibition which recalls one of the many topographies of terror with which Germans ruined this continent in the past. In so doing, we are shining a light on the importance of the Poles' struggle and of the anti Hitler coalition – the importance of resisting tyranny, yearning for and achieving liberty and thus laying the foundations for the Europe that was to come.

That Europe is our Europe today: a European topography that unites Poles and Germans in peace, freedom and human dignity for the long term.

Our thanks to all those who have helped make it happen.