



Speech

by Federal President Joachim Gauck

on the occasion of the 70th anniversary

of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp

Bergen-Belsen

26 April 2015

First of all, I would like to greet you, the survivors of this place of horror, who are with us today to commemorate the liberation of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. I thank you for making this journey!

I would also like to greet your families and all the survivors of this camp who cannot be with us today.

Liberation – there is no need for discussion about the meaning of this word in a place like Bergen-Belsen. Its profound significance is undeniable. It is just as undeniable as the immeasurable guilt which Germans incurred between 1933 and 1945 in countless places around Europe.

The terror which ended on 15 April 1945 with the liberation of Bergen-Belsen camp did not take place somewhere far away in “the East”, behind the front or in the occupied territories. No, it happened right here in the heart of Germany; in a region where Leibniz and Lessing – both Enlightenment philosophers – worked; in a landscape which for many is the epitome of Romanticism and affinity with nature.

In the midst of this culture, of which we are proud; in the midst of this history in which we have our roots; in the midst of our homeland, which we love – in the midst of all this an inconceivable abyss opened up which truly cannot be adequately described using words such as “terror”, “disgrace” or “guilt”. Places like Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald or Dachau symbolise this abyss in a quite unique way. They stand for the immense political, moral, cultural and humanitarian catastrophe into which the Third Reich led Germany and its people.

More than by Adorno’s consideration as to whether it was still possible to write poems “after Auschwitz”, I am plagued by the

question as to how it was possible to write poetry, sing and live alongside Auschwitz and all the other places where such crimes and such inhumanity occurred. How was it possible that such crimes and such inhumanity could take place in a country with such a rich history and civilisation? To this day I have no answer to this question. I can only repeat it over and over in bewilderment – especially in a place like this.

Seventy years ago, horrific images taken by the British liberators on their arrival here at the camp were seen around the world. They showed those terrible pictures of thousands of corpses laid out side by side or on top of each other in huts, or simply piled up on the ground. Among them there were survivors, many of them more dead than alive, reduced to skeletons. Anyone who saw those images back then, or sees them today, must ask themselves: how can an individual inflict that on a fellow human being?

The horror took many forms in this camp. Bergen-Belsen was a prisoner of war camp. Bergen-Belsen was a concentration camp. Bergen-Belsen was a detention camp for Jewish prisoners considered valuable by the National Socialist leadership. And during the final months of the war, Bergen-Belsen was the destination for inmates from other camps in the East sent on death marches, those terrible last journeys which cost so many people their lives.

An especially large number of families were interned in Bergen-Belsen camp. It is estimated that around 3000 children under the age of 14 were imprisoned there in the last years of the war alone. These young people witnessed disease, suffering and death. They saw their mothers or fathers being humiliated or beaten up, while parents were helpless – they could not protect their own children from injustice or inhumanity.

A French prisoner doctor described the inferno during the final phase of the camp when an ever larger number of people died:

“Belsen was the camp where atrocities were committed with hypocrisy. There were no mass hangings here; there were no gas chambers. People died slowly but surely. The tormenting hunger, the organised lack of hygiene, the induced epidemics, the overcrowding in the huts, the abuse, the feeling of total humiliation – all of that ensured that the crematorium fulfilled its regular massive quota.”

In the last three months before liberation alone, more than 35,000 individuals died in Bergen Belsen. Three months!

Today we remember all those men, women and children who fell victim to the National Socialist regime – in Bergen-Belsen camp and in other places of humiliation and death. It is seventy years, almost a lifetime ago, since these images and reports shocked the world. Even

today, however – and in years to come – the images and messages have an impact. They distress us as they distressed the immediate post war generation. They prompt us to ask why and provoke belated anger and belated grief.

“Selection” – the arrogance of believing one has the right to decide who may live and who must die – was the brutal essence of National Socialist ideology. People were persecuted and killed increasingly systematically. The mania of classifying and excluding people, denying their right to belong to a people, the right even to be human and ultimately the simple right to live became ever more extreme. The victims included Jews as well as Sinti and Roma, who were persecuted and murdered on the grounds of racial fanaticism. Members of Slavic peoples were clearly felt not to have the same right to life as the so called “master race”. But prisoners of war and forced labourers, homosexuals, people with disabilities, political opponents of National Socialism, Social Democrats, Communists, trade unionists, Christians of all denominations, particularly Jehovah’s Witnesses, and, finally, people from Germany and around Europe who had had the courage to stand up and oppose the terror and crimes of the National Socialist regime, also faced persecution and the machinery of mass murder.

Hanna Lévy Hass, who was an inmate of Bergen-Belsen, wrote in her diary in November 1944:

“We have not died, but we are dead. They have managed to kill in us not only our right to live in the present and for many of us, to be sure, the right to a future life. But what is most tragic is that they have succeeded, with their sadistic and depraved methods, in killing in us all sense of a human life in our past, all feeling of normal human beings endowed with a normal past, up to even the very consciousness of having existed at one time as human beings worthy of this name.”

All of this occurred every day and a thousand times over – right in the heart of Germany. However, too many people did not see it, some because they were not able to see it, many others because they did not want to see it. There were too few who wanted to know more about what exactly was happening on their doorstep. In Bergen-Belsen it was starving prisoners of war behind the fences. It was wagons full of emaciated people arriving at the concentration camp. It was emaciated individuals at the end of brutal death marches. It was children among the prisoners.

Anyone who looks away in such a situation, anyone who avoids a difficult question of conscience, denies the victims everything which a human being owes to a fellow human being: compassion and help, or merely witnessing the injustice suffered.

Simone Veil, a camp survivor and later President of the European Parliament, described the scenes when Bergen-Belsen was liberated in April 1945: on the faces of the liberated she saw not happiness, but stillness and tears. On the faces of the liberators she saw not satisfaction at their victory, but horror.

Major Ben Barnett, who was one of the first British officers to reach the camp, wrote: "The things I saw completely defy description. There are no words in the English language which can give a true impression of the ghastly horrors of this camp. (...) Why did the Germans do this? I say it was deliberate policy of extermination by starvation."

On liberating the camp, the British soldiers suddenly became responsible for the 53,000 inmates. Half starved, ill and traumatised, many of them were more dead than alive. The liberators did everything in their power to save lives and ease suffering. They provided medical care and ensured a functioning water supply. And they looked after the many children who had been orphaned in the camp. Despite all their efforts, however, thousands more died after liberation as a result of imprisonment and starvation, abuse and forced labour.

But eventually the day came when there was a halt to the deaths of the sick and starving, and the board by the entrance to the hospital said "First day with no death".

In attending this memorial service today, I feel a profound need to express heartfelt gratitude to the British liberators. They came here at a time of inhumanity. They came in a spirit of humanity. With their actions and their attitude – thoroughly rooted in human kindness and decency – they ushered in a new epoch: people, even members of the so called "master race", were to learn anew that it was indeed possible to put care for one's fellow human beings into practice.

And the British soldiers were ambassadors for a democratic culture which focused not on gaining revenge on the enemy, but on creating a new and sure foundation for justice and human dignity in Germany. Moreover, they came with express instructions from their Government to show fairness to the defeated nation, so that the Germans would themselves find their way back to fairness, too.

The British soldiers took this to heart most impressively. In a letter to the British Zone Review one of them wrote: "... merely because the Germans have been wicked, we are not justified in a similar retributive offence. It is nearly two thousand years since a better formula than an eye for an eye was suggested. Our standards must be our own, and be kinder than those of the National Socialists, or I do not know for what positive aim we fought."

The British showed magnanimity in victory, as Winston Churchill put it later in his memoirs. In this they were the glorious counterpoint to the victorious Germans, who in the years before had oppressed, enslaved and plundered large parts of Europe.

And because in those post war times Britain extended a hand to defeated Germany, brought so low, it became possible gradually to rediscover those liberal values which had been almost entirely forgotten here after the end of the first German democracy.

The advance of the Allied forces in the last months of the war that had been unleashed by Germany saved the lives of countless people in the concentration and prison camps in Dachau and in Buchenwald, in Sachsenhausen and in Auschwitz, and in many other places. However, we must not forget that before the British, Soviet, American and other soldiers could liberate the camps, people there and in many towns and villages near the front were still being shot, hanged, robbed of life by other fanatical Germans who, right till the very end, did not want to believe that the end had come.

Even those who had survived the inferno and been liberated would never be the same again. In the words of the Austrian author and essayist Jean Améry, a survivor of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen:

"We emerged from the camp stripped, robbed, emptied out, disoriented – and it was a long time before we were able even to learn the ordinary language of freedom."

Many Germans had trouble with this "ordinary language of freedom" after 1945 – for very different reasons, obviously. After 1945 what they wanted most of all was to forget and make a fresh start. Their own guilt was relativised, and many focused on their own suffering. This is reflected in how the people dealt with the crimes committed here in Bergen-Belsen. The trials of the main perpetrators began even before the end of 1945, but the German people showed little interest. How that has changed over the past few decades.

Many more years were to pass before society in the Federal Republic of Germany finally embarked on a frank, honest and self critical examination of National Socialist history.

Reckoning with the past requires knowledge, thoughtfulness and the ability to reflect on one's own failings, indeed to admit one's own guilt and to open one's heart and mind to the sufferings of others. One person who early on possessed all these qualities was the first head of state of the Federal Republic of Germany, Theodor Heuss. In 1952, at the opening of the Bergen-Belsen memorial site, he said: "Anyone who speaks here as a German must have the inner freedom to recognise the full horror of the crimes committed here by Germans." And he admitted "We knew of these things." There were very few in the

Federal Republic back then, particularly in institutions of the state, who would have been brave enough to make such an admission.

The opening of the Bergen-Belsen memorial received international attention, but was initially little noticed by the German public. Federal Chancellor Adenauer visited the memorial eight years later, spurred on by current events, namely an attack on the recently dedicated synagogue in Cologne. Important impetus for further developments at the memorial came later, and repeatedly from within society. In particular, the 1980s saw the emergence of what we would nowadays call a grassroots movement for active remembrance.

This place, Bergen-Belsen, has shown just what memorials can achieve if they are built on a serious and solid foundation. Once, the National Socialists robbed their victims of their dignity and ultimately their lives here in the camp. And they tried as well to destroy the victims' identities forever. The camp registers were destroyed before the liberators arrived. But, through many years of work, this memorial has succeeded in giving back to many of the people who died here their faces, names and stories.

Anyone who visits the memorials at former concentration camps and wonders "how could all this happen?" can feel the distance that otherwise often separates us from history melt away and, under the influence of the place, give way to great clarity. Grief evolves into remembrance. And individual remembrance evolves into shared remembrance. And then we sense the significance of this process of remembrance. We sense that remembrance not only directs our eyes to the past, but that it always points to the present and future, too. Anyone who wants to live in the future, to live "in truth", needs a sincere remembrance which embraces the truth, a remembrance which makes people human – with the result that a neighbour's suffering is not merely a matter of indifference, but rather something which, whenever possible, we have to try to alleviate or end. Thus humanity forms the true object of remembrance and commemoration.

So we stand here today in a community of responsibility which is committed to respecting human dignity and preserving and defending inalienable human rights. Even today, horror has not disappeared from our world, but with this attitude we can counter it.

We must direct our attention to what is happening in the here and now. That is the lesson we have learnt from the past. Wherever possible, we will put an end to injustice. And if we lack the tools to intervene, if we are powerless, then we can still do more than just look impotently away. In that case we can and must be witnesses; we must make testimony. And that is something each and every one of us can do.

One moving proof of human hope, even in the darkest hour, is the diary of Anne Frank, who died here at Bergen-Belsen. Her father, Otto Frank, survived – the only one of the group who had been arrested in their hiding place in a secret annex in Amsterdam to do so. For the remainder of his life, Otto Frank's goal was to see his daughter's diary published all around the world. In 1980 he said: "But the duty Anne left me continues to give me new strength – to fight for reconciliation and human rights throughout the world."

We Germans are thankful for the great gift of reconciliation with our neighbours in Europe and all nations who were once caused unspeakable suffering by Germans. Today we commit ourselves once again not to deny or relativise the crimes and to keep alive the memory of the victims. By thinking of them, we who came after are accepting the task they assigned us: to preserve and protect human dignity and human life.