



**Speech by
Federal President Joachim Gauck
to mark the first Day of Remembrance
for Refugees and Expellees
Berlin, 20 June 2015**

Today we want to talk about those who have been uprooted.

About refugees and expellees, who have been forced into emigration.

About those who were driven out of their homes in the past and those who will be forced to leave their homes today and tomorrow.

About people who are no longer there but not yet quite here.

About people who miss something and, at the same time, are glad that they no longer have to live where homesickness takes their thoughts.

Today we want to talk about those who have been uprooted.

About people – regardless of whether they are black or white, young or old, male or female, Christian, Jewish or Muslim – about people who have the same painful experiences etched in their souls, which the writer Jean Améry, a refugee from Nazi Germany and a survivor of Bergen-Belsen, summed up with the simple, for some comforting, for others sad words: “One must have a home in order not to need it.”

For the first time, Germany is now marking an official national day of remembrance for the millions of Germans who were driven out of their homeland at the end of the Second World War. For the first time, therefore, the German Government is officially marking World Refugee Day, as adopted by the UN General Assembly fifteen years ago. For they belong together in a quite essential manner – the fate of people back then and the fate of people today, the grief and the expectations back then and the fears and hopes for the future of today.

I wish the memory of those who fled or were expelled back then could enhance our understanding for those who have fled or been displaced today. And vice versa: our encounters with those who are uprooted today could enhance our empathy with those who were uprooted back then.

People have been excluded, persecuted and driven out of their homes since time immemorial. From history we know of conflicts between settled populations and nomads, between locals and immigrants. In the nation-state of the 19th and 20th century, minorities were often regarded as potentially disloyal, as aliens who had to be assimilated or exchanged, driven out or even exterminated. At times, the political class even regarded a population transfer as an effective means of conflict settlement.

The population transfer of millions of Germans from East Prussia, Pomerania, Silesia, Bohemia and Moravia, from the Batschke and many other areas in Central and South-East Europe, also seemed to the allied Heads of Government Churchill, Truman and Stalin to be an appropriate response to the death and terror which Nazi Germany had unleashed on the continent. When the decisions taken in Potsdam created the legal basis for this in August 1945, this transfer had long since been underway: millions of Germans had already fled or been driven out of the German East, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Romania. And what was intended to be effected in an "orderly and humane manner", had turned into a nightmare in reality.

Initially, they fled from the war. In the bitter cold, trains of women, children and the elderly moved along clogged roads and over brittle ice, being shot at by low flying aircraft and overrun by the front. Completely overcrowded refugee ships sank after being torpedoed and bombarded in the Baltic Sea. Countless women were raped.

Then many of those who stayed behind became the target of hate and retaliation: denied their rights, stripped of their possessions, arrested, abused, sent on death marches, murdered, interned, made to carry out forced labour, first driven out in a seemingly wild fashion and then supposedly in an orderly manner, deported as living reparations to the labour camps in the Soviet Union. Not until 1955 did the last of them return.

"So far as the conscience of humanity should ever again become sensitive," stated the British-Jewish publisher Sir Victor Gollancz, a great humanist, in 1947, "will this expulsion be an undying disgrace for all those who remember it, who caused it or who put up with it. The Germans have been driven out, but not simply with an imperfection of excessive consideration, but with the highest imaginable degree of brutality."

Hundreds of thousands of people perished as a result of acts of war, disease, hunger, rape as well as exhaustion and forced labour in the post-war period. All in all, between 12 and 14 million Germans fled their homes or were expelled at the close of the Second World War. The population in those areas which were later to be called the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic increased by nearly 20 per cent.

Especially today, we should recall that flight and expulsion change not only the lives of those who are taken in but also the lives of those who take them in, not only the "new" but also the "old" inhabitants of a country or a region.

Remembering those Germans who fled or were expelled was almost always a difficult matter and almost always an emotional one in our society. For our attitude towards the suffering of the German people remains linked to our attitude towards the guilt of the German people. It took decades until we were able – once more – to think about the suffering of the German people because we no longer ignored the guilt of the German people.

This was a long and not always straightforward journey.

In the Soviet occupation zone and in the GDR, the establishment of independent refugee organisations was banned from the outset. For a long time the memories of those who had been expelled of their former homeland were unwelcome. Expulsion was considered to be the legitimate response to National Socialist policies of occupation and extermination. Criticism of the rapes committed by the Red Army and the expulsions by Czechs and Poles was quashed. As early as 1950, the SED – the ruling Communist party in the GDR – relinquished any claim to the former German territories in the east by recognising the Oder-Neisse Line as the German-Polish border, something which provoked consternation even within the party – and even more so, of course, among many expellees in the GDR.

However, neither relinquishing territory nor making this issue a taboo nor an ideology-driven reinterpretation could dispel grief or trauma. In her 1976 novel "Patterns of Childhood", Christa Wolf wrote that nobody leaves their homeland without a sense of mourning. At the age of 15, she fled from the front, from Landberg in eastern Brandenburg, which is called Gorzów Wielkopolski today.

In West Germany, the expulsions were initially instrumentalised politically to condemn the advance of the Soviet Union, the crimes of the Red Army and the injustices committed by the states which had driven out the Germans. Although the associations which represented expelled Germans renounced the use of force at an early stage, and the revanchism feared by the Allies largely did not come to pass, both Christian and Social Democrats subscribed to the slogan: "Divided in

three – never". As late as 1963, Willy Brandt declared at a meeting of Silesians: "Abnegation is betrayal".

At that time, Germans – and by no means just the expellees – regarded themselves, first and foremost, as victims.

A change in perspective among broader sections of society did not begin until the mid 1960s, largely prompted by the Ostdenkschrift, a memorandum by the Protestant Church in Germany, and a letter from Poland's Catholic bishops to their German counterparts with the self-explanatory title: "We forgive and ask for forgiveness." With the 1970 Treaty of Warsaw, the new Polish western border was recognised de facto by the German Government and – by a thin majority – Parliament. The debates in German society at the time were painful, but they were necessary to arrive at this new perspective.

Many of us here today may still remember the great disappointment, indeed bitterness, which quite a number of expellees felt in the face of the abnegation of the eastern territories. In their hearts, it was still difficult to accept reality, also because the Landsmannschaften (the Unions of Expellees), as well as party politicians, had defended the claims and nourished illusions for such a long time. "Yet no one can still hope today that the lost territories will ever be German again," wrote Marion Gräfin Dönhoff. "Anyone who thinks differently would have to counter their repossession with force." The expellees' associations, which opposed the Brandt Government's new Ostpolitik, were regarded by many henceforth as troublemakers who posed a threat to this change of direction in foreign policy, even as peace-breakers.

Since the 1970s, Germans have increasingly learned to see their suffering within the historical context. What was done to them was now seen against the background of what Germans – before that – had done to others. After all, it was National Socialist Germany which unleashed death and disaster over Europe, which made expulsion, violence, the terrors of occupation and destruction everyday experiences for many of Europe's peoples. That other Germany, which aimed at destruction, which drew up a Master Plan East (GPO) to erase entire Eastern European peoples alleged to be inferior from the map, or to kill them.

Just as the emphasis on the suffering endured by the Germans had served to exculpate Germans, awareness of the Germans' guilt now dispelled any empathy with Germans. Forced displacement was largely accepted as the supposedly inevitable punishment for the crimes committed by Germans. That is what many people in the GDR thought, too, and the dictatorial SED party tried to enforce this way of thinking.

Today I, who lived there, cannot think of this without a measure of shame. For in the 1950s I and most East Germans had heard about the fate of expellees from expellees living near us or through the West German media. And when I look back on the long Saturday evenings of my childhood and youth, I remember the many request shows on North-West German radio, as it was called then. I heard the Ostpreußenlied, a song about East Prussia, dozens of times and even felt a longing for the "land of dark forests and crystal-clear lakes" myself, even though I was from Mecklenburg. It is therefore all the more difficult, then, to understand why I, why we local people, were later so willing to ignore the fact that others, the expellees, had paid so very much more for the violent and cruel war than we had. Why we who had kept our homes began to compare and to cite the bombardments and number of casualties we suffered in order to immunise ourselves against the grief of others, those who arrived in our midst. We blocked the possibility of empathy with political arguments.

Today I know that anyone who denies the sentiments of others is also denying their own feelings. Being receptive to the suffering of others, on the other hand, engenders understanding and a sense of closeness. We should think of that today when strangers are housed or need protection in our town, in our district or in our neighbourhood. Showing understanding for the suffering of others is an essential mark of a compassionate society.

Yet there were times in Germany back then when not even the sons and daughters of the refugees and expellees showed any understanding for the suffering of others. Many of them did not want to hear anything about their parents' lost homes or about how they fled. They found it embarrassing when old folk songs were sung late in the evening at birthday parties and tears came into the eyes of relatives. Love of one's home country or region had, after all, been discredited by National Socialist propaganda, and for many people also by the sentimental feature films about home of the 1950s and, not least, by the rhetoric of some officials of the expellees' associations. Often, sympathy with expellees was regarded as belittling historical guilt, as an attempt to rewrite history or to turn perpetrators into victims.

Fortunately, our society has been gradually abandoning its sometime resistance since the early 1990s. In political terms anyway things were clear: the Two plus Four Treaty and the Border Treaty between the Republic of Poland and reunited Germany established the binding nature of the Oder-Neisse border under international law once and for all.

Furthermore, Europe has grown together again. We can once more travel freely to regions which had disappeared behind the Iron

Curtain for more than four decades. Since the 1990s, hundreds of thousands of expellees and their children have stood in front of their parents' former homes, in front of former Protestant churches, in front of former German schools and in parks or on overgrown land where they often searched in vain for the graves of their relatives. And when Germany took in hundreds of thousands of civil war refugees from Yugoslavia during those years, many people asked themselves in shame: how can we deny our own mothers and grandmothers the empathy which we rightly feel for rape victims in Bosnia? The experience of injustice in the here and now helped them to view that much earlier injustice with new empathy.

Anyone who is forced to leave their homeland often feels a lifelong wound which only heals superficially and re opens time and again. And so we have learned to respect what the cultural historian Aleida Assmann once formulated as follows: "There is such a thing as a human right to one's own memory which is difficult to eradicate with censorship or taboos."

Not even the 800 pages of "The Tin Drum" provide enough scope for Günter Grass to pour his heart out about the lost city of Danzig. In "Crabwalk", published 43 years later, when Grass was 75 years old, he returned to the subject of a vanishing homeland. Similarly, Siegfried Lenz had not yet been able to tear himself away from his home in his stories about Suleyken. Over 20 years later, he brought Masuria back to life again, and even then the separation was violent: he had the local history museum go up in flames, with all the exhibits that had remained after the flight.

Today there are many among the next generation, sons and daughters, who have themselves reached the age where they allow themselves to ask the same question Christa Wolf once asked: "How did we become what we are today?" And so, decades after these events, we are seeing something wonderful: we are reclaiming the possibility of empathy. Those who were born after are, at long last, developing a deeper understanding of the trauma experienced by their displaced mothers and fathers. At long last, locals are developing a deeper understanding of their neighbours and friends, who once arrived as refugees and expellees. And, at long last, there is comprehensive remembrance of the war and post war period in which there is room for grief, guilt and shame.

To my mind, the establishment of the Foundation Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation in 2008, largely thanks to the initiative of the Bund der Vertriebenen (League of Expellees), Ms Steinbach, was an important indicator of this development. The flight and expulsion of Germans are becoming established in the entire nation's historical awareness, fixed in a context which no longer separates us from our

neighbours, from our war time enemies, but which makes possible a new understanding.

To the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the expulsion of Germans was an ideologised topic instrumentalised for political ends for decades. Expulsion was regarded as fair punishment for German crimes, and West Germany as a hotbed of revanchism and revisionism. By hawking these views, Communist governments even managed to gather into the fold people who in all other respects profoundly distrusted them.

Only after 1989, when archives were opened up and ideological barriers fell, when free exchanges were possible and the fear of border changes and restitution demands waned, could the peoples of Poland, Hungary and other Central European countries take a critical look at their own history. Today so called ethnic "cleansing" is discredited everywhere – in Europe at least – as a political tool, and previous expulsions are increasingly regarded as unjust. There are some impressive indications of this. Let me give you a few examples:

- The Slovak National Council asked the Carpathian Germans for forgiveness for their evacuation and expulsion as early as the beginning of 1991.

- Addressing the German Bundestag in 1995, Władysław Bartoszewski, that tireless bridge-builder between Poland and Germany, said: "The evil done to us, even the greatest evil, is [...] no justification [...] for the evil we ourselves have done unto others."

- In 2012 the Hungarian Parliament declared 19 January a national day of remembrance of the expulsion of Hungarian Germans and Danube Swabians. Parliament had already condemned the expulsions and apologised to the victims and their descendants back in March 1990.

- The Romanian Parliament condemned the deportation of Romanian German labour to the Soviet Union as political persecution and recently approved compensation payments also for Germans who no longer live in the country.

- On the 70th anniversary of the Brno death march, the Czech city of Brno officially asked the victims of the expulsion for forgiveness. "It doesn't hurt so much any more if we admit mistakes," said the young Czech author Kateřina Tučková. "On the contrary, we find doing so is necessary and cleansing."

While Europe was divided, it scarcely seemed possible that we could ever reach a stage where, as we are seeing more and more often now, the burdens weighing down relations between our peoples are no longer ignored, the sufferings of one side no longer compared with those of the other. When people tell each other their stories, the loss of home becomes a tangible, shared, existential experience, a

profoundly personal compassion for others, irrespective of their nationality or religious beliefs. And Germany's past has become more and more a part of the history of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Latvia and Hungary – and often more alive in the Polish, Czech and Hungarian consciousness than in the German.

I would like to take the opportunity today to thank our neighbours most sincerely for their generous gestures and for their new trust.

People have always felt unease when faced with the unfamiliar. We see it today, and we saw it after 1945, even though the refugees then were fellow countrymen anchored in the same culture and in some cases the same national history. What this teaches us is that the stranger is always the new arrival in an established group who is regarded as an interloper. It is always possible to find reasons to keep one's distance or to reject the new arrival.

Often, indeed, the post war refugees and expellees experienced discrimination. They were jeered at and called Polacks, gypsies, German tramps or have-nots. They were branded as backward and were accused of having been especially subservient to the Nazi Reich. Thus there was a cynical justification for the lack of solidarity.

It is not just the insults repeated in accounts of those post war years that are strangely familiar now. Virtually no one wanted to share their house with the strangers; local people received preference when it came to jobs; only rarely did the cultural differences provoke curiosity and interest. For many years the locals celebrated their own festivals and church services, turning up their noses at foreign dialects and foreign smells.

It took a long time for Germany to become a country at one with itself, a country in which some kept their homes and others found a new home. A country in which some did not feel strange and others did not feel excluded.

In time, instances of refugees being successfully integrated became more than isolated incidents. Over the decades, West Germany took in almost four million refugees from the GDR. It gave a new home to tens of thousands of people who had fled the Communist states of Eastern and Central Europe, as well as refugees from civil wars, military dictatorships and collapsing states, be they Greece, Turkey, Iran or Yugoslavia. So Germany has a great deal of experience with refugees and expellees, positive experience which we flag up all too rarely in the public debate. And yet, a look back at past successes would do us good as we confront new challenges today.

Never since the end of the Second World War have so many people been uprooted as today. The United Nations has just published frightening new refugee statistics. At the end of 2014 there were 59.5

million refugees worldwide, eight million more than in the previous year. Never has the figure been so high. The vast majority are displaced persons within their own country: around 40 percent of the population in Syria, hundreds of thousands in Iraq, South Sudan, DR Congo and Nigeria. Half of all refugees are children and young people under the age of 18. This is particularly depressing. Even Europe is seeing a huge increase in the number of internally displaced persons. In Ukraine alone there are almost 650,000.

Many refugees stay in the vicinity of their homes, because they hope to be able to return soon. I have met some of them – Syrian families in a camp in Turkey. But more and more people are undertaking ever longer, more dangerous and more expensive journeys to give themselves the chance of a fresh start. Many try to make their way to Europe, a place of their longing, the continent of freedom and prosperity, which they believe will enable them and their families to live a better life, free of fear, violence and hunger. I have met some of them, too – for example, young people from West Africa in a camp in Malta.

For weeks, months, sometimes even years they travel, mercilessly exposed to looters, blackmailers and human traffickers. They are exploited, robbed, tortured, sexually abused. They risk their lives crossing the Sahara in overloaded trucks or crossing the Mediterranean in ships fit only for scrap, or unseaworthy dinghies and rowing boats. Many are profoundly traumatised by their flight.

Today's refugees are not only the political descendants of those persecuted under the Nazi dictatorship; they are not only the descendants of those displaced at the close of the war. They also have a kinship of choice with those impoverished and persecuted inhabitants of the towns and villages of the 19th century here in our region, so vividly recalled, for instance, by Edgar Reitz in his film "Home Away From Home". We have almost forgotten that Germany, too, was once full of despairing, hoping emigrants. Between 1812 and 1912, almost 5.5 million Germans undertook the dangerous Atlantic crossing to make an uncertain fresh start in America. They were fleeing poverty; they were fleeing political repression or religious intolerance – just like refugees and many migrants today.

We are facing a huge challenge, a new type of challenge, a challenge of unprecedented magnitude. In the last five years, at least 15 new conflicts have broken out or flared up again - in Africa, the Middle East and Europe, too. State structures in whole regions are at risk of collapse, or have already collapsed. The longer civil wars, Islamist terror and armed conflicts between governments and rebels and separatists last, the wider anarchy, poverty, corruption and hopelessness spread, the more people will leave their families, their

friends, their homes. Refugee numbers will increase further, into the medium term.

Given this dramatic development, we need to broaden our approach. Refugee policy has long been more than just domestic policy. Refugee policy has long crossed over into foreign, security and development policy.

Let us start with something which ought to be self evident: it is, as I see it, a moral duty incumbent on all European states to save refugees from death in the Mediterranean. We would lose all self respect if we were to leave to their own devices people floundering in the waters off our continent.

As I see it, it should also remain a self evident moral duty incumbent on all European states to give a safe haven to people who, as it says in Article 16a of our Basic Law and in the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, are being persecuted on political, ethnic, religious or racial grounds. I believe such protection to be non negotiable and our solemn duty until such time as these people can safely return to their homes or stay in a safe place in Germany or elsewhere.

Germany has learned lessons in dealing with asylum seekers. Today we react very differently to the increase in refugee numbers than we did just twenty years ago. I am pleased to see how much sympathy many citizens of our country are showing refugees from civil wars and victims of political persecution, how many of them are sponsoring refugees, giving language lessons, accompanying asylum seekers to official authorities, making a room available in their home. Our country has become better at seeing and empathising with the suffering of others, and we should be pleased about that. There should be no end to this process of learning and developing further.

Much still has to be clarified in the discussion on how to deal with refugees. First and foremost, we have to be clear about the facts. Even now, almost half of the asylum seekers in Germany come from the Western Balkans, some of whose states have been classified by the legislature as safe states of origin, despite some reservations. Between 0.1 and 0.2 percent of refugees from this region are recognised. The other half of the asylum seekers in Germany, however, come from countries at war or where terrorists or dictators hold sway, at the moment in particular from Syria, Eritrea and Iraq. For these countries, between 70 and over 90 percent of applications are recognised.

Alongside many Muslims, they include Christians and Yazidis. People who have been driven out of their villages, forced to convert or to pay protection money. Whose children have died of thirst or starvation, and whose wives have been sold off as if they were war booty. They include unaccompanied minors, children and young people

who have lost their relatives in armed conflicts or during their flight. They are all looking for a country where they can be free and safe. A country in which they can practise their faith, a country in which they are not abused or violently oppressed. A country in which they can determine their own lives in freedom.

We know that neither Germany nor Europe as a whole is in a position to offer a safe haven and a future to everyone who wants them. Refugee policy must, therefore, go far beyond the European Union level. We need to provide greater support than hitherto for those countries in the immediate neighbourhood of war torn areas. We must make greater efforts than hitherto to stabilise the countries of North Africa and particularly the Western Balkans. And, since the Federal Foreign Minister is here today, I want to express profound recognition for the Federal Government's repeated endeavours to get political activities moving, particularly in such difficult spheres. Thank you. Finally, we must continue to aim to tackle the causes of flight on the ground in a more targeted manner, all the while knowing that nothing we do can have any great success as long as governments do not do more themselves to build a secure, peaceful and worthwhile future for their peoples.

So let us look mainly at the possibilities open to us in Germany and Europe, where we have influence and bear immediate responsibility. Although it is true that we have again stepped up search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean, many other questions remain unclear. How can we combat criminal gangs of human traffickers? What new, safe ways are there for us to recognise refugees? How can we ensure fairer distribution of refugees in Europe? How can we set up an asylum system with similar standards across all member states? How do we deal humanely with asylum seekers whose applications have been rejected? And, a not unimportant question: how do we regulate immigration alongside asylum?

In short, how can we ensure that, bearing in mind the dimensions of the problem, we do more? More in every respect: take in more, help more, but at the same time manage things better, take decisions more quickly and, yes, show greater determination in rejecting applications, so that we remain able to take in those we have undertaken to protect at all costs and who are in greater need of our help than others.

Recently, some people have once again been asking just how many refugees our society can cope with. After all, a nation lives off a feeling of belonging, off trust, cooperation and compassion among its citizens. On the one hand, refugees and immigrants enhance social and cultural diversity and increase society's innovative capacities. That is why we talk about "enriching" society. On the other, we know from recent academic studies that mutual consideration and solidarity within

a society can dwindle if, for instance, the number of refugees and immigrants in conurbations increases far too quickly, or if the cultural discrepancies appear too great.

At the same time, however, we must not ignore the possibilities for refugees or the opportunities for our society. We must keep remembering what a huge part refugees and expellees played in Germany's successful development. It is that very spirit, the determination to seek a fresh start and help shape the future, that I see in many refugees today.

Today we wanted to talk about those who have been uprooted.

About refugees and expellees, who have been forced into emigration.

And we see that it has taken us right to the heart of an important global issue, and also right to the heart of a major political and moral dilemma.

In weighing the ideals of humanity against realpolitik, there can be no ideal solution. There almost never is. In politics, we can only choose between good and less good solutions, sometimes even just between less bad solutions. That's politics.

70 years ago, a poor and ruined Germany managed to integrate millions of refugees. Let us not think ourselves capable of too little today. Let us trust in the energies this country has. We always need a vision of ourselves which carries us onward. And, in the long term, we will only be able to accept ourselves if we do everything possible just now. Why should an economically strong and politically stable Germany not be able to see in the challenges of today the opportunities of tomorrow?