



**Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the luncheon with representatives of concentration
camp committees
Schloss Bellevue
2 July 2015**

I am pleased and gladdened that you, former inmates of German concentration camps, are my guests this lunchtime. I am most profoundly moved by your presence, and am thrilled you are here. Thank you for accepting my invitation. Of all the encounters here in Schloss Bellevue, this one is particularly momentous.

For, during the Nazi dictatorship, you were brutally and violently separated from your loved ones and torn from your normal lives. This was done by acts of sheer tyranny. You were the disenfranchised in the SS's empire of camps where dignity, decency and rights were trodden underfoot. It took a lot of luck to survive in this world, for whoever entered this empire was in effect doomed to die.

The names of the camps in which you were held – and from which you were only liberated because the Allies left the German Reich no option but unconditional surrender – these names will forever be names of disgrace for us Germans. These names embody a guilt that brings duties and responsibilities, even to those born after the events and those who are innocent of the crimes. Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Bergen-Belsen, Ravensbrück, Mittelbau-Dora, Sachsenhausen, Dachau, Flossenbürg, Neuengamme.

We will never forget these and other places of terror, whose names stand for hell on Earth. But they should not be remembered simply for the suffering of the past. They should instead also be viewed as charging us and our descendants with a mission – not to allow anything like this to ever happen again.

The Nazis' reign of terror began in Germany, targeting sections of the German population. It then brought war and violence, persecution and destruction to almost all of Europe. You, ladies and gentlemen, knew and felt the true nature of their murderous ideology: their exclusion of everyone who was considered different, the subjugation of

the weaker, the disenfranchisement of everyone who did not meet their ideas of what a normal, healthy, supposedly German or so called "Aryan" person should be. Because they were Jewish, or Sinti and Roma, or disabled or homosexual, or Communist, or Social Democrat, or because they were a devout Christian, a priest, monk or nun, or a supposedly inferior Slav, or because they had the audacity to ask just once if all of this was really right – the arrests, the persecution, the war.

National Socialism meant the exclusion and disenfranchisement and ultimately even the destruction of everybody who was considered not able or willing or worthy to become a new person in the Nazi mould. These people were considered and labelled subhuman, their lives were henceforth worth nothing.

The fact that we are able to be together now today, here, that you have come, seventy years after the end of the war and the liberation of the camps, that is not self-evident to us, not even after so much time has passed. For some of you, it has indeed been a long road to travel before you were willing to have anything to do with a German government representative, before you were even prepared to return to Germany.

I am grateful that you decided to come. You are today actively involved in your camps' survivors committees, and speak up for the interests of the former inmates. You are actively involved in keeping the memories of the pain and suffering alive, to ensure that the Nazis' crimes and evil deeds, their reign of terror and their frenzy of destruction, do not vanish from the world's consciousness, and in order to show goodwill to those born thereafter, to reach out in reconciliation to subsequent generations in Germany.

I am thus grateful to be permitted to meet you today, to be able to share a meal with you, to talk to each other, and to look each other in the eye.

It is good to fight evil whenever you can, with the permitted means at your disposal. But it is even better to banish evil by utilising the forces of good, the good that is within us: the power of mercy, of goodwill, of magnanimity.

With this in mind, let me welcome you again to Schloss Bellevue. I am so very glad you are here!