



**Message from Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the opening of the 2015 European Maccabi Games
on 28 July 2015
in Berlin**

Athletes,

Welcome to Germany and welcome to Berlin!

For a German who was born in the war and who is thus a member of the older generation, this evening is a truly special event.

For the first time Europe's biggest Jewish event, the European Maccabi Games, is taking place here in Germany. I am very pleased about this – especially because this year we are celebrating 50 years of diplomatic relations between Germany and Israel.

That is an important event, not only for us Germans and our Israeli friends – our European neighbours take a great interest, too.

The great, indeed historic, importance of these games here at the Maifeld fields in Berlin is something we can grasp by casting an eye over the history of this site.

The Maifeld and also this Waldbühne open air amphitheatre are part of the Olympic grounds which set the scene for the 1936 Olympic Games. Those games took place back when Germany was ruled by the National Socialists and when anti-Semitic acts – discrimination, persecution and detention – had already long since begun; when Jewish athletes were excluded from taking part in the Olympic Games; when many German Jews had fled from their parents' homeland in pain and suffering, seeking refuge in free countries or emigrated to Palestine where they were starting to build a new home.

How symbolic is it that in this very place, on this site, in the shadow of the Olympic Stadium, Jewish athletes are coming together from all over the world in order to take part in a sporting competition.

I am delighted and think it is very significant that you have chosen this very place – I am deeply moved by the fact that this

country and this city will now have the chance to watch the Jewish games.

Perhaps you could even say that in a way, Maccabi is coming home, returning to its roots.

The Maccabi sports movement, which originated in a Jewish gymnastics club founded here in Berlin, was indeed partly a response to society's growing hostility towards Jewish people. Long before state-decreed anti-Semitism, Jewish members were increasingly excluded from sports clubs or treated as second-class members in them. Nevertheless, the desire to undertake sport and to experience competition and camaraderie was strong. The Jewish gymnastics movement, which included the Maccabi movement spread rapidly to other countries, becoming international and indeed holding international-level competitions.

So after many twists and turns of history, on this sports field formerly called the Reichssportfeld, many Jewish athletes are gathered from all over Europe, from Israel and beyond – to engage in peaceful, sporting competition.

Today, Berlin is a magnet for curious and creative people from all around the world. Some come as students, many as tourists. Some come back and many even stay here. I am pleased that Berlin's new friends include many, many people from Israel as well as people with Jewish roots – a wonderful gift and fantastic demonstration of trust in our Germany today.

A piece of history lies in every corner of Berlin, we are confronted with the past everywhere – whether we seek it out or not.

But you in particular, young people, seem to be attracted by the fact that Berlin has become a city of the future, a city of plans, visions, fresh ideas and the courage to embark on something new.

What a fantastic setting for the 2015 European Maccabi Games!

Now, ladies, gentlemen and athletes, I hope you can all share this spirit of tolerance and understanding, this spirit of a happy shared future for us all.

May you all enjoy absolutely unforgettable, wonderful games and a cheerful experience of summer here in Berlin.

And here comes the important part:

The 14th European Maccabi Games have now begun!