



**Federal President Joachim Gauck  
at a luncheon on the occasion of the first official visit of  
Polish President Andrzej Duda  
at Schloss Bellevue  
on 28 August 2015**

Mr President,

Mrs Kornhauser-Duda,

I am delighted that you have come to Berlin so soon after taking office. I consider this to be an important signal. Allow me therefore to welcome you to Schloss Bellevue.

Representatives of our countries meet on numerous occasions, and that is great news. Moreover, these encounters have, or so it seems to me, become closer, indeed more informal over the years. Just like among family relatives – and we can certainly say that we are kindred by choice.

A whole lifetime after the end of the Second World War and a generation after the Iron Curtain came down, we can say that the peoples of Europe have, of their own free will, entered into relationships that allow them to coexist in a peaceful and free community. Twenty-four years ago, the Republic of Poland and the Federal Republic of Germany confirmed their friendship by treaty. Sixteen years ago, Poland joined NATO and it acceded to the European Union eleven years ago. I find all of this to be an enduring source of joy as your country, Mr President, is particularly dear to my heart and to all those in positions of political responsibility in Germany. If I say that again here today, then I'm probably not telling anyone anything new.

When I went on my first official visit to Poland in March 2012, a journalist asked me why I was so enthusiastic about the Polish nation. While finding an answer is easy, the question has one or two pitfalls nonetheless. There are, for instance, the mindsets that I admire – the courage and determination with which Poles stand up for their rights and their freedom. But if I start talking about the wonderful encounters

and deep friendships in Poland, then I don't know where to start – or indeed stop.

Allow me to dwell on one occurrence that I believe to be exemplary of the bond that unites our two countries, one that symbolises the nascent reconciliation of our people after the devastation wreaked across Poland and Europe by National Socialist Germany. It is a letter from Polish bishops to their German counterparts from November 1965.

I am still profoundly moved today when I read it. Apart from the generosity of the gesture, it evokes a great aura of a kind that, incidentally, was also expressed by Karol Wojtyła, the future Pope and one of the letter's signatories.

Its authors not only speak about Poland and Germany – about the beneficial influences that the cultures of both countries had on each other, about the saints that they had in common and Saint Hedwig, to whom Berlin also dedicated a cathedral – but also put all of their reflections into a European context. They praise the rich dialogue between Poland and other Western peoples, the Länder of southern Germany, Burgundy, Flanders, Italy, later France and Austria, and the states of the Italian Renaissance. Poland, they write, "was the youngest of the older brothers of Christian Europe".

For us Germans – Christians and non-Christians, Catholics and Protestants – the letter was a great gift. There are many things that we shall not forget, such as the pastoral letter, the other gestures of generosity, Pope John Paul II's persona that transcended borders and the courageous commitment of the Solidarność trade union to democratic freedoms. It was a battle that was waged by countless Poles for us all and for Europe.

Fifty years have passed since the letter reached its addressees. Back then, it would have taken a most vivid imagination to envisage how positive and trusting the relations between our countries would be half a century later.

In the past decades, we have built up a great reservoir of mutual respect and trust – that is what you wrote to me, Mr President, after taking office. Let us build on that, talk frankly and in the spirit of friendship about what we hope for and expect from each other, deepen this friendship and use it to the benefit of Europe and those who feel a connection to us – for the sake of the citizens of our nations, and above all for the sake of our young people. Paving the way to a future of peace, freedom and prosperity for our youth and coming generations is one of the most challenging yet rewarding tasks for politicians.

To your health, Mr President, and to that of your wife; to the Republic of Poland and our strong friendship in a united Europe.