



**Federal President Joachim Gauck
on receiving an honorary doctorate
from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem
on 6 December 2015
in Jerusalem/Israel**

The Hebrew University's decision to award me with an honorary doctorate today is not only a private affair between a university and a German citizen. When the most important university in Israel bestows this honour on the German Federal President, it also symbolises the depth of relations between our two countries.

My thanks for this honour today is of course therefore twofold: on a personal level I would like to thank you for the privilege of being an honorary academic citizen of this noble university from today, and as President of the Federal Republic of Germany I would like to thank you for this title, which also honours the country I represent.

I am very moved to be with you here on Mount Scopus today. These university grounds are a very special place, particularly with regard to German Israeli relations. The academic insights that have been gleaned and taught here, the quality of academic life that has given the Hebrew University an international reputation, all this rests on foundations that Jews from Europe brought with them to Palestine.

I have to admit that it was only during my preparations for this day that I really became aware how strongly the founding of the Hebrew University was shaped by intellectuals who received their academic education in Germany or in German speaking countries.

Let me call to mind the great Martin Buber, for example, who at the start of the 20th century signed an appeal for the founding of a Jewish university and who, after fleeing Germany in 1938, began to teach at the Hebrew University, which had been established in the meantime. I have known of Martin Buber since my days studying theology. At an early stage I became acquainted with his translation of the Hebrew Bible, completed together with Franz Rosenzweig, a translation into a very different, poetic German. The message of the

Biblical texts, with which I was so familiar, gripped me again in a new way at that time.

But I would also like to mention another name: Salman Schocken, the successful owner of major department stores and promoter of Jewish literature and culture, who, after fleeing National Socialist Germany, became a member of the governing body of the Hebrew University. Around him he gathered a group of prominent Jewish emigrants who also left their mark on Palestine: they included the philosopher Hans Jonas, the author Else Lasker Schöler and the architect Erich Mendelsohn. He, Mendelsohn, had already designed Schocken's department stores in Nuremberg, Stuttgart and Chemnitz. He then built Schocken's villa and library here in Jerusalem and eventually designed the Hebrew University and the Hadassah University Hospital.

And now another name: the historian Richard Koebner, virtually unknown in Germany, a Jew from what was then Breslau who laid the foundations for the study of history in Israel at the Hebrew University. The institute that now bears his name focuses on German and German Jewish history and is an example of fruitful cooperation between Israeli and German academics.

For me, the strands of German Jewish Israeli tradition contain a comforting message: that behind the cruel, the condemned Germany, on which Salman Schocken's son Gershom later wanted to impose a boycott, a different Germany can be perceived: a Germany characterised by humanity, intellectual vitality and civilisational progress. A Germany that exists alongside the disaster of war and extermination, that has helped shape Israel's mentality character and that continues to be – or is once again –valued.

A German of my age can accept an honorary doctorate from the Hebrew University only with deep thankfulness, humility and great joy.

Dear students attending this academic ceremony,

During your lifetime only one democratic German state has existed. I have only got to know Israel personally in these recent times. GDR citizens were as a rule not allowed to travel to non-socialist countries, which of course included Israel. Moreover, in the official GDR propaganda Israel was portrayed as the spearhead of imperialistic interests in the Middle East, as an aggressor whose goal was to destroy the Palestinians. East Berlin allied itself with Arab states against Israel, which was not seldom compared to Nazi Germany, of all things, in a perfidious distortion of the truth. The GDR allowed the Palestine Liberation Organisation, not Israel, to open a representation, supplied them with weapons and trained their fighters.

The GDR may certainly have described itself as anti-fascist, but it refused to show almost any solidarity to the survivors of the Shoah.

The GDR leadership flatly refused to provide any kind of compensation or reparations, unlike the Federal Republic of Germany in the West. And when, for tactical reasons, it eventually sought ways to move closer to Israel and the World Jewish Congress, it was too late – in the peaceful revolution of autumn 1989 the party and the government were ousted by the people.

Only the members of the first and only freely elected People's Chamber of the GDR, of whom I was one, were able, a few days after its constitutive session, to unanimously adopt a declaration on Israel which stated: "We ask the people in Israel for forgiveness for the hypocrisy and hostility of the official GDR policies towards the State of Israel and for the persecution and abuse of Jewish citizens in our country that also occurred after 1945."

There were few Jews in the GDR. It was therefore only during my visits to Israel after the fall of the Wall and reunification that I was able to fully grasp, through meetings and conversations with survivors, the extent to which persecution, extermination and genocide had harmed the souls of the survivors and even their descendants. I had been aware of the *bruta facta* of the monstrous crimes from biographies, academic writings and media reports. But to see and hear in face-to-face conversations with people how the dark shadows, the trauma, experienced directly or through empathy with family members, had become engraved in faces and souls, gave these encounters a particular, unforgettable intensity.

These were tentative encounters on thin ice. Encounters in which I sensed that even fifty years after the end of the war, neither my Israeli conversation partners nor I myself had freed ourselves from the past – and indeed could not do so. For even today, when Germany has been a democratic state under the rule of law for many decades, Auschwitz is an integral part of German identity, and even today, when Israel is facing quite different threats, the Shoah is an integral part of Israeli identity. But these encounters convinced me personally that both sides have the strong desire to deal with this past in a way which makes a shared present, and above all a shared future, possible.

At this point, to further illustrate what I have just said, I would like to tell you how I felt yesterday evening, standing with a mature gentleman, the President of this country, before a concert in Tel Aviv with the Thomanerchor and Gewandhausorchester from Leipzig. And this man spoke about the relationship between Germans and Israelis using the simple word "friendship". I was born during the war, and today I look at this man, the President, and ask myself this: what has happened to enable us now to call this relationship friendship? Is it a miracle? Yes, perhaps it is. A great many people have contributed to this miracle. This feeling that something good can grow even after the jaws of hell have opened, this feeling that becomes a reality bringing

people together, is a wonderful thing. Not just something that is politically good, but something that is wonderful for people. And when, as happened yesterday evening, a survivor of the Shoah – Betti Bausch, who is a frequent visitor to Germany – approaches me, stretches out her arms and kisses me, what is that?

Fifty years have passed since diplomatic relations were established between the Federal Republic of Germany and Israel. The establishment of diplomatic relations between our countries was preceded by the building of many bridges between institutions and people – academic, scientific and religious institutions, and individual citizens. But then these relationships became a diplomatic reality, too. Many events have commemorated this anniversary this year. All the speakers probably agreed that the process of moving closer to one another was arduous. We owe a very great deal to the brave pioneers of understanding on both sides. The exhibition on these first fifty years of relations, which is currently on display in both countries among many other things, honours the memory of these pioneers of a new, a better, era.

No, it was not easy to make a new start with one another. Even visiting Germany was initially prohibited by the state in Israel. As older members of the audience will recall, passports at the beginning of the 1950s entitled their bearer to travel to all countries, but were specifically stamped "With the exception of Germany". Avi Primor, the former Israeli Ambassador to Germany, even spoke of the "enmity" that he and many of his generation harboured towards Germans for many years. Rolf Pauls, the first German Ambassador to Israel, had stones thrown at his car by furious protesters when he was being driven to his inauguration in 1965.

Following a private visit to Israel in 1966, Konrad Adenauer declared that "psychological normalisation" was evidently not yet possible in relations with Israel. He expressed his regret that nations were simply not able to forget. However, I believe Adenauer, who with Ben-Gurion contributed so much to forging ties, and had to overcome considerable resistance in Germany in doing so, was expecting too much too soon. Nowadays we know more about the psychological impact of life threatening situations. Affinity, not to mention "normalisation", cannot be politically regulated, far less imposed; grief and pain need time. Israelis avoided contact with Germans. And Germany was largely characterised by disinterest. A nation that after the war still primarily regarded itself as a victim was unable to conjure up much interest in or sympathy for the victims of German crimes.

Yet the strength of the emotional ties in Israel to German culture, despite everything, was shown, more than by almost anything else, by Marlene Dietrich's appearance in Jerusalem in 1960. This German resistor, branded a traitor by many in her own country, was permitted

to do something that, coming from other Germans, caused offence. With the agreement of the audience, which included a considerable number of survivors, she sang several songs in German, in the language that was taboo and viewed with contempt in Israel. The enthusiastic audience wept, cheered and thanked the performer with a standing ovation lasting half an hour.

The audience had encountered an individual, a woman who had grown up in Germany with the German language, but who in her attitude differed fundamentally from the Germans responsible for the Shoah. She did not want to live in the Germany created by the Nazis. For her, human solidarity was more important than unconditional loyalty towards a nation or blind faith in an ideology. And so the foundations for the bond between our nations were laid by people like her during the years in which the Germans began to change their attitude. When, particularly in many church congregations and university environments, they ceased to deny the past and started to examine their consciences. When they desired to know what had happened and realised with horror the crimes of which Germans had been capable. And when eventually a large majority began to open themselves up emotionally to the sufferings of the victims, as millions of Germans did as a result of the television series "Holocaust" in the late 1970s, for example.

How much has happened since then! Exchanges between school children and students, the work of Action Reconciliation – Service for Peace, town twinning arrangements, cultural exchange, academic and business cooperation, friendships and romances.

On the one hand it is true to say that the past will not go away. It continues to exist in our relationships, less and less as an element of division, but permanently woven into the fabric of our interaction. It is something that has not been entirely removed, and that probably never can be entirely removed. On the other hand, the past alone can no longer determine the present and the future. It can no longer undermine the trust that has been established. It can no longer prevent dialogue which is now resilient and able to withstand controversy. And thousands of young Israelis now no longer have to justify the fact that they regard Berlin as an attractive city in which to live, work and study. Likewise, the partnership between your university, the Hebrew University, and the Freie Universität Berlin is just one of several examples of this deep and self sustaining cooperation.

Our encounters have also changed in another way. Previously we often just rubbed one another up the wrong way, today we often learn from one another: voluntarily, in order to jointly create new areas of activity, and also out of necessity, when we have to counter new threats. I can feel myself that now that terrorism is moving closer to

Western Europe, I have a better, more intensive idea of the threat that people in Israel have been facing for decades.

David Grossman, writing after the attacks on the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, commented that Europe's citizens were also gradually beginning to understand what Islamist terrorism was going to mean for them. He wrote: "I am speaking of the experience that life under the threat of terrorism disfigures the individual and consequently the whole of society. (...) I am speaking of the awareness that we cannot protect our loved ones from the blind arbitrariness of terrorism. (...)"

It is sad and disturbing to see how David Grossman's words have acquired a new relevance not just for France, once again the target of brutal attacks, but also for Israel. How violence and terrorism are allowing fear and distrust to rear their heads again in your country, too. I wish that Jews and Palestinians could finally break out of the vicious circle of violence and find a way to co exist in peace and self determination. My wish is that those of you in particular who are sitting in this room and who will steer the fate of your country in the future, will retain your hope and strength so that the longing of people all over the world can become a reality in your country, too: a life in dignity, justice, freedom and security – for everyone, equally.

As you will have realised, this is a moving day for me. If what I said at the beginning is true, that the Hebrew University has been so strongly influenced by European, by German, culture, then this is a very special way for me to feel at home here: in the knowledge that here is an intellectual, a philosophical and a cultural home which unites Israel and Germany. I will cherish this day as a sign of our desire to continue to search for and discover and develop the things we have in common.

Toda raba.

Thank you very much.