



**Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck
on the 25th anniversary of the Treaty between
Germany and Poland on Good Neighbourliness
and Friendly Cooperation
in Schloss Bellevue
on 16 June 2016**

Twenty five years are a long time in a person's life – but a mere drop in the ocean in terms of history. Nevertheless, the past 25 years of neighbourliness between Germany and Poland are of a very particular and historic importance. Since Poland was divided in the 18th century, we have not known another time when Poles and Germans have lived so long together in peace and liberty. We are here to celebrate one fact in particular today, namely peace and friendship between sovereign neighbouring states, between two equal members of the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance.

Many men and women were instrumental in bringing about this wonderful development. As far back as the autumn of 1965, the Protestant church's famous, and at the time controversial, Ostdenkschrift memorandum called for Poland's western border to be recognised. A few weeks later, the Polish bishops wrote a courageous sentence in a pastoral letter to their German counterparts – a sentence that became a cornerstone of reconciliation. It said: "We forgive, and we ask for forgiveness." The churches – as Federal Chancellor Willy Brandt also had to concede – were ahead of the politicians. However, Willy Brandt took the path of rapprochement in his Ostpolitik. He focused on dialogue rather than confrontation and on openness rather than ideological entrenchment, while his de facto recognition of Poland's western border allayed Polish fears about German territorial claims.

And we should not forget that in hindsight, it is obvious that many Poles believed more strongly in what appeared impossible than their German neighbours did. We are grateful to the Polish opposition intellectuals for their unwavering belief in a vision of a joint European future at a time when others were willing to accept the divisions in

Europe. We are also grateful to the Polish politicians and people for not standing in the way of German reunification during the crucial months of upheaval and transformation in 1989. In this way, they made it possible to overcome the old East West conflict.

I am certain that the closer relations between Germany and Poland during the past 25 years will go down in the history books as the start of a new era, which began with the reconciliation Mass in Kreisau just three days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when the first non-communist Prime Minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, and Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl embraced. The foundations for rapprochement were laid by the Border Treaty of November 1990 and the Treaty on Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation of June 1991. These treaties allowed Poland to be sure of its borders and our partnership.

However, the actual work of rapprochement only started once the barriers to actually having contact with one another fell. Memories of the crimes committed by the German occupying forces frequently met with bitterness among expellees who felt the pain of the loss of their homes. Polish fears of a Federal Republic of Germany, which had been painted as revanchist by communist propaganda, collided with a lack of empathy in Germany towards Poland, which, after decades of communist rule, was regarded as old-fashioned and backward.

In 1990, Karl Dedecius, the great translator of Polish literature, saw German-Polish relations as "fragile and at risk" because of the "unbearable historical [...] burden" on them. There was only one way to become closer, he said: "Have more contact. Replace prejudices with facts. [...] Listen to both sides' arguments and take what they say seriously."

And this was what was needed, time and again, during the past 25 years: having more contact with one another; listening to one another; and taking one another seriously.

Clichés thus gradually turned into knowledge, while distance gradually developed into closer relations. Many of you here in this room experienced this process of rapprochement for yourselves and helped to improve relations in one way or another. I would like to express my profound gratitude to all of you for this today.

You all know that great achievements were made in a short space of time. Trade relations enjoyed an enormous boost. Cultural and academic exchange became a matter of course. The German-Polish Youth Office has brought 2.7 million people together so far. Many people have become friends and many people have married. Close transnational relations developed in the border regions, in security policy and as regards combating crime. Germany did not only become a crucial advocate of the Poles' accession to the European Union and

NATO – in alliance with other partners, the former occupying force now also guarantees Poland's security.

Although Germans may still know less about Poland than Poles know about Germany, even after 25 years, there is no doubt that we have become closer – through shared interests, projects and objectives – as partners in the very community of mutual interests and shared values that Krzysztof Skubiszewski, the first Foreign Minister of the free Poland, longed for, the very community that the tireless conciliator Władysław Bartoszewski envisioned and worked to bring about as Foreign Minister and as a private individual until his death just over a year ago. And difficult topics certainly had to be addressed.

The fact is that Germans and Poles did not only become closer through achievements, but sometimes also by resolving conflicts. All of us recall the at times heated and emotional debates. At a second glance, what initially looked as if it could drive us apart turned out to be a way to grow closer. Because we discussed our different experiences, attitudes and opinions frankly, we learned more about one another and came to understand the other side better. Because we were willing to listen to the other side's arguments and to empathise with these experiences, we were able to adjust our way of looking at things. For example, it has become a matter of course for Poland to integrate the once despised German culture and history of the former German Eastern territories into Polish history and contemporary life. For a long time now, the fate of those who were expelled has no longer served to downplay German responsibility for the past – instead, Germans' suffering has become recognisable and has been accepted as the outcome of German responsibility.

To my mind, dialogue, including heated debates, remain essential. Some people in Western Europe still find it difficult to take the conditions that define the societies of East-Central Europe following decades of communist rule sufficiently into account. All too often, it is still assumed that the people in East-Central Europe share the same cultural norms and standards as in the Western part of the continent or that they will adopt them as a matter of course. Although the individual societies certainly need and seek the community of Europeans, societies need autonomous spaces in order to find their own way in an increasingly integrated Europe. This needs to take place in accordance with national experiences and traditions and, at the same time, in line with the principles we have agreed together in Europe.

We are living in an era in which the familiar ways of solving problems no longer meet with unanimous consent and new concepts and ideas do not merely affect our two countries, but rather the future of the entire European Union. So let us work on German-Polish dialogue today in particular. Let us breathe new life into the principles

that define the vision of ourselves we chose together. A shared responsibility, as emphasised in the Treaty on Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation, "for the development of a new and free Europe united by human rights, democracy and the rule of law".

We are now facing great challenges once again as Poles, Germans and Europeans. And Karl Dedecius's old advice remains valid: have more contact with one another; listen to one another; take one another seriously.

This remains the path forward in our community of shared interests, debates and responsibility.

Thank you!