



**Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the ceremony marking the 75th anniversary
of the massacre at Babyn Yar
Kyiv, Ukraine,
29 September 2016**

Three years ago, one of the most prestigious prizes in German literature was awarded to a young author – Katja Petrowskaja. She grew up in Kyiv and today lives in Berlin. She won the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize for a story that describes how her great-grandmother set off for Babyn Yar and was shot dead in the street by a German occupation soldier – 75 years ago today.

She was obeying the instructions that had been published on posters throughout Kyiv: all Jews of the city should present themselves at cemeteries in the city outskirts at 8 o'clock, and bring with them their documents, money, valuables and warm clothing.

The German command had threatened that anyone disobeying the order would face the death penalty. However, the old lady was not worried about this threat, or about the assembly points – the cemeteries! She did not believe the German occupying forces had any bad intentions – certainly nothing life-threatening and evil.

The unique aspect of the crime she would fall victim to was that almost no one thought the perpetrators would be capable of such bestiality, willing to betray all civilised values.

In Babyn Yar, German commando units, together with members of the secret gendarmerie and the Waffen-SS, forced their victims to undress and hand over their valuables, beat them and drove them to the edge of the ravine, and shot them. Men and women, children and the elderly – 33,771 people in a mere two consecutive days.

The great-grandmother of Katja Petrowskaja is one of the victims whose death we are mourning today. The story written by her great-granddaughter is something special, something precious. Many decades after the crime was committed, it gives back to the victim her face, her name and her appearance. A number in a death toll record

becomes Esther. The storytelling approach is infinitely gentle. It accompanies her on her route, without making a secret of her violent death. It extends the time she still has to live. And it points to what can no longer be deciphered and no longer read, to what might have been.

We, the later-born generations and those who have lost loved ones, must also rely on our imagination, because, to remember and mourn, we need more than mere numbers and facts. We want to understand who we are, where we come from, and who came before us.

It is literary testimony, I believe, that has even made possible our present-day commemoration. It has forced us – by overcoming all resistance – to remember Babyn Yar. It has also achieved what history-writers in Germany, Russia and Ukraine have so far had great difficulty accomplishing: It has created a space for shared commemoration.

What we know today about Babyn Yar we have learned thanks to all those who overcame the denial, the belittling and the silence – at different times, in their own countries, and each in his or her own way. I want to point out one person in particular: It is Yevgeny Yevtushenko, because it was he who, in 1961, broke the taboo by which the Soviet Union had avoided mentioning the murder of its Jewish population.

Babyn Yar was a unique place of horror. When the Wehrmacht withdrew from Kyiv in December 1943, the ravine was still used for executions. Babyn Yar was not only the mass grave of the Jews of Kyiv, but also of tens of thousands of Soviet prisoners of war, mentally handicapped persons, Sinti and Roma, and Ukrainian nationalists.

They all fell victim to the destructive desire of National Socialism – a destructive desire that was not satiated by killing its victims; the aim was to even wipe out all memory of those who were killed. As the Red Army drew closer to Kyiv in 1943, Soviet prisoners of war were ordered by their German captors to unearth the bodies in Babyn Yar, burn them, and grind their ashes. It was only the withdrawal of German forces from Kyiv that put an end to the murder and cover-up.

Here, the criminal nature of the war of annihilation in Eastern Europe based on race ideology again comes into plain view. The devastation it left in its wake here in Ukraine was unparalleled. The German occupiers even used Ukrainian nationalists as auxiliary policemen. Here, and in Ukraine's neighbouring countries, the Nazi regime was from the outset not merely seeking to conquer and occupy foreign countries, but to murder entire population groups.

It is immeasurable suffering that we see, and unspeakable crimes that we Germans bear the blame for, when we look into the abyss that is the Shoah. Gazing into this abyss gives us vertigo. We fear that – as Nietzsche put it – the abyss also gazes into us. Yet we have learned and will not forget that it is impossible to reflect on German guilt and the history that we share without casting our eyes into this chasm.

We owe it to the victims, we owe it to our present-day world, and we owe it to ourselves. You can fill in this ravine, as was literally attempted with Babyn Yar. However, time and again, memories will resurface.

Creating room for these memories means commemorating all those who died here, not just the group they belonged to, or a religion, or a party. It means reminding everyone that they were also friends and neighbours. We have a responsibility to turn numbers in the Nazi regime's death records back into people, into individuals.

Only if we succeed in doing so will we create the collective memory that we need, that we urgently need, since this history is a shared history. The people who were killed by Germans in Babyn Yar were Jews, Ukrainians, Russians and Poles. We who want to understand how this could happen, how our fathers and grandfathers became murderers or victims, today depend on one another. We will only find answers to our questions by working together. I am not calling for any blurring of responsibility, but rather want to encourage collaborative, cross-border research. Research that resists the current trend to seek truth by only gazing through a nationalist prism.

Knowing what we do about the mass murder of Jews, Babyn Yar must forever remain a place of remembrance. To us, Auschwitz is a symbol of the killing that occurred in the extermination camps. Babyn Yar stands for what came before the industrialisation of murder – that is, the point-blank shooting of thousands of people. And gazing into the abyss of our own history involves admitting that not only specialised units, but also members of the regular Wehrmacht, played a key role in these crimes. It took far too long for this view to become accepted in Germany.

Facing up to your own history, daring to take a look at the facts, your own guilt, owning up your own failures, is a process that involves all generations. It has left its mark on Germany, and it has not yet been concluded, even so many years after the war. In full knowledge of this, we again and again turn to victims, who were or are defenceless and subjected to injustice, abandonment and persecution. In this connection, I think it is especially important for us to look at present-day Ukraine.

Since the end of the Cold War, the people of Ukraine have reminded us that they have their place in European history. They have

reminded us that Ukraine is a rightful member, and will remain a member, of the family of nations – a sovereign nation in a state with territorial integrity that must be respected. We know Ukrainians as pugnacious – they are willing to defend their freedom, democracy and rule of law, and this makes them part of our European community of shared values. We have learned much about Ukraine as a nation, and this has taught us quite a deal about our own role and responsibilities.

Quite possibly, the Holodomor with its countless victims is more deeply ingrained in your national memory than the crime of Babyn Yar – yet I am Germany's President, and I stand here, aghast and full of grief again and again over the monstrous crimes that other Germans committed during another time. And I sense one other thing as well: looking back also changes my view of the present. By humbly commemorating all of the past victims, I am also standing in support of the people who today are calling out injustice, helping the persecuted and tirelessly defending those who are being denied their human rights.