



**Speech by Federal President Frank Walter Steinmeier
on the occasion of his visit to the Warsaw Book Fair
during his first official visit to the Republic of Poland
in Warsaw/Poland
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Poland's great and renowned Warsaw Book Fair – this year, Germany is its guest of honour. The Presidents of both countries have come here today and are giving speeches. All of this makes me very happy. What better way to show that we Germans are not mute, as the Slavic root of our name Niemcy would suggest. That we do not remain silent in our encounters, but rather have a great deal to say to one another – the Polish to the Germans and the Germans to the Polish.

Literature is a window through which one people can look another in the eyes, Karl Dedecius has told us. This is particularly true when great translators, like Dedecius himself, clean these windows for us. Otherwise, these windows aren't fit to look through, and our counterparts remain mute.

I must not let this opportunity pass without praising those who act as bridges between the Polish and German languages and literatures. We would be far poorer without Karl Dedecius, Renate Schmidgall, Martin Pollack, Esther Kinsky, Lisa Palmes, and many others. They all are much more than translators. Without these cultural ambassadors, we Germans would probably not be able to hear the great contribution that Polish literature has made to European literature. We would know nothing about Adam Mickiewicz, Czesław Miłosz, Andrzej Szczypiorski, Wisława Szymborska, Olga Tokarczuk or Andrzej Stasiuk. In the end, we wouldn't have become acquainted. It is first and foremost through literature that we learn about one another – over and over again.

Literature creates the space in which we can conduct a dialogue and interact, as well as argue with one another. Literary scholars and teachers like you, dear Mrs Kornhauser Duda, make this exchange

possible. How necessary and fruitful this exchange is, for both us and others, was demonstrated just recently by Fundacja Kultury Polskiej – The Polish Cultural Foundation – when it awarded its honorary prize for the promotion of Polish literature abroad to the German Poland Institute. We deeply appreciate this honour, and I warmly congratulate you, dear Dieter Bingen, on receiving this award!

There is a long tradition of the dialogue that I am talking about, the dialogue between our two countries' literatures. It ranges from the Polish songs of Uhland, Herwegh and Chamisso of the Vormärz period (1830-1848) all the way to the German post World War II poetry of Günter Eich and Johannes Bobrowski, as well as the novels of Siegfried Lenz and, of course, the Danzig Trilogy of Günter Grass. German Polish history is found in the works of Andrzej Szczypiorski and Czesław Miłosz. Sometimes, the works of German authors are reflected in those of their Polish counterparts, and vice versa. For instance, the short stories of Bruno Schulz contain echoes of Franz Kafka. Finally, the works of some of our best authors, such as Herta Müller, were discovered and translated in Poland before they became well known in Germany.

And the dialogue between our countries' writers has not been limited to the cultural sphere. Its traces can also be found in politics. Dear President Duda – a few years before your predecessor, the Polish President Lech Kaczyński, died so tragically, he was interviewed by the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung newspaper on an unusual topic. In it, he spoke about Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, which he described as his "favourite novel". He talked about how he was particularly impressed by the war of words between Settembrini, the enlightened liberal, and Naphta, his intellectual adversary – a conservative, religious revolutionary.

Lech Kaczyński explained in the interview how this became a stage for the battle between two different cultural standpoints. Ever since reading the novel as a young man, he made up his mind: He "of course never identified with Naphta, but rather with his liberal adversary Settembrini," who "symbolises opposition against totalitarianism". By contrast, Lech Kaczyński pointed out, Naphta exemplifies how "part of our intelligence can be seduced by totalitarian ideologies".

I am sure you will believe me when I say that many years have passed since I myself read *The Magic Mountain*. But I do remember well how I, like Kaczyński, just as decisively took the side of freedom and reason and identified with the characters who defended these values. Naphta loathes Settembrini's didacticism, and the fact that he is an enlightened citizen of the world. He believes this type of humanism is misguided. Settembrini, for his part, dreads Naphta's

model of a theocracy, along with its fundamentalism that would stifle all freedom.

Quite a few aspects of this controversy will appear highly relevant to us today. This may give us cause for reflection. But there is no reason for us to be afraid. I do, after all, hope that we and Europe have learned our lesson. Our controversies no longer end – as they do in *The Magic Mountain* – with the need to regain our honour. We have agreed that our arbiter shall be the rule of law. It guarantees freedom and democracy.

During the long struggle for European integration, we have made an effort to find a common language. This does not mean defending others to the point of giving up our own identity. Rather, we must be aware that we have some shared and some different interests, and we must look for ways to communicate. The Enlightenment is not an historical event – and Thomas Mann was just as aware of this as Lech Kaczyński. It is a European project. It is constantly in transformation, and it is part of our European identity.

It is by definition an open ended project. Success was never guaranteed, and the Enlightenment has always been accompanied by a Counter-Enlightenment. Criticism is a tool of the Enlightenment. Without faith in reason and a desire for emancipation, we would lose not only our bearings, but also our power of judgement and, as a result, probably also our freedom to act. Our shared goal is a Europe in which free individuals can reach political consensus by using their faculty of reason.

To enable this, art, as well as literature, must be protected from political interference. Art and literature are, after all, surprisingly strong when it comes to resisting any attempts at appropriation. A people can be reflected in its literature, and Poland is an excellent example of this. But literature must never be misused to idolise a people. Germany had to learn this lesson. It was a bitter one indeed and involved painful losses.

Thomas Mann resisted fascism, and Lech Kaczyński resisted communism. We, in our day and age, should resist all forms of fatalism. Europe is not powerless when faced with the temptation of abandoning liberty. We are free to act, and to shape our future, as we see fit.

Our generation was not the first to dream of a common European future. About the everlasting peace between the nations was probably the first constitution ever written for a united Europe. This constitution was written by a Polish citizen, the scientist Wojciech Jastrzębowski. It is about a Europe of equal nations, a Europe without borders, a Europe united by common European legislation and institutions. He wrote this

treatise during the November Uprising against the Russian Emperor in 1831.

The idea of European integration, too, grew out of our common cultural, religious and humanist European heritage. It is a child of the Enlightenment and, like the Enlightenment itself, a process that is ongoing. We should cultivate this great achievement – and we should do so together.