



**Speech by Federal President Frank Walter Steinmeier
at the ceremony to mark the centenary of
the Augsburg Synagogue
in Augsburg
on 28 June 2017**

How beautiful are your tents, Jacob – that was the title of an exhibition on the synagogues in Swabia, which could also be seen here in this building a few years ago. And yes, that is exactly what you think when you look around here. What a beautiful place of worship, and what an extraordinary building!

There were many synagogues in this area. Beautiful, large and small, important and less important – they included this synagogue here in Augsburg, which was designed by Fritz Landauer and Heinrich Lömpel. It is certainly the most important. Very few synagogues survived the National Socialist era. Of the many visible signs of German-Jewish self confidence, often only traces remain – mostly not even ruins. What once stood tall was supposed to disappear. This synagogue, too, was supposed to be destroyed. In the end, it was saved not by the courage of individuals but by the fear of the fascist mob, which was afraid that an adjacent petrol station could explode and destroy the whole row of buildings.

It is difficult to find words in the face of the barbarities committed by the National Socialists, as well as the absence of empathy with Jewish neighbours, the lack of courage of the majority of the population and their unwillingness to defy those in power. It is difficult not only for a Federal President but ultimately for anyone standing here who wants to speak about this synagogue's history, about the abysses of its history and the fate of its congregation. The horror at the hate and destruction, the sadness at the loss, the pain over what had disappeared for ever will be mixed until time immemorial with the joy at this building, at the beauty of its rooms, at what it has meant to its congregation and to the people of Augsburg for the last one hundred years.

The Augsburg synagogue is still one of the most beautiful in Germany. It is incredible good fortune that it was spared – good fortune for the congregation, for the city and for us all. A synagogue is always also a home, a haven for its congregation. That is true again today.

In 1985, 40 years after the end of the war, the year in which my predecessor Richard von Weizsäcker helped the Germans – and himself – to accept their history, that was the year in which a new chapter opened for the Jewish community here in Augsburg. At that time, before the inauguration, Walter Jacob, the son of the last Rabbi in Augsburg spoke. He reminded the Germans that the original community had felt – and I quote – “completely at home” here before the war. Walter Jacob said back then that he hoped this synagogue would not only be a monument but also the centre of a new, growing and reinvigorated congregation. Today, I would say that this hope has been realised!

Walter Jacob spent his childhood on these premises. He played in the garden, went to school in an adjacent building, and he enjoyed the safety of a community which was treated with hostility and threatened outside these walls. He wrote later that his parents succeeded in “keeping us children safe from the horrors of that time”.

They only succeeded until the early morning of 10 November 1938 when the mob forced its way into the synagogue, ran riot, looted, started fires and finally arrested his father, Rabbi Ernst Jacob, and took him together with the shammash to Dachau concentration camp. The events of that day not only ended the German-Jewish family history of the Jacobs. It also ended a chapter in German-Jewish history: the history of Jewish emancipation, political, social and religious equality, the history of the Jewish middle class and liberal Judaism in Germany. Jewish citizens built this synagogue. It symbolises this period of shared history. The violent end to this history brought with it persecution, displacement, torture and the murder of millions – the destruction of Jewish life in Germany without the country of the perpetrators realising or being willing to accept the irreparable damage it had inflicted on itself.

For that reason, we cannot simply carry on where we left off before the horrors of the National Socialist era. On returning in 1985, Walter Jacob said that the road back to Augsburg went through Dachau. However, the fact that with his help and the help of many others we could start again is a precious gift. I am thinking here of Julius Spokojny, Mitek Pemper and Ernst Cramer and I would like to thank Henry Stern and Gernot Römer, who are with us this evening. We want this strong, self confident Jewish life in Germany, whether it be orthodox or liberal. To give it up again must remain inconceivable forever.

That is why I want to state very clearly on this centenary: yes, there is anti-Semitism in our country. It can be found in mindless demagogic slogans as well as hidden in what appear to be unfortunate slips by intellectuals. We should ensure that we never get used to one or the other! We should never get used to the fact that synagogues in our country still need to be guarded by the police. We should not accept nationalistic ideas re entering political speeches. We must not accept immigrants from the Muslim world importing hostile stereotypes. We must not tolerate criticism directed against the Israeli Government's policy being maliciously used to call into question Israel's very existence. Anti-Semitism must outrage us, not because we have to make amends but, rather, because we are human beings and because we have a responsibility. Let us be vigilant – more vigilant than ever before!

How beautiful are your tents, Jacob,

your dwelling places, Israel.

Like valleys they spread out,

like gardens beside a river,

like aloes planted by the Lord,

like cedars beside the waters.

Yes, this yearning, the yearning for home – how wonderfully it is described here in the Book of Numbers and how familiar it sounds to us. I believe you do not have to be Jewish for those lines to go straight to your heart.

Jews, Christians and Muslims; believers and non believers; those who have always lived in Germany and those who are new to our country: everyone wants to feel "completely at home" here, as the Rabbi said back then.

I am very aware that this is a lofty goal and a difficult task in times when such a high number, so many different people are seeking to make our country their home, as well as in times of so much tension, both within our country and in the outside world. Much remains unclear and we have to renegotiate many things if Germany is to remain home for the native population and become home to those who have come to live in our country.

However, ladies and gentlemen, one thing is certain: anti-Semitism destroys home for all of us. The fight against anti-Semitism is not only a question of solidarity, it is a fight for everything that holds us together as a society. Or in other words, only if Jews in Germany feel completely at home will our country be completely itself. Only then is it a tent, a garden beside the river, a place which deserves to be called home.