



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the ceremony marking the 60th anniversary of
Action Reconciliation - Service for Peace
in Berlin
on 27 May 2018**

Allow me to offer you, Mr Bacon, as well as the other witnesses who experienced such immense suffering during the Nazi regime, a very warm welcome. I am most grateful that you have all come here today on this occasion.

I would like to thank Jehuda Bacon not only for his words, of course, but for so much more.

When I heard your story for the first time, Mr Bacon, I thought we should thank you – even more so than for your words – for your life. For the fact that you live it and for the way in which you lead your life.

Those who are acquainted with your story know that survival at the moment of reckoning was not a question of instinct.

“As Long as We Live We Have to Decide” is the title of your book that you wrote together with Manfred Lütz. It is also the conclusion that you arrived at for your life after Auschwitz.

Yes, we have to decide time and again. But the horrible decision to live or die is one that only very few in this room have had to face – not to mention the circumstances under which you had to reach this decision. Hardly anyone is able to imagine what it means to be at the mercy of the inhuman logic of a regime that purported to lord over life and death.

Since we are and remain called upon to prevent history from repeating itself, we need people like you, Jehuda Bacon. Not only because you are prepared to stare into this abyss with us, but because you have given us an example and have shown us that we must have no fear.

We can decide. Yes, we are called upon to decide for the whole of our lives. This is what people like you have taught us. That is precisely why Action Reconciliation - Service for Peace (ASF) cannot wish for a better speaker on its 60th anniversary than you.

Once again, thank you so much for being here today.

Those who did not want the crimes that were committed during the National Socialist period, who did not want the suffering caused, did not do enough to prevent it. That is what the founding appeal of Action Reconciliation - Service for Peace of 60 years ago, proclaims.

This sentence is as simple as it is clear. It was meant for the generation of those who experienced and lived under National Socialism. It has always been controversial to speak of guilt wherever a collective is referred to. And yet this confession of guilt was a necessary step in order to lift the cloak of silence that shrouded these crimes. Today, looking to the future, for us, those who were born after this period, it is just as clear that we have a duty of responsibility. Those who want to steer clear of the abyss must be aware of it. They must know where it lurks, what form it can take and what language it speaks.

And they must do enough to ensure that it does not take hold of them and others. This is why the generations born after the war will not be able to avoid reflecting on the past.

Action Reconciliation - Service for Peace sought to go even further than that, however. Its founder Lothar Kreyssig and his few companions wanted to send a signal. A signal of acknowledgement of guilt and responsibility, first and foremost in the countries that suffered the most under the German occupation in Europe, in Poland and Russia, and also in Israel, a state whose foundation will remain bound up with German crimes committed against the Jews of Europe.

Kreyssig wanted to send a signal because he had realised that there would be no peaceful future in Europe without this acknowledgement of German responsibility. He wanted to do this because he knew that the Germans would remain unreconciled among themselves without this acceptance of guilt. Kreyssig, who had initially remained in the GDR after the Wall went up, stepped down from the leadership of the pan-German organisation in 1962. Nevertheless, Action Reconciliation - Service for Peace was, under his direction, a bridge also in the GDR that continued to bring together Germans from both parts of the country. They shared responsibility for their common history – whether they liked it or not. Both German states could not just simply shake off the past, nor could they rewrite history.

Lothar Kreyssig learned his lessons from life in a state that had collapsed following mass murder and the cruellest crimes against humanity. He wanted a different German state – a state governed by

the rule of law. Kreyssig, a former senior judge from Chemnitz, was, according to his personnel file from the year 1935, a "very competent judge", versed in criminal and civil law alike and with an "open, honourable character, responsible and conscientious". However, as was to be expected, he was not suitable for higher-level tasks under the National Socialist regime as he had "no qualms about speaking his mind with respect to anyone" – including the National Socialist state.

And he had, not long after 1933, already taken a dim view of the National Socialist state. He made no secret of his negative attitude towards the regime, as was noted elsewhere. He never joined the NSDAP. His dismissal from judicial service was merely a question of time.

When he learned that mentally ill and incapacitated patients were being taken from the Brandenburg-Görden sanatorium to a facility in Hartheim to be killed off there, in secret and without the knowledge of their guardianship judges, he brought charges of murder against Reichsleiter Philipp Bouhler, Hitler's commissioner for the Aktion T4 programme.

He held firm to the belief that an "order from the Führer" did not constitute any legal basis. And he did not keep mum about it.

Those who were unwilling to recognise the will of the Führer as a source of law had no place in the National Socialist dictatorship, and certainly not in its judiciary. As a committed Christian, Kreyssig had resolved not to collaborate, but to act in accordance with his conscience. He chose the path of resistance: "Justice is what benefits the people. Entire areas of our community have been denied justice in the name of this terrible doctrine, which still remains unchallenged by all guardians of the law in Germany," Kreyssig wrote to Reich Minister of Justice Franz Gürtner on 8 June 1940. He had a feeling that the Aktion T4 programme, the killing of so-called "worthless life", was only the beginning and that not only lawless realms were being carved out, but justice itself was to be wiped off the map. How could he, as the good lawyer he was, have closed his eyes to this development?

And it goes without saying that Lothar Kreyssig knew why in 1958, over a decade after the end of the war, he observed a "dull numbness" and "fearful self-assertion" among his compatriots, as he wrote in the founding appeal of Action Reconciliation - Service for Peace – a thinly veiled circumscription of the Germans' unwillingness to face their past.

Kreyssig considered what was long termed "coming to terms with the past" in the Federal Republic, i.e. accepting responsibility for the injustice that was perpetrated in Europe in the name of the German people, to be a precondition for returning to the fold of the international community and for Germany's integration in Europe.

Action Reconciliation - Service for Peace was intended, first in Western Europe and later on in the neighbouring countries of Eastern Europe, to help overcome the division of Europe and, in Kreyssig's mind's eye, to lead to a "new, deeper understanding of the neighbourliness of peoples".

I have heard about what it means to implement this idea from the many discussions I have held with volunteers working for Action Reconciliation - Service for Peace. They were wonderful and especially lively encounters during which it was always palpable what wealth of experience these young people had already gathered in the months of their voluntary service, how much they draw from this and how they were able to share this with others. I recall an encounter in Jerusalem particularly well.

My wife and I sat opposite a group of young people for whom this year was so much more than just a year between school and an apprenticeship or course of study. It was a time of orientation. They had all thought about and discussed Israeli-German relations and the role that they themselves play here. One of them - as I was particularly delighted to see - had decided to go into politics.

In conversations with Christoph Heubner, whom I have encountered time and again in our efforts to engage with Eastern Europe and Poland, I was fortunate enough to discern what Action Reconciliation - Service for Peace means to the many volunteers and full-time staff. Stefan Reimers, and all those who shoulder responsibility at Action Reconciliation - Service for Peace today, you are committed to your goals and values at a time when there are hardly any witnesses to the National Socialist period left and when much is at risk of being suppressed and forgotten.

It is therefore all the more urgent for us to tell those demonstrating in Berlin today that no line can be drawn under our responsibility for history.

What has become of Kreyssig's call for a new understanding of the neighbourliness of peoples? How topical is it today? Some 180 volunteers in 13 countries are supporting old people, survivors of the Shoah, those in need, and people with physical and psychological ailments. In the past year, Action Reconciliation - Service for Peace hosted 26 summer camps in 17 European countries and is involved in political and historical education projects. It is raising awareness of the consequences of National Socialism, anti-Semitism and racism in the past and present. A key focus of 2017 was the project "Suppression and resistance. Opportunities for civil society in Europe in the past and present", which is being funded by the EU. Four summer camps in Lithuania, Italy, Greece and Hungary have focused on the core messages of Action Reconciliation - Service for Peace: "Speak out for Peace", "Remember (Your) History", "Welcome Refugees" and "Resist

Populists". With political education programmes such as these, Action Reconciliation - Service for Peace is an indispensable bulwark against right-wing populism, historical revisionism, xenophobia and Europhobia.

But the work of remembrance is also about pausing for reflection, as Charlotte Kaiser, who was born in 1999 and worked as a volunteer at the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center in the US, tells us. For her, remembering the atrocities of the National Socialists is a gesture of humility towards the victims.

Thanks to Action Reconciliation - Service for Peace, Lothar Kreyssig's vision of a neighbourliness of peoples has become what we would today call a vibrant civil society.

The 60th anniversary of Action Reconciliation - Service for Peace is a good and welcome opportunity, besides the ASF's work, to examine the story of its foundation and its founder. Indeed, I believe that we should have drawn attention to role models such as Lothar Kreyssig and Fritz Bauer more frequently and more emphatically in the past, examples that were too little known for far too long. Until recently, I was unaware of the fact that Fritz Bauer, to whom I will be privileged to pay tribute at the Paulskirche in Frankfurt shortly, was a major proponent and supporter of Action Reconciliation - Service for Peace, bequeathing a large part of his estate to the organisation.

Assuming responsibility for our own history was a long and at times arduous process. It was no re-education or humiliation forced upon us, but a slow and constant rise to self-awareness and, ultimately, self-liberation. There is no alternative to this for us Germans even today. I say this in light of various attempts at historical revisionism. Those who trivialise once again the crimes of the war of annihilation and genocide bring disgrace upon themselves. We should remind ourselves that historical awareness and political responsibility are at the heart of our democracy.

Our democracy, our country, would not be the same without them.

This path not only returned Germany to the fold of European nations, but was a precondition for the Federal Republic of Germany's development into the country we are today - a respected and trustworthy neighbour in Europe.

Our country owes Lothar Kreyssig and the many volunteers of the ASF who followed his call and his example a great debt of gratitude for this guidance to achieving self-awareness.

What is more, marking 60 years, as I can tell you from my own experience, is an opportunity to set the bar particularly high. I wish you every success for your work.