



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the ceremony to mark the tenth anniversary
of the inauguration of the Memorial to the Homosexuals
Persecuted under the National Socialist Regime
in Berlin on 3 June 2018**

“Human dignity shall be inviolable.” This sentence is fundamental for us Germans.

It is the first sentence in the first article of our constitution – a sentence worded as a bulwark against inhumanity. And it was truly needed, as human dignity had been systematically violated, denied and transgressed through the state’s use of humiliation, persecution, torture and murder during the years of National Socialist tyranny.

Germans deported and murdered millions of people in Germany and all over Europe. Germans laid waste to entire countries and regions, thus leaving deep and visible wounds in Europe. Our country incurred terrible guilt during these twelve years.

And those who now deny, downplay or diminish this unparalleled break with civilisation do not only taunt the millions of victims, but also sow new hatred and seek to deliberately rip open old wounds. We must take a united stance against this.

It is true that it has never been easy for us Germans, either in the East or the West, to remember this terrible time, and in particular the victims and their suffering, in a spirit of honesty. The path was long. For decades, a cloak of silence lay over our dinner tables and smothered every necessary discussion.

And yes, at some point remembrance began in Germany after all. But it came slowly. It came gradually. It came late and for many people it came too late.

Honest remembrance is a cornerstone of our identity today. Nevertheless, it does not come easily to us. Many wounds from the past have still not healed. Far too often, there are reasons to be vigilant once again. Remembering also means remaining vigilant.

That is why it is right that every walk around the Brandenburg Gate now takes us past memorial sites. All four memorials, including this one here, were demanded by the public. In many cases, politicians and the state took a long time to meet these demands. Albert Eckert and Günter Dworek, both of you can recount this process on behalf of many of those here with us today.

It is also thanks to the work of the Foundation that these four memorial sites have now become important symbols of modern Germany – symbols of a country that is aware of its darkest moments and does not deny them; of a country that repeatedly wants to think about “never again!”; and thus of a country that wants to remember.

Today we remember the homosexuals who were persecuted under National Socialism. We remember the many tens of thousands of people whose privacy, lives, love and yes, dignity, were violated, denied and transgressed in the most abhorrent ways.

We remember the over 50,000 men who were persecuted under Section 175 of the Criminal Code, a section that was made more stringent under National Socialism. These men were locked up. They were paraded in public. Their lives were destroyed. They were tortured, incarcerated, sent to concentration camps. Thousands of them died. We remember them today.

We also remember the other people who were persecuted and victimised by the Nazis because of their sexual orientation or sexual identity. Some suffered under the general climate of hatred and contempt, for example because they were lesbian, intersexual or transsexual. Some became targets for other reasons – because they were Jewish, regarded as “asocial”, members of the Swing Youth, socialists or communists – but also because of their sexuality. All of them suffered at the hands of others. We remember them all today.

Through their hatred, the Nazis also wanted to erase from German history the diversity that had previously enriched our country, particularly in Berlin during the Weimar Republic. The intellectual legacy and liberal ideas of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Johanna Elberskirchen and Magnus Hirschfeld were regarded as anti-German and supposed to disappear into the mists of history.

Countless people fell victim to this insanity and countless lives were thrown off course. It is good that we are commemorating them today.

However, we must also remember the post-war period, as during the early years of the Federal Republic, virtually no one was in any great rush to restore Hirschfeld’s legacy. For all those whose sexuality was defined as a crime prior to 1945, 8 May 1945 did not mark total liberation.

Even under the Basic Law, they were still at the mercy of Section 175. The same went for the GDR. This section remained in force in the Federal Republic, unchanged from the 1935 version.

For over 20 years, tens of thousands of men in the Federal Republic were arrested, sentenced and imprisoned under Section 175. They had to continue living in secrecy; they continued to be denounced and to face threats to their livelihoods. In many cases, it merely took an investigation to destroy a life.

The new liberal order in our country remained incomplete for many people and many years. Homosexuals' dignity remained violable. It took too long until their dignity counted for something in Germany. And the years until then were marked by a long path, with arduous discussions, for victims and activists.

Homosexuals experienced unspeakable suffering under National Socialist tyranny. And even after 1945, their fate was not acknowledged for a long time – too long.

However, correcting oneself, remembering the past honestly, and if need be, apologising when injustice has occurred are great strengths of democracy.

As Federal President, it is important to me to say today that your country made you wait for too long. We are late. What has been said to other groups of victims is something you are still waiting to hear. And that is why I ask for forgiveness today for all the suffering and injustice of the past and the long silence that followed it.

Yet it has to be said that our country has learned some lessons. I see many people here today who have done their utmost for decades to ensure these lessons were learned. Thanks to you, the legacy of Ulrichs, Elberskirchen and Hirschfeld was able to flourish again despite everything. I think this is good for our country.

Almost 50 years after Stonewall, shortly before the 40th anniversary of the first Christopher Street Day in Germany, 17 years after the Act on Registered Partnerships and a year after the introduction of the right to same-sex marriage, I have no doubt that you engaged and politically active individuals in particular have achieved a great deal. You can be proud of that and I hope that we can all be proud here today.

To all those here at this memorial, and to all gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, transsexual and intersex people in our country, I say today that your sexual orientation and sexual identity naturally enjoy the protection of our state, too. And naturally, your dignity is inviolable, too, as it should have been from the very start.

We all know that there is still work to be done. We cannot turn a blind eye when homophobic insults are now uttered as a matter of

course in schoolyards and when all too often we have to award prizes to dedicated people from other countries who risk their lives fighting for basic human and civil rights.

That is another reason why it is still important that we keep visiting our memorials, that we come here, remember, and in remembering, recognise our responsibility for the present.

We owe this to human dignity.

Thank you very much.