



**Speech by Federal President Frank Walter Steinmeier
at the conference “Poland and Germany in Europe” on the
occasion of the 100th anniversary of Poland’s
independence
on 5 June 2018
in Warsaw, Poland**

I am delighted to have the opportunity to share a few thoughts with you at the opening of this conference.

The fact that we, in this year, on this occasion and as representatives of our countries, are discussing the role of Poland and Germany in a united Europe, the fact that we are not only doing this as neighbours, but as part of this European Union, is far more than many of our predecessors could possibly have imagined.

Indeed, that we would one day work together was so unimaginable for so long that many are apt to call this a miracle. As understandable as this expression may be, it ignores the fact that this miracle required pretty mundane preconditions. It would have been unthinkable were it not for Poland’s active readiness for reconciliation.

Looking back on German Polish history, there was little cause for Poland to place its trust in its German neighbours. Prussia played a major role in the disappearance of the Polish state over the course of centuries. And, Mr President, you mentioned the fact that the National Socialist regime ultimately sought to destroy Poland, its statehood and its society. We will not forget the crime against humanity perpetrated against the Jews of Europe during the German occupation of Poland. And we will not forget the suffering that Germans brought upon the whole of Poland.

It is for this reason, Mr President, Andrzej Duda, and I say this as the German head of state, that Germany is and continues to be thankful that we encounter each other today in a spirit of trust and that this partnership that we now take for granted became possible in the first place. And we are thankful also for the fact that Poland and Germany are able today to discuss – and also disagree about – the

political shape that the European Union is to take. But particularly when we disagree about something, we must remember that this partnership cannot be taken for granted even today; it is only possible with an enduring awareness of and responsibility for the history that unites us.

When Poland regained its independence as a nation state one hundred years ago, Polish German togetherness was conceivable at best in a private context, through personal friendships, and not in a political sense. But even friendships left their mark, such as the one between the German author, art collector and occasional diplomat Count Harry Kessler and Marshall Józef Piłsudski.

It was in 1915 at a time of war that they made each other's acquaintance on the Eastern Front near Czartorysk, where Kessler was serving as a liaison officer to the Austrians. Their friendship is part of German Polish and also European history. More precisely, this connection between them itself made history.

You can read about this in Kessler's diary from the time immediately after the end of the First World War. It recounts three days in November 1918, three days that would come to dominate the course of Poland's history and the emergence of the Second Republic, and which would play a decisive role in the downfall of the German Empire and the proclamation of the republic in Germany.

It was Count Harry Kessler who was tasked with freeing Piłsudski and his close confidant General Sosnkowski from German imprisonment in Magdeburg on 8 November and bringing them to Warsaw. And so it was that, following this successful coup, four men, Piłsudski, Sosnkowski, Kessler and the commander of the Prussian motor unit (Kraftfahrtruppe), Rittmeister von Gülpen, sat in an automobile en route from Magdeburg to Berlin, passing through a pretty unspectacular landscape in which, nevertheless, each of the four spotted something familiar.

"It was a warm springlike day with a perfect blue sky", Kessler writes, [...] "and out of doors and surrounded by woods and fields, thoughts of enmity, war and revolution were far from the minds of all four of us. Piłsudski [...] gave me a nudge and said that this was what his home region looked like, very homely, this poor soil, the pines and woodlands, only that it was hillier where he had grown up."

And so, in the end, they all got into conversation with each other during their journey. What seems remarkable to me about this is the fact that this moment of freedom, the absence of war and revolution, that this moment causes all four of them, almost immediately, to discover something familiar amidst the unfamiliar. As men of their age through and through and soldiers on opposing sides, they are far from being on the same page. And yet they acknowledge each other; they

notice that they have something in common and that this is potentially even more than they might have suspected up until then.

In the next few, eventful days, the German Kaiser would abdicate, the social democrat Philipp Scheidemann would proclaim the republic and Józef Piłsudski would board a train to Warsaw. He was to lead Poland to independence and pave the way to the Second Republic. It spelled the end, for the time being, to the division of Poland and was the dawn of a new era.

Józef Piłsudski and Count Harry Kessler were to encounter each other on a few more occasions after that. Shortly afterwards, Kessler followed as the first Envoy of the new German Republic in Warsaw. The two continued to meet and respect one another. They held each other's candour in high regard and were united by the intention to guide their two peoples "out of their old enmity into new amity", as Piłsudski put it when Kessler handed him his letter of credence.

The year 1918 was a landmark year not only for Poland and Germany – it was a period of change and new beginnings. At the end of this Great War, monarchies had fallen and empires collapsed while nation states had newly or, as in the case of Poland in 1918, re emerged. For both Poland and Germany, this period of transformation was bound up with the attempt to bring about a democratic fresh start. Both Piłsudski and Kessler played an active role in this period of political upheaval, despite the fact that the latter rarely occupied a prominent position and neither of them, on closer inspection, were born democrats.

We know today that these efforts to bring about a democratic fresh start also failed because there were too few democrats who gave this endeavour their wholehearted blessing. And we know that this fresh start in Poland was made even more difficult at a time when it was necessary to bring together different administrative, legal and economic systems. For all of Piłsudski's hopes, no "new amity" was yet to emerge from old enmity in the inter war years.

What he, Piłsudski, told Kessler back then, the need to leave old enmities behind them and "work together like neighbours who have, at long last, come to their senses" took, as we know now, a very long time, to become reality.

It is thus all the more important for us today to preserve what has been achieved. The fact that Poland and Germany are closer now than at any time in their common history has much to do with us heeding this call to come to our senses and to work together, that we have learned this lesson today.

Poland and Germany are strong and independent nations in Europe and are economic and political partners within the European

Union. Neither threatens the other's sovereignty, and neither country takes orders from others.

We are free because we have come together in the European Union of our own free will – and not only for economic reasons. No, because we knew that we would be out of our depth as individual nation states in our efforts to respond to new global challenges. On the basis of this realisation, the member states of the EU have relinquished part of their sovereignty in order to gain additional, common – European – sovereignty. European sovereignty interpreted in such a way is not incompatible with national sovereignty but complements and even expands it.

A Europe, a common and genuinely self confident Europe, that speaks with one voice is what is needed if each of our individual nations is to be able to make itself heard in this world at all. Separate from each other, we would not only have less economic strength, but, and I am certain of this, we would also be less able to act politically – particularly in a world in which, looking to the East, we are exposed to new and dangerous tensions. Of course, I agree that Europe should invest in transatlantic relations. However, I cannot ignore the disconcertion that we have experienced in recent times in which we can no longer be so sure about the political direction that the leading power in the West is taking, at least as far as international trade policy is concerned. This is the world in which we pursue our policies today.

But we must also not forget that sovereignty on the international stage requires certain conditions to be met at home, namely democracy and the rule of law. Indeed, we Europeans are not sovereign because we somehow pull together at random where we see fit, but because we act on the basis of values and rules that we have accorded ourselves. Within the framework of these basic rules, each nation is free to shape its democracy and constitutional order itself. Whenever basic rules are challenged, however, everyone else is also affected. And that makes no one stronger – and especially not in the eyes of those who would prefer us Europeans to be divided rather than stand together as one.

In a nutshell, we have a great deal to lose. If the European Union's cohesion crumbles, then none of us will be any more able to assert our interests as nation states. On the contrary, we will all lose out.

Let us therefore continue to venture down the path that others have cleared for us, a path to a Europe in which we stand up together for our security, our prosperity, our freedom and, yes, also for our national idiosyncrasies.