



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the "Pogrom 1938" commemoration event
Berlin, 9 November 2018**

Just a few days ago, we heard about the terrible attack in Pittsburgh. I was not only appalled by this hate-filled crime and saddened by the deaths of so many people. I was also afraid for a friend who had to leave this country with his family 80 years ago in order to save his life. I met Walter Jacob when the synagogue in Augsburg celebrated its centenary. His father was the synagogue's rabbi and he grew up under its roof – until 9 November 1938. The family was able to flee, first to London and then to the United States, and Walter Jacob himself became the rabbi of a congregation in Pittsburgh, where he lives to this very day. And he's alive. Thankfully, he was unhurt. However, I don't want to begin this speech without saying to him and his friends that we share the double pain which this crime must mean to him. We're all mourning the victims of Pittsburgh and our thoughts are with their families and the people of that city.

Jeanine Meerapfel,

In your foreword to the book by Michael Ruetz, you wrote, "It is difficult to imagine the fear and despair which this night provoked. Whenever I try to imagine the events which suddenly called everything into question, all ways of life, all certainties, all the things we took for granted in our daily lives, I am seized by terror. You are a Jew", wrote Jeanine Meerapfel, "and suddenly there are no more safe places. No door, no wall protects you from the hate. No-one comes to your rescue. Everyone stares."

The images which Michael Ruetz and Astrid Köppe compiled, edited and published in an illustrated book depict these stares. We can see the curious stares as well as the amused, the uncertain, the enthusiastic and the malicious stares.

For the humiliation of the Jewish population took place here in Berlin, in Hamburg, Munich, Frankfurt and other cities in the German

Reich, as well as in villages and hamlets – on the streets and in broad daylight. Eighty years ago today, on 9 November 1938.

Ruetz's images remind us that the violence and the plundering, the burning down and the destruction of Jewish property took place before everyone's eyes, not under the cover of darkness and not in one single pogrom night. From eye-witness accounts, we know that it was not only SA members and National Socialist officials who went on the rampage. We know that neighbours also became plunderers and perpetrators.

It lasted days. Days during which so much was lost: friends, neighbours, property, home, trust, security and protection. Many lost their lives.

What we call dignity was also lost. The intention was to strip the victims of their dignity. Their tormentors debased themselves with their actions.

Five years after the National Socialists came to power, German society had an opportunity during those days in November 1938 to take a close look at itself. What we see today are images of a society which has lost its way in a most abhorrent manner. We're appalled by them because they show what people are capable of doing to others. Or more precisely: what they're prepared to tolerate without intervening. And we're also appalled because they illustrate how contagious hate can be.

The images reveal the defencelessness of the victims, their horror and their fear. They provide a foretaste of what was to follow this disenfranchisement: expulsion, torture and murder. Barbarism and the millions of lost lives which Nazi Germany inflicted on the whole of Europe.

However, the images from that time also appal us because we notice that the perpetrators and eye-witnesses think they are safe. A pogrom is the result of resentment which has spiralled into anger, hate and violence. It appeals to the most base instincts – it provokes greed and cruelty. However, anyone who believes they can see this in the faces of the standers-by is mistaken. Rather, the observer sees that the faces of the onlookers display no disquiet about the calamity suffered by others.

That's the abyss we're looking into. It shocks us, and rightly so. For that betrayal of all civilised values which culminated in Auschwitz is already evident here. Those of us born after the war know that these images don't portray random incidents or events far back in the past. We know that it happened here, not somewhere else, that great-grandfathers and mothers were among the perpetrators and eye-witnesses. We know what happened afterwards and that the past captured by these images is our past.

We want to step out of this crowd, from this or that image, but we are gripped by these images.

We are gripped by them just as Jeanine Meerapfel is gripped by them. She was born in Buenos Aires in 1943 into a Jewish-German family which had been able to flee. And she knows that just because a horror is in the past that doesn't mean that it's disappeared.

We've become accustomed to referring to the destructive ideology and negation of culture of the National Socialists when we talk about the pogroms in November 1938. This allows us to separate this barbarism from what we call culture, from what we are or want to be. It's important to make this differentiation. But it could lead us to mistakenly believe that we can separate this negation of all that culture stands for from our own history and identity and thus let it fade into oblivion. We're hearing again and ever more frequently that remembering these crimes is backward-looking and domineering. That it's blotting out the glorious past and for that reason alone must come to an end.

However, the crime committed against European Jews is inextricably linked to German history and identity. That's why we'll never stop remembering it in Germany, neither today nor in the future.

It is part of our history and identity because the crime against humanity perpetrated against the Jews also represented an irreplaceable loss to German culture. The history of this building, the Akademie der Künste, illustrates this. Its predecessor, the Prussian Akademie der Künste, lost 41 members between 1933 and 1938, who were expelled either because they were Jewish or because their views were not in line with the prevailing political climate at the time.

Every reminder of the National Socialist era is also a reminder of this loss. For we have to acknowledge that something is missing, missing for all of us, in art, in music and in literature, something that wasn't painted, or not composed or not written.

The loss is irretrievable. It's a wound which will not heal. Remembering the crimes, the persecution, expulsion and murder of the Jews therefore invariably reminds us of this pain.

Accepting it is part of our identity, part of the basic understanding of our state and of our constitution. This pain has been incorporated into the first sentences of our constitution: "Human dignity shall be inviolable. To respect and protect it shall be the duty of all state authority."

However, Jeanine Meerapfel also asks in her foreword to Michael Ruetz's book: "Can one live in this country?" Can one live in a country where anti-Semitic attacks still take place, where attacks on Jewish citizens and Jewish institutions are increasing in number?

The question as to whether a Jewish person can live in this country must be answered and as the Head of State of this country I say: it's our duty to ensure that no Jewish person in Germany replies "no". Together with you, Ms Meersapfel, with the citizens of this country at our side and on behalf of our state, I want to reaffirm that Germany intends to keep on remembering, that we will not tolerate the violence we see in Michael Ruetz's images and that we will stand up and oppose anti-Semitism in whatever form it takes.

For none of us can or wants to live in a country in which Jewish people cannot live. Or to put it a better way: only if Jewish people feel safe and at home in Germany can this Republic be completely at ease with itself.

Anti-Semitism should have no place in our society, which puts protecting human dignity first. That applies to everyone living in this country and who wants to live here. We've given our word: it's enshrined in our constitution. And we will stand by that. Always.