



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the cultural evening featuring music, art and literature
of the Roma and Sinti and the Yenish
on 22 January 2019
at Schloss Bellevue**

I am delighted that you have all come to Schloss Bellevue this evening. This place has never before witnessed such an evening – and it promises to be a very special occasion.

Perhaps some of you were puzzled when you read your invitation to join the Federal President for a cultural evening featuring music, art and literature of the Roma and Sinti and the Yenish". Maybe some of you wondered whether the evening was to mark a special occasion.

Yes, it is a special occasion, albeit not an anniversary celebration.

No, with this evening I wanted to send a clear and – in my opinion – overdue signal. For in Europe and in Germany there is a culture that is often, whether deliberately or unconsciously, overlooked, neglected, stifled and even suppressed, which is now to receive visible recognition here, at the very seat of the Head of State of our country. The culture of the Roma and Sinti, the culture of the largest minority in Europe, is to be the focus of attention here.

For this location, Schloss Bellevue, is situated only a few hundred metres as the crow flies from the headquarters of terror, from where, under National Socialism, the planned extermination of the Sinti and Roma was organised – at the behest of the German Head of State of the day.

It is good that public awareness of what Romani Rose and many others refer to as the "forgotten Holocaust" of the Sinti and Roma is now finally growing. Many people have worked to bring this about. First and foremost you, the Sinti and Roma yourselves, who have tirelessly drawn attention to the terrible fate of half a million victims of murder in Europe, more than 20,000 of whom were German Sinti and

Roma – and to the enduring pain that lives on in almost all your families to this day.

It was my predecessor Roman Herzog who, at the opening of the Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma in Heidelberg on 16 March 1997, stated in no uncertain terms that still apply: "The genocide of the Sinti and Roma was perpetrated with the same motive of racial barbarity, the same intention and the same desire for organised and final extermination as that of the Jews." As I know how important this statement was and remains for you, I am very deliberately repeating it here today.

It is also part of the Memorial to the Sinti and Roma of Europe murdered under the National Socialist Regime, which was finally inaugurated here in Berlin on 24 October 2012 after many years of preparation.

Yet awareness of the long history of anti-Gypsyism and the story of discrimination and persecution of the European Roma, which is still going on in many cases, has undoubtedly also been triggered and heightened by the speech given by the Dutch survivor Zoni Weisz in the German Bundestag on Holocaust Remembrance Day 2011, the first Sinto to speak there. Nobody who was present that day or who saw the speech on television will ever forget it. And this evening we are also aware that in many parts of Europe, new resentment towards minorities, particularly towards Sinti and Roma, is being fuelled and exploited for political ends.

This evening, when we focus on the Roma culture, this old European culture – incidentally, the Sinti have lived in the area of what is now Germany for 600 years – we must not forget this bleak, dark historical background. For this culture has often not been perceived and recognised as a special and independent culture – indeed sometimes it has not been regarded as culture at all. And when it was, it was seen as both a threatening and a fascinatingly exotic way of life, which often was and still is two sides of the same coin.

I am therefore all too well aware of the sensitivities that can be triggered when non-Sinti and Roma speak about or portray this culture or indeed take it as the subject of their art. All too often it is then distorted beyond all recognition by prejudices, stereotypes and clichés. Even when this is done with the best of intentions. The artists performing tonight are invited to articulate their own culture, to give expression to its value, to present it themselves as a counterweight to all external, often discriminatory definitions and descriptions.

Right up to the present, a distorted view of the culture of the Sinti and Roma has been and still is depicted, despite the best of intentions. We could find plenty of examples. Perhaps you will remember the song "Spiel Zigan" (Play, Gypsy) by Udo Jürgens

from 1971, which, although referring to the dark aspects of the majority society with self-critical intention, nonetheless makes use of the all too hackneyed fascination clichés. Here are three verses from it:

“Play, gypsy, play.
You can only give the happiness
that in your life
this world denies you.

Play your longing,
which they never possessed,
they who have long forgotten
the art of dreaming.

Play, gypsy, play.
Give your songs
to those who tomorrow
would rather see you leave again than arrive.”

The song still breathes some of the spirit of the post-1968 years and does contain elements of social criticism, yet at the very point where it wants to be positive, it adopts an outside perspective on the so-called “gypsy culture” with which we have been very familiar here in Germany since the Romantic period.

This evening, therefore, our view of Roma and Sinti culture should not be shaped by external descriptions but by its own presentation. That no doubt also ties in well with the imminent launch of the “RomArchive”, created by Isabel Raabe and Franziska Sauerbrey and promoted by the German Federal Cultural Foundation. It is due to open the day after tomorrow with a three-day festival at the Akademie der Künste.

This outstanding pioneering project, the largest cultural project ever made by, with and about Sinti and Roma, puts together an unprecedented digital archive, which centres on self-representation and portrays the richness and diversity of the Sinti and Roma arts and cultures. I hope that it will be instrumental in helping Sinti and Roma art and culture to be recognised as an integral part of European cultural history after 600 years of external representation.

The evening also ties in well with the fact that the Wunderhorn publishing house has been promoting the history and literature of the Sinti and Roma for a long time now. And also with the fact that six months ago, Wilfried Ihrig and Ulrich Janetzki published the first “modern poetry atlas of the Roma and Sinti” bearing the title “Die Morgendämmerung der Worte” (The Dawning of Words) in the Anderen

Bibliothek (Other Library series). When you consider that it contains poems translated from Romany and 21 other languages and dialects, you can see the broad European nature of the Sinti and Roma linguistic culture, which for a long time was only handed down via the oral tradition.

In her preface, Dotschy Reinhardt rightly points out the importance for Sinti and Roma of the commitment to their own culture also in the fight for their human rights. And in his epilogue, Klaus-Michael Bogdal reiterates how the relationship between the majority societies and the minority in Europe has been shaped above all by fear and distrust – and how this manifests itself particularly in the culture of the majority society, and how difficult it was in contrast for the Romany people to give their own culture a voice.

This evening therefore also fits in with the first cultural week organised by the Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma, due to take place from 24 to 27 June 2019 and focusing on the theme of “Home”, for which I was happy to assume the patronage.

Now, who is going to show us snapshots from the culture of Europe’s Roma and Sinti this evening?

We have just heard

Tayo Awosusi-Onutor. Born in Karlsruhe, she is a singer, author and director. She describes herself as Afro-Sintesa. Her music is soul, jazz, R&B and the music of the Sinti and Roma. She is also politically active in various communities of colour. Tayo will be accompanied on the e-piano by Ernie Schmiedel. It’s a pleasure to see you today. Welcome!

We are also looking forward to the other musicians: David Peña Dorantes from Seville comes from one of the oldest Spanish flamenco dynasties, that of the “Peña_Perrate_Bacán_Pinini”, and is a key figure in modern flamenco. Dorantes will be accompanied by Isidro Suarez on percussion. Welcome!

I am looking forward to guitarist and composer Ferenc Snétberger, who originates from northern Hungary and has lived in Berlin for many years. In 2011, when I saw him for the first time, he was one of the performers at the Holocaust Memorial Day in the German Bundestag. Ferenc Snétberger is known particularly for his improvisation talent and his genre-transcending performance. His repertoire is inspired by the Roma tradition of his homeland, Brazilian music and flamenco as well as classical guitar and jazz. Welcome!

Incidentally, the European classical masters, such as Haydn, Beethoven and Brahms, also drew inspiration from the musical traditions of the Roma and Sinti. Django Reinhardt, for example, or Coco Schumann – unforgotten particularly in Berlin – injected new colours and forms of expression into the world of jazz.

I am looking forward to art historian and curator Tímea Junghaus, who originates from Budapest and is the director of the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture, which was founded in 2017 on the initiative of the Council of Europe, the Open Society Foundations and the Alliance for the European Roma Institute. Tímea Junghaus' activities as a curator include the first Roma pavilion at the International Art Exhibition in Venice in 2007.

I am looking forward to the visual artist Delaine Le Bas from Worthing, in the United Kingdom. She worked on her installations with her deceased husband, artist Damian Le Bas. They have cooperated closely with the Kai Dikhas gallery and Berlin's Maxim Gorki Theatre, which has not only been showing the play "Roma Armee" since 2017, but which also hosted the first self-organised Roma Biennale in 2018. Welcome!

And last but not least: I was looking forward to the writer Mariella Mehr, who is unfortunately unable to be here tonight due to ill health. We will, however, be hearing one of her writings. A Swiss writer, she is a member of the Yenish minority, which does not belong to the Sinti and Roma but was discriminated against and persecuted as "gypsy-like wandering travellers". Like many others, she was forcibly separated from her "travelling" family, her parents, and grew up in 16 children's homes and three educational establishments. In novels and poems Mariella Mehr developed an evocative and expressive language for existential experiences such as foreignness and belonging, injury and pain.

As you can see, we have an international line-up. And this also includes actor Sophie Rois, who will read the work of Mariella Mehr. She is from Linz, but has lived in Berlin for a long time and worked with Frank Castorf for many years. Now she is a member of the Deutsches Theater ensemble. I am truly delighted that this outstanding actor is giving us the honour of her presence this evening. Welcome, Ms Rois!

I promise that this will be an exciting and fascinating evening. And I hope that with this evening we will send not only an audible but also a visible signal.