Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
on the occasion of the awarding
of the German National Prize to Anita Lasker-Wallfisch
in Berlin on 3 September 2019

Where does this voice come from? That's what I asked myself when I heard you speaking in public for the first time, Mrs Lasker Wallfisch. I don't mean the many presentations and question-and-answer sessions that you continue to give at German schools today, and nor do I mean the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of National Socialism last year when you gave a speech at the German Bundestag. I mean the voice of the young 20 year-old Anita Lasker, who at some point in April 1945, shortly after the liberation of the Bergen Belsen camp, still before the end of the war, said the following to a BBC reporter:

"This is Anita Lasker speaking, a German Jew."

This voice was very young, very confident and very firm. You wanted to let your sister in the UK know that you had survived. But in this very first, brief statement that we heard you make, and which naturally I only heard for myself decades later, you didn't just speak for yourself. You spoke about Auschwitz, on behalf of the survivors and the dead. And you also talked about the fact that the few who had survived feared that the world wouldn't believe what had happened to them there.

That's what I found so astonishing and moving. The fact that such a young voice found the strength to speak, to speak that way – still in the midst of the inferno that was Bergen Belsen. After all, speaking is about seeking a way to put into words that which defies comprehension, about wresting words from the realm of the unspeakable.

Who can fathom what it means to speak as a survivor? How can you speak at all about what you have experienced if the language you have learned has no words for this? If you were born into a German-Jewish family in Wrocław in which you made music and read books together? A family in which being German, as you once said, was about loving the music of Bach and Beethoven, in which you still read

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Schiller's Don Carlos despite the threat of deportation? In which culture was a home?

The barbarity of the camps, the destructive ideology and the negation of culture under the National Socialist regime knew no language as a means of communication. Threats and commands were the order of the day, while music was abused as a drumbeat for marches or for the sentimental edification of murderers.

So how can survivors speak about their experiences? Literature has come up with ways to do so. Imre Kertész called this atonal language. When horrors lived through can no longer be integrated into a shared world of experience, language must also resist everything that has existed, everything that has been tried, tested and cultivated in the past. Kertész was able to speak about Auschwitz by writing about it in literature.

Elie Wiesel went even further. He saw remembrance and speaking about the past as an obligation. Those who help people to forget by staying silent, he said in his plea to the survivors, finish the work of the murderers. This was why he, a survivor, wanted to bear witness.

But only when we, who did not experience the camps, ask ourselves what it meant for the survivors to speak do we perhaps begin to sense that the experience of the death camps either cannot be conveyed or can only be expressed with difficulty. That it sets the survivors apart from the living because there is no continuity between the experience of a death camp and a life that has never been faced with horror on a daily basis, total degradation and death. Then we sense that the survivors were often alone and stayed that way – those who were unable to speak about the horrors they had experienced or suffered, as well as those who wanted to speak, but were ignored by those who wanted to leave the past behind them as quickly as possible.

Only a few, far too few, tried to alleviate the loneliness of the victims.

We know that there were witnesses to the humiliation, persecution and deportation of Jewish citizens during the National Socialist period. It was precisely their silence, the silence of the perpetrators and their accomplices, the suppression of guilt and the failure to mourn in Germany that turned the loneliness of the survivors into an existential burden. This burden proved too heavy for Paul Celan, Primo Levi and Jean Améry to bear. This – quite literally – deadly silence represented the completion of a murderous project. It fills me and us with shame to his day.

What you have done, Mrs Lasker-Wallfisch, namely resisting silence and repression of the past over the course of many decades, is

therefore all the more important. The fact that it finally proved possible to lift the shroud of silence in this country is thanks to people such as you. We have those who survived, who bore witness, and who spoke and wrote about their experiences, to thank for this.

It took an agonisingly long time until they were heard, until the Auschwitz trials in the mid-1960s marked the beginning of the end of the culture of silence in German society – until the numbness in which this country had hitherto been locked dissipated.

The trials were a prerequisite for this, not because it proved possible to get to grips with the crime against humanity that was the Shoah through the courts, but because the misery of silence was made public. The victims became witnesses. They were cross-examined and they spoke out – many of them in agony – while the perpetrators remained silent and in denial.

But this silence and denial were now public silence and denial. Before the eyes of the world, and above all before the eyes and ears of the German public, the injustice that this silence signified was laid bare. The perpetrators not only wanted to remain undisturbed by any claim to atonement, but also to stay immune to guilt and shame. Not long after this, a younger generation asked their fathers and mothers to explain why this silence and repression had been tolerated for so long.

The recordings of the Auschwitz trials prove that guilt can be heard. The perpetrators' denials and silence speak volumes. Their statements are unbearable, but most instructive. They make us Germans feel ashamed. And perhaps the feeling of shame they provoke is part of the cathartic impact of the Auschwitz trials. This feeling did not begin immediately, but its impact has been lasting.

At the time, Fritz Bauer was Prosecutor-General in Land Hesse. Germany has him to thank for the fact that there was an attempt to try people in a German court for the crimes committed in Auschwitz-Birkenau. And like you, my dear Mrs Lasker-Wallfisch, Fritz Bauer came from a German Jewish family of lawyers – from the same world as your parents, Alfons and Edith Lasker, a world that you know so well and have described so vividly for us.

The truth is painful, but we can expect people to bear it. Without recognition of this, there would be no Jewish life, no understanding and no dialogue in this country.

The truth of the annihilation camps is a burden that only the survivors were expected to bear. They could not repress these memories. For the survivors, what they experienced is a past that never ends. In your book, "Inherit the Truth", you wrote: "When you have seen and gone through what we have, those experiences become

an integral part of you, and they inevitably colour your whole make-up."

The fact that you share this truth with us today, give talks in schools about your experiences, and speak up in support of remembrance and a common future is a gift – indeed, it is far more than that. It is also a service to the future of this country, an absolutely invaluable service.

The Federal Republic of Germany would not be the country we know and where we want to live today if we had not accepted our past. And we would not have been able to accept it without the help offered to us by people like you, Mrs Lasker-Wallfisch, and your sister Renate Lasker-Harpprecht.

It was never a question of simply addressing this past for long enough so that we could go back to enjoying a "relaxed" relationship with our own country. A relationship with one's own country is not relaxed if the past has to be rewritten into a perfect chain of feats and achievements. Those who believe they need a sanitised version of the past as proof of their own country's greatness are nationalists, not patriots.

The German National Prize, which was founded by Helmut Schmidt with like-minded people such as Gerd Bucerius, Reimar Lüst, Fritz Stern, Kurt Masur, Günter de Bruyn and Ignatz Bubis, pays tribute to services to our country. Mrs Lasker Wallfisch, your endeavours to foster understanding, particularly with young Germans, your stance against anti-Semitism and marginalisation, and your support for tolerance are shining examples of such services. We would like to thank you for that.

Your country, Germany, would like to thank you for that!

Alongside our feelings of gratitude, it remains our responsibility today to pass on memory of the Shoah and thus our knowledge about the prerequisites for remembering and speaking about the past. There will always be some resistance to this, and it is our duty to defend remembrance of the past against such resistance. I said a few moments ago that for the survivors, what they experienced is a past that never ends. And I would like to add that for those of us who belong to later generations, remembrance is a responsibility that never ends – an enduring responsibility.

In today's world in particular, we will need to stand up far more resolutely once again to the notorious silence and denial. We must never – and we will never – tolerate the resurgence of anti-Semitism. There can be no room in our society for anti-Semitism. We will fight it in Germany and as Europeans we will fight it in Europe. I firmly believe that we have the strength to do so. Historical guilt cannot be assuaged or offset, but it must guide us in the present. a line can never be

drawn under the past. We have a responsibility for the past. And this responsibility has not diminished in any way over time. The survivors of the Shoah put their hopes in us. You, Mrs Lasker Wallfisch, put your hopes in us. We want to live up to your hopes and our responsibility.

Allow me to extend my warmest congratulations to you on being awarded the German National Prize, which pays tribute to your life's work. In accepting this prize, above all you honour and give hope to the country in whose name it is awarded.