



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
on the occasion of a Heimat evening with  
music, literature, theatre and film  
at Schloss Bellevue  
on 6 February 2020**

Perhaps some of you were a little surprised when you received the invitation for this evening's event. For today is all about a truly German word: Heimat, or homeland. I can assure you that the aim of this evening is not to romanticise all things German.

Heimat, a very German word with no equivalent in many European languages, is elusive and difficult to fathom. And those who have spent some time thinking about this issue will know that Heimat became very popular in Germany time and again over the course of history until the term seemed discredited once and for all. Martin Walser commented that Heimat was the nicest way to describe backwardness. Edgar Reitz, renowned for his magnificent Heimat series, which came out when the concept of Heimat was certainly not in fashion, describes Heimat as an expression of longing and as a battlefield of emotions. And the series, which many of you know, was shown around the world with the original title Heimat. The director Fatih Akin believes that Heimat is more like a mindset, while Theodor Fontane would say that it is a wide field.

Heimat is experiencing a revival. Books are written about it, it is the subject of films and we have a Federal Minister responsible for Heimat. And I firmly believe that those who long for Heimat are most definitely not stuck in the past. On the contrary, Heimat is a positive concept: it can foster cohesion and make a shared future possible. That is precisely why I placed it at the heart of my speech marking the Day of German Unity shortly after the last Bundestag election, an election which revealed deep rifts in society. Unfortunately, however, I have the impression that Heimat has once again become a political rallying cry.

I would therefore like to begin today by asking once more: what is Heimat? Is it the familiar place we grew up in, something we associate with certain people, smells, landscapes, food or a dialect? Or is it the place where we live and feel at home? Is it the language? Is it a political concept or a sentiment? Does it only exist in our memories? And can individuals only have one Heimat?

As many of you have discovered, Heimat has many different spellings today: it can be spelled with ai, ey or ay. Haymat with ay is a play on the German word Heimat and the Turkish word hayat, which means "life". It is also the title of a book by Kristina and Firat Kara, which I read with great interest. I would like to wish them both a very warm welcome this evening.

I sometimes feel as though  
My heart is broken.  
Now and again I feel homesick.  
I just don't know what for.

Mascha Kaléko wrote in her poem Emigrants' Monologue about Heimweh, another very German word, which means homesickness. Above all, however, she wrote about a painful, an existential experience: the loss of Heimat, the loss of language. The writer Emine Sevgi Özdamar once said that her German words did not have a childhood. I would also like to extend a very warm welcome to her this evening!

We often do not understand what Heimat is until we leave it, or when it is taken away from us. That is an experience as old as humanity. However, people have always also found a new home somewhere else. That is an experience which many of you have probably also had.

Today, people are more mobile than ever before. However, many view the world as a permanently alien place. Many are unsettled by the pace of globalisation and the digital transformation. That may re-awaken a longing to feel at home, a longing to put down deeper roots: where our surroundings are familiar, where we feel safe. Karl Jaspers said that home was where he understood and where he was understood. Everyone in our country wants to understand and be understood – and rightly so! That applies both to those who have been here for generations and those who came to our country much more recently.

However, to understand and be understood requires one thing: communication. I find it encouraging that a majority in our country regard Heimat as something which brings us together and not as something which divides us. And this is why I say: let us not leave the concept of Heimat to those who use it to exclude others, who mobilise

“us” against “the others”, who marginalise groups and incite hatred and discord!

There are many people living in Germany who lost their Heimat 75 years ago. Many others who have found a new home here since the early sixties and many who have come to this country during the last few years as refugees. That has changed German society. Yes, we have had heated discussions during the last few years about who is welcome in our country and how integration can work. And yes, these discussions are arduous. But they are necessary in a vibrant democracy – provided they are conducted with decency and respect. We also have to conduct them because migration is not a one-way process – and our society is not static.

Migration and integration require all of us to play our part: both those who have just come to our country and those who have been here for generations. Nor will integration succeed better the less we discuss it. Quite the opposite is true.

All of us have to reach out to each other. We have to accept that we are all different, sometimes very different, that we come from different countries, that we have different life plans, religions and formative experiences. We have to be considerate towards one another. We have to respect the new facets of our society as well as what was already there. And we must not withdraw ever more into our own worlds or, as we say nowadays, our echo chambers!

The truth is that the term “integration” no longer adequately reflects our reality today. At any rate, not if this means melting into cultural uniformity. In truth, what “German” means and what “Germany” is have already changed. Germany consists of many cultures, of many newly evolving cultures – and that is what we want!

We can therefore only create the place where we all live – our Heimat – by working together: in peace and in line with the values enshrined in our Basic Law. A Heimat in which – despite all our differences – we understand and are understood. I admit that such a place is taxing because it is made up of so many different stories. However, I believe that is what makes our country strong. Allow me to express a wish today as Federal President: the stories of those individuals who have come to our country and will come in future, must – to a much greater extent – become part of our shared perception of who “we” are. This is also what I wanted to happen with the stories of people in eastern Germany thirty years after the Peaceful Revolution and the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Unfortunately, these stories, your stories, are too often about marginalisation or everyday discrimination, about rejection and a lack of recognition, even in the second or third generation. The authors of *Heimat* also describe this in their book. Bernhard Schlink wrote that it

becomes clear that Heimat begins with recognition and a sense of belonging to a community when that recognition is lacking. German-Turkish neighbours from Moabit have told me about this lack of recognition. I also hear it when I travel around the country from the children and grandchildren of immigrants. And many, probably also many of you here this evening, are concerned that discrimination and racism will increase. Your concern may have increased somewhat recently.

How can it be otherwise at a time when the poison of nationalism is beginning to seep into our debates again, when some are trying to make ethnocentric beliefs acceptable again and when the democratic consensus against those hostile to democracy is threatening to crumble.

I can well understand your concern. Like you, I hope that the voices against hate will become even louder. Like you, I expect elected members of parliament to assume their special responsibility for democracy and a humane and decent society 75 years after the end of the National Socialist regime. And I hope that even more people will stand up for those who are marginalised, insulted or attacked.

As Federal President, I say to you today: you all belong to our country! Your stories belong to our country!

I am thinking here of the stories of people who have fled war and destruction and come to our country. I am thinking of the stories of the many young people who come here to work or study. And I am thinking of the stories of people from Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece or Turkey, who we regarded as Gastarbeiter, or guest workers, for a long time, indeed for too long. They have all made an essential contribution towards our country's prosperity. And all of them, their children and grandchildren, have changed our society, our culture, our music and literature, our food, our lifestyle. They have changed our Heimat. They have transformed Germany into a more open and more diverse country. For that I would like to thank you most sincerely this evening!

Your stories form part of our shared story: they are the stories of people who feel at home here, and have often done so for generations. They are the stories of people who say: Germany is my home, my Heimat. People who, however, perhaps also say that they have another home in their hearts and this home lies in Turkey, in Italy or in Greece, in Russia or Poland, in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan or Somalia. Let me say quite clearly that we can be at home in more than one place.

I am therefore looking forward to a very special Heimat evening with you.

I would now like to introduce the artists who will be performing for us this evening. I am delighted that you are all here this evening!

When you came in, you heard music selected by Ipek İpekçioğlu and she will provide the music during our reception later on this evening. Ipek İpekçioğlu, you live in Berlin and fill concert halls around the world as a DJ. You are also an author, producer and activist. I am delighted that you accepted our invitation!

In a moment we will hear Cymin Samawatie and her quartet Cyminology. Cymin Samawatie, you also live in Berlin and your music is a blend of East and West: a mixture of old Persian melodies and jazz. We look forward to hearing you! Welcome!

I would also like to cordially welcome another musical guest, Sultan Tunc, who we know as Rasta Baba, and his band. Sultan Tunc, you, too, are a musical bridge-builder and we are looking forward to hearing you later.

And I am delighted that Emine Sevgi Özdamar is with us this evening. You will read from your text Berlin, Stadt der Vögel (Berlin, city of birds). You came to Berlin for the first time as an 18-year-old and you live and work here today. Welcome!

We will also see extracts from two films which many of you know: *Almanya – Willkommen in Deutschland* by the sisters Yasemin and Nesrin Şamdereli. Welcome! And *Soul Kitchen* by Fatih Akin – which, by the way, is in some ways a film all about Heimat.

I would also like to extend a warm welcome to Dimitrij Schaad. You are an actor at Berlin's Gorki Theatre and will tell us the story of your family in an extract from the play *The Situation*. Welcome!

I am also looking forward to the discussion about Heimat which Ijoma Mangold, cultural correspondent at *Die Zeit* newspaper, will chair. Mr Mangold, you unexpectedly gained a new Heimat at the age of 22, that of your Nigerian father. It is a pleasure to have you here with us this evening.

In addition to Cymin Samawatie, you will be talking to the actor Adam Bousdoukos, whom many will know from Fatih Akin's films. You are also one of the protagonists in *Soul Kitchen*. Welcome, Mr Bousdoukos! And I am looking forward to hearing someone who has not only won awards but is also one of the busiest theatre directors in Germany: Ersan Mondtag.

So you can see that we are going to have lots of fun together this evening. I would like to thank everyone involved! And now I would like to wish you an enjoyable evening!

Thank you!