



**Speech by Christian Wulff,  
President of the Federal Republic of Germany,  
at the official commemoration of the liberation of  
Auschwitz concentration camp  
on 27 January 2011  
in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Poland**

66 years ago today saw the beginning of the end of the suffering of the survivors of Auschwitz. The liberators had come – at last.

What the victims had to suffer in Auschwitz in the years up to then is inconceivable, unspeakable, indescribable. Even so, it needs to be grasped, told and described over and over again. Following a cynical selection process, hundreds of thousands were sent directly from the ramp to the gas chambers to die a terrible death. Children were separated from their parents, families were torn apart. Those prisoners who were not immediately murdered, irrespective of their origins, had to provide forced labour under the most dreadful conditions. They suffered hunger and were exposed to all weathers. They were subjected to inhumane punishments, bullying and so-called medical experiments which were in truth cruel tortures. The perpetrators' despotism knew no bounds.

Auschwitz and other camps were the scenes of the maltreatment and murder of Jews, Sinti and Roma, prisoners of war, resistance fighters, homosexuals, disabled people and others.

Even before they came to Auschwitz, Germany's Jews and then Jews in the countries occupied by Germany had increasingly been deprived of their rights, humiliated and degraded. This culminated in the systematic persecution of Europe's Jews with a view to their elimination.

Auschwitz lies on Polish soil. A very large number of its victims were Polish nationals. Poland and its inhabitants suffered

immeasurably under German occupation and the National Socialist racial fanaticism.

The name "Auschwitz" stands like no other for the crimes committed by Germans against millions. These fill us Germans with repulsion and shame. They imbue us with a historical responsibility independent of individual guilt: never again must we allow such crimes to take place. And we must keep memories alive. For the knowledge of the horrors which took place and the recognition of what people were capable of doing to others are a reminder of the obligation on this and future generations to preserve the dignity of the individual at all cost and never again to persecute, degrade or kill others simply because they are of a different faith, ethnic origin, political conviction or sexual orientation.

For us Germans it is a source of great joy and a mark of great favour that the victims and their descendants were willing to reconcile. We know that this was not easy. And so we are all the more grateful that Jewish life is once again flourishing in Germany, that we have a unique relationship with Israel and that we are linked in deep friendship with our Polish and other neighbours. This is an immense gift for us.

It is impossible to fathom the horrors in their entirety. Only when the sufferers are given a name, a face, a home, can we really try to understand their fate and imagine what they went through. That is why it is so imperative that the survivors, old as they now are, tell today's young people stories from their lives, describe to them what it was really like to be 17 and standing there on that ramp.

I am profoundly grateful that we have some survivors with us here today; indeed some have accompanied me from Germany. As long as you bear witness, there can be no forgetting. And if we preserve and pass on your testimony, there will be no forgetting. Anyone who hears your stories will be affected for ever. You are both the victims of terror and at the same time the bridge to a good future. It is very important to me as Federal President to be with you here in Auschwitz.

The fewer of you there are who can still provide personal recollections, the more important becomes the written, photographic and film evidence, the more important it becomes to preserve the memorials, especially Auschwitz. Let us all do whatever we can to help with this.

Reminders on houses of their former occupants, deprived of their rights, displaced, murdered, can also be of help. Or those small brass plaques on the pavement recalling victims at their last freely-chosen place of residence.

Today's young people must know the truth about the National Socialist terror regime. Then they will loudly and resolutely contradict those who deny or falsify the facts. They will stand up to those who do not wish to understand, who scorn the dead and mock the survivors.

That is why I invited young people to accompany me to Israel and Yad Vashem last November. That is why President Komorowski and I together went to the International Youth Meeting Centre to discuss civil courage with young people, to discuss a culture in which one doesn't look away, in which one intervenes whenever necessary.

We must not forget that there were people from all nations and all walks of life back then too who did not look away, but who helped as much as they could and who risked their own lives often enough in doing so. Many of these "Righteous among the Nations" are commemorated in Yad Vashem as well.

Remembrance, commemoration and mourning should not paralyse life, should not bar the way to the future; on the contrary, they should make it possible. Together we bear a responsibility to ensure that such a break in civilization never happens again – not in Europe, not anywhere in the world. That is why, for the sake of the victims and for the sake of our future, we must keep the memories alive.