



The speech on the internet:

www.bundespraesident.de

Page 1 of 3

**Federal President Joachim Gauck
receiving the Leo Baeck Medal
in Berlin
on 14 May 2014**

It is an honour to receive this medal here in Berlin. It is not only an honour, however; I not only esteem it at a rational level, I am also deeply moved. We are meeting here in the city where Leo Baeck became a rabbi in 1912, where he worked for science and for the Jewish community until, during the Nazi era, his fellow Germans deported him to Theresienstadt. On my state visit to the Czech Republic a few days ago, I was there, in Theresienstadt. As I remembered those who suffered there, my thoughts were also with Leo Baeck. And in a couple of days, I will travel from here to Buchenwald. Our German history – the losses incurred and the depths plumbed – is something I have carried with me throughout my adult life, and it is a strong influence in my presidency too. That context makes it particularly special and beautiful when we see good days and things happen that speak to a brighter future. In that sense, it is especially moving that the Leo Baeck Medal is being awarded today not in New York as it usually is but, for the first time, here in Berlin.

It's a common phrase: "my heartfelt thanks". But I want to tell you, Rabbi, how truly grateful I really am. When you gave me a book by Leo Baeck earlier – his chief work in German, published before the Nazi era and signed by him for a friend – when you just gave it to me and looked me in the eye, I felt that the word "heartfelt" had gained more depth than the simple politeness it usually conveys.

Leo Baeck and Berlin were once inseparable, and they have been finding their way back to each other in the years after his death. We are celebrating a very special moment tonight. The institute that bears his name, your institute, is opening an office here in Berlin. Not only is this an enrichment to the cultural and academic scene; it is also an important symbol: after many years in exile, many items bearing witness to the Jewish life that so enriched Germany, and particularly

Berlin, have a place in their old homeland once more. You too are helping to give a new lease of life to that which the Nazis sought to destroy forever.

The Holocaust is an integral and immutable part of remembrance, and it always will be. Alongside it, however, we want to re-anchor the many other aspects of German-Jewish history in the nation's collective consciousness. That's why the Leo Baeck Institute is so crucial. Simultaneously an archive, a research centre and a forum for discussion, it has a superb collection of books and biographies, letters and photographs, documents and artwork which demonstrate how significantly German Jews shaped this country – as journalists and artists, as scientists, entrepreneurs and politicians.

I just thought of something else that I would like to say, in the spirit of Leo Baeck. I'll just take the liberty of adding it here. I said just now that commemorating the Shoah would always be part of our collective consciousness here in Germany. Of course it will – how could it not be? That past will not go away. But if we are talking here about encouraging signs and the fulfilment, late in time, of his early dream, then we need to mention this too: we can now count a positive memory among those in our collective German identity which Leo Baeck cannot have dreamed of during his lifetime. Since the war, free Germany has seen the sort of body politic develop, step by step, that all the democrats who ever were have yearned and fought for.

This is a Germany in which the law takes precedence over might, where might does not supersede justice and where human rights and civil liberties belong to everyone. This is a country, furthermore, which has created an authority to help anyone, stand by anyone, who risks having their constitutional rights denied or impinged upon. It is a country which manages, unlike many others around the world, to generate long-term domestic peace, in which businesses and employees have found a modus operandi which aims for progress, profit and prosperity. This is a country where nothing has reached its end state, in spite of everything, but which is in a constant development process that we can only be happy about, if we can only find the strength to see things as they are and not let ourselves be imprisoned by the chains of memory that tie us to the guilt of our fathers and forefathers. We never want to forget it, but we have brought the spirit of the great European melody of human rights and civil liberties, the spirit of the Enlightenment, back into this country. And we have been doing so for decades. I would so wish Leo Baeck to have lived to see those decades.

He never saw the Germany we have now. But when we recount our failures, we also need to tell a story of rebirth – of rejoining the great European melody that sings of humanity and human rights. And we are part of that melody, this country and all its people. What a

beautiful thing it is to be able to draw such a conclusion on an occasion such as this.

Thank you very much.