



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the event commemorating the 80th anniversary
of the beginning of the Second World War
at Wieluń, Poland
on 1 September 2019**

80 years ago, at this very moment, all hell rained down on Wieluń – fuelled by German racist barbarity and the desire to annihilate.

Thank you, citizens of Wieluń, for allowing me to be with you here on this day of remembrance and commemoration. Thank you, Mr President – dear Andrzej Duda – for inviting me.

All those who have heard the stories; who have seen the pictures; who have seen the devastation, the suffering and the death that the German attack brought to Wieluń 80 years ago on this day; all those who know how the violence and destruction that began here would over the next six years spread throughout Poland and all over Europe – they are equally aware that it is not at all a matter of course to ask a German Federal President to stand before you today.

So I stand before you – survivors, descendants of the victims, old and young, citizens of Wieluń – in gratitude and humility.

What happened in Wieluń was a warning flare – a terrorist attack by the German Luftwaffe and a harbinger of all that would follow over the next six years.

We call it war – because we lack a proper way to describe all the horror of those years. We call it war – a frenzied, unchecked desire to annihilate that would wipe off the face of the earth more than just this city, its inhabitants and their history. It was meant to eradicate Polish and European culture, to make way for the delusions of a criminal and his fanatic followers.

The attack on Wieluń had a singular purpose: to test capabilities that had been designed to wreak such destruction. The cynicism of the German attackers was boundless; their actions were inhumane, and the consequences for the inhabitants of this city were terrible.

And yet, far too few Germans today know of this place. Far too few know about these deeds.

The time has come to commemorate what happened in Wieluń and in many other Polish cities and towns that were levelled in the same way that German crimes in other places are commemorated, such as those in Guernica, Lidice and Oradour – and the time has come for us to find new and appropriate forms of remembrance, including in Germany and in Berlin, for these German crimes in Poland.

Wieluń must be in our minds, and in our hearts.

Here in Wieluń, neighbourly ties between Poland and Germany were destroyed with such a radical will to annihilate and such incredible violence that the memories are painful to this day.

The terrorist acts were followed by destruction, humiliation, persecution and torture, and by the murder of millions of Polish citizens and of Polish and European Jews.

Rest assured that there is not a single German who is not moved when they reflect on this trail of barbarism. This also holds true for those who reject these memories, who feel such strong humiliation that they seek escape through denial and aggression.

What German could look at Wieluń, at Warsaw or Palmiry, or at Auschwitz and other places where the Shoah took place, without feeling shame?

It was Germans who committed these crimes against humanity in Poland. Anyone calling them things of the past, or claiming that the vile rule of terror of the National Socialists in Europe was a mere footnote of German history, is passing judgement on him or herself.

What occurred there will never be a thing of the past. It occupies us. "For anyone who was born a German *does* have something in common with German destiny and German guilt." Anyone referring to German history must also grapple with this statement by Thomas Mann.

What occurred will never be a thing of the past. Nor will our responsibility. We know that.

As Germany's Federal President, let me assure you
that we will not forget.

We want to, and we will, remember.

And we will bear the responsibility that our history imposes upon
us.

I bow before the victims of the attack on Wieluń.

I bow before the Polish victims of German tyranny.

And I ask for your forgiveness.

Chylę czoła przed ofiarami ataku na Wieluń.

Chylę czoła przed polskimi ofiarami niemieckiej tyranii.

I proszę o przebaczenie.

Poland resisted the infamous attempt to wipe it off the map. It stood back up through its own efforts, rising from the rubble of war and from bondage. It has become a free Poland in a free Europe, also because its citizens never lost sight of their goal:

"Father tells us that this is Europe," Czesław Miłosz writes.

"On sunny days, you can see it all clearly.

Now it is smoking after many floods ..."

Poland has never stopped being part of this Europe that Czesław Miłosz speaks of. Poland was, and Poland will remain, a country at the heart of Europe.

Germany will always be grateful for how we were taken back into the fold, as a European nation, after all that Germans had inflicted on the people of Wieluń, and on millions of others on our continent.

Germany will always be grateful for how the Poles fought for freedom, how they tore down the Iron Curtain and prepared the ground for a united Europe.

We cannot undo the injustice and suffering that was inflicted back then. We also cannot make a tally. And yet, Poland has offered Germany the hand of reconciliation. In spite of everything.

We are profoundly grateful for the hand they have extended, for Poland's willingness to walk with us down the path of reconciliation.

The path of reconciliation has led us to a common and united Europe.

A Europe that was founded on the spirit of resisting vile, racist doctrines, as well as totalitarianism and tyranny – and on the spirit of freedom, democracy and the rule of law.

A Europe founded on the spirit of Poland.

That spirit will also guide us Germans.

We want to preserve this path of reconciliation.

As good neighbours of Poland, we want to continue down this path.