



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at a dinner in honour of former Federal President  
Joachim Gauck on the occasion of his 80th birthday  
at Schloss Bellevue,  
on 11 February 2020**

Eight decades, there's no two ways about it, is a long stretch of time. If you congratulate someone on their 80th birthday, then you need to go a long way back when seeking to take the early days into focus – in this particular case, his childhood in the captain's house in Wustrow, on the narrow strip of land between the inland bay or "bodden" and the coast – the view stretching far out into the Baltic Sea, over Fischland and Darß, which was the home of the four- to five-year-old at that time.

The person celebrating such a milestone birthday likewise expects such reminiscences to be made. The pace of life has slowed down, and it is easy to cast your eye over the long path behind him or her from this vantage point.

But what about Joachim Gauck? The pace of life as a former Federal President may have slowed down, but retirement? You can't really call this retirement. If you look back with Joachim Gauck – you can easily trace the actions of others with the help of Google nowadays – then you find a range of hits, but not from the past ten, 15 or 20 years, but rather those that are usually from the previous day. In January 2020, we read headlines about his call for Germany to honour its military obligations in Iraq, even after the escalation of the conflict between the Iranian regime and the US; we also read reviews of his most recent book – not memoirs, but rather commentaries on one of the most important and necessary virtues of our age, namely tolerance. And we also saw headlines about the coalition negotiations in the Free State of Thuringia, in which he sought to act as a mediator. He could not yet know that the Minister-President's election could be misused to ridicule liberal democracy and its representatives. But he was motivated by the conviction that elected members of parliament must take on their special responsibility for democracy.

All of these, as you will notice, are not the pronouncements of a pensioner, not such pronouncements that are, at best, shrugged off with a belittling smile. These are reports from the politics of the day, interjections, contributions to debates and comments that are acknowledged, that are discussed and which are, time and again, doubtlessly controversial.

So virtually no message of congratulations and no tribute on his 80th birthday is complete without looking to the future, to what is to come and what we can expect.

Ralf Fücks, who is with us today, wrote in his tribute on Joachim Gauck's 80th birthday that anyone who studies Gauck's biography appears to think that his time as Federal President represented the logical completion of his life's journey. However, he writes, this is, of course "a construction seen from its end point". What he means by this is that, at the beginning of the development, the end appeared improbable, even unthinkable.

But what does Joachim Gauck think about all this? Last year, he stood at the top of the church tower in Wustrow in the spotlight of a television camera. He cast his eyes over the Fischland of his childhood and said: "peculiar". He probably meant that it was peculiar and wonderful that the boy that he was went on to become the President of this country.

The country that received this man as its President could and can continue to count itself lucky precisely because his life's journey did not follow a straight line, because this journey did not follow a preordained route. To quote the German author Uwe Johnson, Joachim Gauck "always cut straight across the tracks". He is not a non-conformist, but someone who goes, indeed had to go – on frequent occasions in the course of his life – his own way. That is still the case today. It makes the study of his life beneficial for us all.

After all, the experiences of this life story, these insights, conclusions and impressions, even wounds and doubts, have made an impression on his thoughts and actions. They have left a touch of humanity, in all the offices that Joachim Gauck held, but especially here in this office, that of the Federal President, in which I had the honour of being his successor.

Some wounds can shape a life and imbue it with direction. The fact that his father was "picked up" by the Soviet secret service and disappeared for years is one such wound. His son was denied the opportunity to study German language and literature because – and I quote from his headmaster's report at the time – he was "in a stage of critically examining his environment". Criticism means making distinctions, but under the prevailing conditions in the GDR, the critical examination of these conditions was to be applied to one's political

opponent and not to one's own calamities. But Joachim Gauck wanted this to be the other way around.

Joachim Gauck, those who are familiar with this will surely interpret your wonderful foreword to a new edition of Heine's "Germany. A Winter's Tale" as an autobiographical statement: Heine's hardships, his longing to feel at home and at one with the familiar, with people and spheres, the search for belonging and its failure due to the narrow-mindedness and pressure to conform in a pre-democratic society – these were also your hardships.

Joachim Gauck did not resign himself to intellectual narrow-mindedness and he resisted the pressure to conform. But he did not tread what would perhaps appear to us today to be the most obvious, the most convenient path. Of the three options that presented themselves – fleeing to the West, learning a profession or studying theology – he chose the latter. He chose theology as the one remaining sphere that was beyond the direct reach of the state and the Party. And he chose this in order to learn more about himself and his place in the world.

Joachim Gauck did not want to flee; he wanted to stay put. He had an affinity with Uwe Johnson even in this ambivalence, the love of freedom and the attachment to the familiar. Escape, Johnson had said, was "a movement in great haste, under the threat of danger." He, by contrast, had travelled to the western part of Berlin "on the suburban railway". When the trains stopped running after 13 August 1961, Joachim Gauck was left behind – in intellectual exile, as they say. With his body behind the Wall yet someone who crossed borders in his mind, he entered into a lifelong relationship with his distant friend, freedom.

This was to become the most formative relationship of his life. After 1989, the intimate love of freedom in the sanctuary of the church became a passionate commitment. A political commitment – also because, of course, you cannot talk about politics without always also talking about freedom, and you cannot talk about freedom without also talking about politics. This freedom, which Hannah Arendt wrote about, freedom as the aim of all politics, is the political commitment of his life.

That, Joachim Gauck, is what you have always remained, namely a liberal – a conservative, sometimes social democratic, and occasionally a green liberal. You have remained so – without party-political ties, probably because you knew or at least feared that such ties would have prevented you from cutting straight across the tracks, or at least would have made doing so more difficult.

In all the offices you have held, as a pastor, as Federal Commissioner for the Files of the State Security Service of the former GDR and, finally, in the highest office of the land, your everyday

actions bore witness to a life lived courageously. No party membership book could replace this. Even if such a book must not necessarily contradict a life lived courageously, if I might add in view of many here in this room.

A new, open and pugnacious spirit took up residence at Schloss Bellevue in the form of Federal President Joachim Gauck's "flat-share", as the "Süddeutsche Zeitung" wrote at the time. A President who captured people's hearts, but who nevertheless never shied away from subverting expectations, who did not allow himself to be taken in, who held convictions which he knew would garner criticism, in some cases even opposition. A self-confident President, furnished with a decent helping of congenial Mecklenburg doggedness, who focused on issues, who stood up for them passionately and who put people's backs up, such as with his call for Germany to live up to its role in Europe and assume greater responsibility, including military responsibility. A President who was able to withstand contradiction and injuries, and yet reached out his hand time and again, who sought dialogue and wanted to achieve reconciliation.

It is precisely this innate quality that distinguishes Joachim Gauck – a quality that is genuinely characteristic of inner freedom and which also wants to bring this freedom to bear, to shape and preserve it, with responsibility, with reason and with power of judgement. Such a quality is most special. Joachim, whoever possesses this is a courageous person, a genuine, upstanding democrat, a Federal President who leaves behind him a profound legacy – and grateful successors.