



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at a ceremony to mark 100 years
of the Estonian Embassy in Berlin
on 29 June 2020**

How lovely to be here, and to see you! I was happy to receive the invitation, and am even happier that you, dear Kersti Kaljulaid, have come to Germany. We were scheduled to meet here in Berlin in mid-March, but had to postpone our meeting three days beforehand owing to the worsening spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Now this evening you will be the first state guest I have welcomed to Bellevue since the crisis began. Thank you very much for coming.

Personal encounters are irreplaceable. The longer the travel and contact restrictions remain in place, the more we realise that. Not only do we miss friends and family – we also miss those unexpected, surprising encounters from which friendships grow.

The history of this building, which became the first Embassy of the Republic of Estonia in Berlin 100 years ago, is bound up with a personal encounter which echoes through relations between our countries to this day. When this Embassy was reopened after a long time on 27 September 2001, a former occupant of the house spoke: your predecessor, Lennart Meri.

He told the story of the schoolbag he proudly carried to and fro every day between Hildebrandstraße 5 and his school in the Derfflingerstraße. It was a leather satchel given to him by his father, Georg Meri, who was Legation Councillor at the Estonian Embassy in Berlin. When Estonia lost its independence in 1940 as a consequence of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the Meri family had to leave Berlin. Eventually, the satchel was swapped for some potatoes, during the family's banishment in Siberia.

For Lennart Meri, in 2001, things had come full circle: after 61 years, he was back in Berlin, as Estonia's President, to reopen the Embassy. One could say that this story is as brief history of the 20th century – and it is also a weighty one.

It can be read in many different ways. Meri, as he usually did, opted for an optimistic interpretation: he saw it as a chapter of European history in which the fight for freedom and democracy finally led to a happy outcome. Not to a paradise-like world. No, Meri pictured a world where, even though the problems grow more complex, the human mind can still cope with them.

He was right. No one can claim that the problems have grown easier over the past two decades. The 21st century is producing its own stories.

But it is not only the darker prophecies that have come true: Estonia has also lived up to Lennart Meri's hopes. It has done what is sensible for smaller countries in Europe to do: it has committed itself to community with others, to the European Union, to the North Atlantic Alliance, and thus made the best of its location, of the age and of its circumstances. Estonia's success and Estonia's self-confidence over recent decades provide convincing proof of Paul Henri Spaak's old insight: in this European community, there are only small states and small states that have not yet realised they are small.

What is crucial is that one has ideas. And that one finds ways to put these ideas into practice. Few people have expressed so clearly or so convincingly as you, Madam President, Estonia's determination to give something back to Europe, to make its own contribution to the success of the united Europe. And indeed, Estonia today in many ways outstrips supposedly bigger countries. It has pushed forward with the digital transformation of its administration, and is not only benefiting itself from this technical advance, but is also sharing its experience with others. Thanks to your initiative and your skill, Estonia has been able to put one of the biggest challenges of our age, security in cyberspace, on the agenda of the United Nations Security Council.

Madam President, I am also curious to hear your impressions of a journey you have made before me – your trip to Antarctica at the beginning of the year. That trip, too, was devoted to an issue which is of crucial importance for our future – climate change. This issue may have been less visible in the headlines for a while owing to the pandemic, but it has become no less important. Your journey followed the traces of Fabian Gottlieb von Bellingshausen, the Baltic German from the island of Saaremaa who discovered Antarctica 200 years ago.

Kersti Kaljulaid, some journeys require courage, especially those to more inhospitable areas. You have demonstrated your courage, not only in Antarctica. Estonia is benefiting from this self-confidence. Europe needs it.

Madam President, I am looking forward to our meeting this evening, and I am grateful for the friendship between our countries

and between us personally. May this beautiful house of friendship continue to render service for a very long time!