



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at a meeting with the families
of the victims of the attack in Hanau
at Schloss Bellevue
on 23 September 2020**

Looking at you, my thoughts go back to the evening of 20 February. It was just a few hours after the horrendous massacre in Hanau. We met in the town hall to walk together to the vigil. Paralysing pain pervaded the room. Together, we stood in silence, some were weeping. There were no words to describe or explain the unfathomable events that had unfolded. All we could do was survive this pain together. And it was unbearably difficult.

Seven months have passed since then. But the pain lives on. Some of you have in the meantime found the strength to talk about your suffering. About the nights when you just couldn't escape the images of the murderous attack. About your thoughts upon waking up each morning when you realised time and again that those you loved are gone, that they were brutally taken away from you. Your daughter or sister, your son or brother, your mother or father.

Some of you cannot comprehend to this day what happened. Or you do not want to comprehend because the depth of your pain is so indescribable. Some are still waiting for their child to come home. Others are only just beginning to realise their loss which leaves an endless void. Putting one foot in front of the other is difficult. And it is even more difficult to look to the future – a future without those you loved.

Your situation in your time of mourning was made even more painful due to the corona crisis. Because you were not able to meet and share your grief. Because you felt alone, lonely and isolated. But also because you had to fear that the racist murders, the victims and your suffering would be forgotten in the midst of the pandemic.

But, I say to you, the bereaved: we do not forget. We must not forget and we will not forget. That is what my wife and I would like to

say to you today, on behalf of the vast majority of your fellow citizens in this country. We cannot ease your pain, even though there is nothing we would rather do. But you should know that we stand beside you. This country – your country – stands beside you. The hearts of our country have opened up to you.

What happened continues to make many people sad, angry and determined. We saw this in the demonstrations of sympathy and solidarity just a few weeks ago, in your town of Hanau and in many other towns across our country. And I hope that you feel that today, too, here in Schloss Bellevue.

I know some of you found it difficult to make the journey to Berlin. We are honoured that you came. Today, we want to remember together the people that you and we all lost on 19 February. And we want to hear how you have been coping in the difficult time of mourning, whether you have had the support that you needed and hoped for.

We remember nine people, nine young lives. One woman and eight men who were working on their futures, fighting for their dreams, were there for others. They had so many plans for their lives. And there is one thing they all shared: they saw themselves as people of Hanau – no matter where they or their families had once come from, what they believed in, what they liked doing.

Their death has left a huge hole. And this hole remains. No-one knows as well as you what made these nine individuals so special. I am grateful to you for telling us about them, for letting us see their faces. We will not forget them. And we will not tire of saying their names:

Sedat Gürbüz, Gökhan Gültekin, Said Nesar Hashemi, Vili-Viorel Păun, Ferhat Unvar, Mercedes Kierpacz, Hamza Kurtović, Fatih Saraçoğlu, Kaloyan Velkov.

Today, we also remember Behçet Gültekin, Gökhan's father. I had the honour of getting to know him. Just a few weeks after the attack, he lost his battle with a serious illness. The death of his son robbed him of the strength to keep fighting.

Nine people are dead because a racist and right-wing extremist saw them as foreigners. They were shot because they had dark hair or were relaxing in a shisha bar. One of them, Vili-Viorel Păun, apparently tried to follow and stop the attacker. It seems now that it was also his courage and his determination to protect others that cost him his life.

The attacker knew nothing about his victims. He attacked them because of what they represented. His murderous hatred targeted people with a migration background. People whose parents or grandparents had come to Germany from the south or the east. People who he saw as different or foreign, who he, with his warped view of the world, reviled as not German, as not belonging.

What he did reveals the cold and blind logic of racism and all other heinous ideologies. Those who force people into groups and discredit them based on some characteristic; those who reduce them to their background, their faith, their gender or their approach to life; those who rob them of their uniqueness – they are breaching the most vital principle of our democracy. Human dignity, the dignity of each and every person, shall be inviolable. It is protected by our Basic Law.

The terrorist attack in Hanau struck nine unique people. Nine people who were not foreign but were part of our society. They all belonged to this country, each of them in their own special way. Their life stories show us that in our immigration society we for some time now have a young generation in which the most diverse realities have mixed. A young generation in which it no longer matters where someone comes from but what someone stands for and where someone is heading. Racist labels are inhumane and fail to do justice to the reality in our diverse society.

Us against them, them against us – that is the language of hatred. It is the language of humiliation – a humiliation which sows the seeds for violence. It is the language of those who want to incite hatred and divide our society. We have to make ourselves heard and show solidarity no matter when people in our country have their dignity violated. We owe this to the victims of 19 February.

Most people in this country see Germany's new diversity as an asset. They want to live together and they are doing so, day in day out – whether in your hometown of Hanau, here in Berlin and in many other places in our Republic. People with different backgrounds meet in childcare and in schools, in workshops and offices, in cafés and sports clubs. And they – and indeed all of us – hopefully keep learning how to navigate difference and resolve conflicts in respectful dialogue as equals.

But we also know that the racist terrorism of Hanau did not come from nowhere. There is racism in our country, there is Islamophobia and there is antisemitism. People are insulted, threatened, attacked and murdered out on the street because they have dark skin, pray in a mosque or wear a kippa. The roots of right-wing extremism reach deep into our society. It is a serious and pressing problem. Even in times of corona, we must not forget about it.

All of you, the bereaved, know what it feels like to be stigmatised and marginalised. Ms Kurtović, you said: "Racism and discrimination are everyday experiences for us even though we have integrated successfully and see ourselves as Germans". Here you can sense the bitter disappointment. You have fought to belong. You have done so much for this society. And then some people still only see you as "foreigners". I understand how bitter that is, the fury it causes even though I don't have to experience it myself.

As Federal President, I stand at your side, at the side of all people experiencing marginalisation and discrimination. Let's together fight for a country where no-one has to feel they are worth less than others. For a country where no-one has fewer opportunities because of their name or their colour. For a country where we watch our language on the internet, on the street or in our parliaments.

The memory of the attack in Hanau and the many other acts of right-wing extremist violence make us all the more determined. Time and again right-wing terrorists have tried to shake our democratic society of immigration by staging barbaric attacks. On Saturday, I am attending the memorial ceremony for the victims of the attack on the Oktoberfest in Munich forty years ago. And on 9 October, I will visit Halle, a year after the horrific attacks there targeting Muslims and Jews. The two people who lost their lives were neither.

We do not forget the dead. And remembrance is a challenge and a duty. It is the duty of our state and its security forces to protect each and every person in our country regardless of their background, their faith, their colour. Munich, Halle, Hanau sound a warning for us to do all we can to prevent such attacks in the future. And they sound a warning for us to do more to ensure no-one in our country has to feel unprotected.

Not just the state but each and every one of us is called upon to play their part in the fight against hatred and violence. We need to offer help and be vigilant when people near us fall prey to conspiracy theories, peddle such myths and start to withdraw. We have to stand up and be counted when people are derided. And we need to set ourselves clearly apart no matter where right-wing extremists take to the streets. Those who stroll alongside them are sinking to their level.

I am pleased that so many people in our country are standing up to racism. That, even in corona times, we can still hear them and see them. You, the bereaved, have also stood up for cohesion in recent weeks. Bearing in mind what you have suffered, this is not something we can take for granted. To my mind, your commitment should put to shame those who continue to spread hate and incitement to hatred. And it should inspire all those who are not yet working to fight inhumanity.

Ms Unvar, to close, I would like to quote the impressive words you voiced a month ago at the ceremony in Hanau. "Our children," you said, "must not have died for nothing. Their death must be the end, the end of racist attacks. Their death should be the start of something new, of schools without racism and a co-existence in which we all have the same rights. (...) If we manage that, I will stand at my son's grave and say: That was your struggle and you did it."

Ms Unvar, the bereaved who I address today, let us together fight for this noble cause, for a society free of racism, free of hatred and violence. We stand together. We stick together. And we want to live together. That is and remains the message of Hanau.