



# BUNDESPRÄSIDENTIALAMT

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**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
on the occasion of the opening of the new premises  
of the European Centre for Jewish Scholarship  
in Potsdam  
on 18 August 2021**

Let your house be wide open, how wonderfully this sentence from the Talmud fits this occasion. And it also fits in well with the bright premises at this historical site, beside the New Palace in the park of Sanssouci, in which the European Centre for Jewish Scholarship has its new home. Let me congratulate you!

Walter Homolka, Dietmar Woidke, thank you for this invitation.

Yes, this ceremony had to be postponed due to the pandemic. However, I have to admit that I am delighted that it is taking place at this particular time, in this year. For in this anniversary year we are recalling that there has been Jewish life in the area of what is now Germany for the last 1700 years, that before the Shoah, the betrayal of all civilised values, Jewish life was flourishing not only in the major cities but also in rural areas and in smaller towns, including here in Potsdam, here in Brandenburg. As patron of this year of celebration, I am moved that there is once more a synagogue here on the premises of the Abraham Geiger College in Potsdam.

Let your house be wide open – the Abraham Geiger College regarded itself as an open house from the outset. Behind this lies a bold idea: here in Germany – in Germany of all places – liberal rabbis are to be trained again in the great tradition of Reform Judaism. Walter Homolka, you and Walter Jacob, the great scholar and rabbi whom I very much admire, had to overcome a measure of resistance in order to realise this idea.

I was present – in another capacity back then – when in 2014 the first of your graduates were ordained outside Germany in the White

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Stork Synagogue in Wrocław. That, too, moved me. Germans and Poles celebrated together the renaissance of Jewish life in Wrocław with the rabbis trained in Potsdam. Who could have imagined such a thing only a few years ago?

It is this spirit which has led us to celebrate the opening of this centre here in Potsdam today, a training centre which will have an impact far beyond our borders. The Institute for Jewish Theology of the University of Potsdam and the two rabbinical seminaries, the Abraham Geiger College and the Zacharias Frankel College, you, ladies and gentlemen, who have been working together so closely for many years, are now united under one roof. What a wonderful gift for our country!

I have spoken of a wide open house – how much I wish that there was no shadow hanging over this sentence. It is true that new Jewish life has unfolded in our country during the last few years. Jewish life which is diverse, vibrant and forward looking – and the fact that rabbis are being trained here again is part of that. That is a blessing and I am deeply grateful for it! However, talking to you here today, I also have to speak of how concerned I am that this Jewish life in Germany is still not considered to unquestioningly belong here; that Jewish institutions still have to be protected. The attack in Halle almost two years ago made this abundantly clear to us in a very painful manner.

What happened on that 9 October was a nightmare. A heavily armed right wing extremist perpetrator attacked a full Jewish place of worship on the holiest day of the Jewish year. Blinded by hatred, he killed two people – with only a wooden door preventing a bloodbath.

The thought of what might have happened torments not only those who had gathered in the synagogue and spent hours in fear of their lives. It torments many Jews who are asking themselves once more whether they are safe here in the country of the perpetrators of old. I can assure you that it torments me as the Head of State of this country. It pains me and it makes me angry.

It pains me and makes me angry that antisemitism, antisemitic hatred and incitement in Germany, in Germany of all places, is again being openly displayed and has been for many years. And I wish I could say that Halle was a turning point. Even after this tragedy, however, Jews have been mocked, humiliated and physically attacked: all over Germany, even in broad daylight. Even worse, crude antisemitic conspiracy theories have reared their ugly head once more during the COVID 19 pandemic. That is unbearable!

As Federal President, I want to say to you today that there can only be one answer for us Germans: we, every single one of us and we as an entire society, do not tolerate antisemitism in any form! We do not look away! We tackle this problem before it takes hold, before words

become deeds. We take a decisive stand against those who stir up and spread hate and hate speech.

Antisemitism is always a seismograph for the state of our democracy. The more openly, the more aggressively it is expressed, the greater the risk to the values on which our Basic Law is based, the greater the risk to respect for human dignity and tolerance. That is the lesson we learn from our history. It is a warning and a mandate for both the present and for the future.

Walter Jacob, whose name the building next door bears, said that the Jewish community in his home town Augsburg felt completely at home there before the war. The barbarity of National Socialism almost completely extinguished Jewish life in Germany. I am therefore all the more thankful that it is flourishing once more, that we are standing here today. However, I know that only when Jews feel completely at home in Germany again, when they feel completely safe, will this country be completely at ease with itself.

You who teach here in Potsdam, you who are learning here and will subsequently go out to lead congregations, are making a very valuable contribution towards this, hopefully towards ensuring that this wish does not remain a utopia. I am confident that this centre will continue to gain in influence throughout Europe and beyond. Influence as a place where people find their faith through knowledge, as was the ideal of Abraham Geiger. And as a wide open house of Jewish life, which also attracts people of different faiths and makes them eager to find out more.

I wish you all the very best for the future!

Thank you very much!