



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at the presentation of the research project on  
The Office of the Federal President and confrontation with  
the National Socialist past between 1949 and 1994  
at Schloss Bellevue  
on 13 September 2021**

When I took office as Federal President in March 2017, Hugo Heymann was completely unknown to me. In the intervening years, I have come to feel a very special connection with the man, and that for good reason: while I hold this office, my wife and I live in the house where Hugo Heymann and his wife, Maria, used to live.

Hugo Heymann was a businessman who bought the villa in Berlin's Dahlem district in 1926. He wanted to grow old there in company with his wife. But Hugo Heymann did not grow old, because Hugo Heymann was Jewish. In 1938, aged just 56, he died, robbed of his fortune, following imprisonment and abuse at the hands of the Gestapo. He had already sold the villa on Pücklerstraße just a few days after the Nazis seized power, amid a picture of increasing repression in Germany, and had latterly lived in a hotel.

The house on Pücklerstraße has belonged to the Federal Republic of Germany since 1962, and it has served as official residence to the Federal President of the day since 2004, after decades as the Federal Government Guest House. Nevertheless, the house's history, the fate of Hugo Heymann, was for too long not something the German state talked about. It was critical historians who first drew our attention to it in recent years, and did so quite insistently – rightly so, in my opinion.

My wife and I therefore only moved in once the history of the building and its owners had been brought to light and we had agreed on how to adequately honour the memory of Hugo Heymann, his life and his death. The research that the Office of the Federal President commissioned into Hugo Heymann and the official residence has been published as a booklet. And in front of the building, there is now also a memorial panel to Hugo Heymann and his fate. Everyone who visits us,

or even just passes by, reads the words and perhaps takes a moment to reflect.

Why am I telling you this? I'm talking about the example of the presidential residence and Hugo Heymann because it shows three things: the stories of the victims of Nazi crimes, stories of destroyed lives, can literally be found behind the façade of almost every building, yet despite decades of academic research and investigation of history, we are a long way from having told all those stories and brought all the crimes to light, and nowhere near remembering all the victims with adequate tributes; as Federal President, I feel a special responsibility not to shy away from the history of my office but to face up to it in an open and self-critical manner.

Many ministries and institutions have made their histories the subject of academic research in recent years, commissioning investigations into their role in National Socialism and especially into the way it was dealt with in the young Federal Republic. Behind the façades of the state too, a lot of history lies in obscurity. Much remains insufficiently illuminated and untold. There are no studies, as yet, looking into our highest constitutional bodies at the federal level, but the Federal Chancellery and the Federal Constitutional Court do intend to work through the history of their institutions too. All that notwithstanding, it is my view that the office of the head of state can least afford to neglect that endeavour.

In his famous speech, my predecessor Richard von Weizsäcker called 8 May 1945 a day of liberation. In 1945, that liberation came from outside. It had to come from outside – because this country was so deeply ensnared in its own evildoing, in its own guilt. But there is another aspect that is important to me. If we look at German history since 8 May 1945, the three quarters of a century that have passed since the end of the war, we Germans have ourselves played a part in the liberation. And that has been an internal liberation. It didn't happen on 8 May 1945; it didn't happen on any single day but has been a long, painful journey – confronting our past and investigating who knew what, who was complicit in crimes; asking agonising questions within families and between generations; fighting to prevent things being hushed up and suppressed. It was only thanks to that process of confrontation that many Germans of my generation were able to make their peace with their own country.

All my predecessors, in the way they exercised their office, also influenced the way our society dealt with its Nazi past; they all, in some form or other, played a role in that process of internal liberation.

A research project on the Office of the Federal President and confrontation with National Socialism will primarily have to examine personal continuities, people's careers before and after 1945, but will also open up other questions. How have the Federal Presidents – briefed

and supported by the Office of the Federal President and its staff – dealt with the subject of National Socialism in their public and internal activities? How have they dealt with perpetrators, victims, hangers-on – in speeches, during state visits, in letters and conversations, when awarding medals or issuing pardons?

We are hoping for light to be shed on all of that. That is why this research project is so important to me and why we have been striving from the very beginning for the highest quality, the greatest possible transparency and complete academic independence.

We put this project out to tender, conducted a two-stage selection procedure and took expert advice from outstanding specialists in the field; some of them are here with us today. I am delighted that we were able in the end to gain Professor Norbert Frei from the University of Jena to work on this project, an outstanding expert on German post-war history.

With his book *Vergangenheitspolitik* on the politics of amnesty and integration, Norbert Frei not only coined a phrase but also set out a formidable survey of the young Federal Republic's handling of the Nazi past. Professor Frei has headed important research projects on the Nazi past of ministries and businesses and is an expert on the careers of former high-ranking Nazis within the Federal Republic.

Professor Frei and his team already started their work last year. I know that the project was not spared the hindrances of the pandemic and the concomitant restrictions. But in spite of that, Professor Frei, you are giving us a glimpse into your research today which, according to current plans, you intend to conclude in the coming year.

I am really looking forward to that glimpse and am very grateful for your readiness to grant us it today. I am also glad, however, that, following your presentation, we will also have an opportunity for an in-depth discussion with Professor Sybille Steinbacher, Director of the Fritz Bauer Institute, and writer and journalist Robert Leicht. We have two panellists here who look upon the Federal Presidents and their office from very different vantage points, exercising academic analysis and journalistic observation. You both also have my heartfelt thanks for coming.

In working through the history of the presidential residence and the fate of Hugo Heymann, we have made a start. It serves as an example of our commitment to look our history and the way we have handled it squarely in the eye, and not to shield the highest public office and its staff from that self-criticism. This new research project is another step in our endeavour to honour that commitment. Your research, Professor Frei, will hopefully shine a light into many a dark corner. It will answer many questions but presumably throw up just as many new questions, to which we will then have to find answers. This, too, is a

result of Germany's past: there is no end to remembrance, no release from our history.

Thank you all for being here today; I look forward first of all to your presentation and then to our shared discussions. A warm welcome to you all.