Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the event "1918 – 1938 – 1989: commemorating 9 November"
at Schloss Bellevue
on 9 November 2021

"Ich weiß bestimmt, ich werd' Dich wiedersehen" (I know for sure I'll see you again). Indeed, this is exactly what came to pass for Roland Jahn and his family in the GDR, and for so many other Germans from East and West, who embraced each other with tears of joy during the night of 9 November 1989 and in the days and weeks thereafter.

However, this did not come to pass for Margot Friedländer, who never saw her loved ones again. Her mother, her father, her brother – Margot Friedländer lost all of them in the extermination camps.

And this also did not come to pass for Adolf Strauss, the composer of the song we heard just now. He wrote it at Theresienstadt concentration camp in 1943. Strauss was murdered in Auschwitz just a few months later.

Federal Chancellor, President of the Bundestag, President of the Bundesrat, President of the Federal Constitutional Court, President of the European Council, Charles Michel, Members of Parliament and representatives of religious communities, Distinguished guests, fellow citizens watching this at home, Allow me to offer you a warm welcome to Schloss Bellevue on this important day, 9 November.

1918, 1938, 1989 – our guests addressed three very personal, very moving aspects this morning, and I would like to thank them for this. Emilia Fester, the youngest Member of the German Bundestag, who invoked the words once uttered by Philipp Scheidemann. Roland Jahn, to whom we only recently bade farewell as Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the former German Democratic Republic. And Margot Friedländer, who celebrated her one hundredth birthday just a few days ago; we are eternally grateful that you are here, and not only on this day. Margot Friedländer, you are a blessing for our country!

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1918, 1938, 1989 – 9 November had a profound impact on the winding path of the 20th century. Your contributions have offered us an insight into this – and also into the internal connection between these dates, into the political magnetism of 9 November, which this date has had since 1918. It was no coincidence that the National Socialists chose the anniversary of the proclamation of the republic to launch their first major attack – the so-called Beer Hall Putsch of 9 November 1923 – on the democracy that they so despised.

And, just as 9 November casts a long shadow, it also has a long prehistory itself. We cannot understand 9 November in the context of the 20th century without taking a closer look back – a look back at the roots of the freedom and democracy movement in the 19th century, and at its opposing forces, at restoration, anti-liberalism and the thirst for power. The St Paul's Church democrat Robert Blum fell victim to these opposing forces in 1848 – and was summarily executed also 9 November, which should at the very least be mentioned today.

We have heard today about these historical roots, about the precursors to freedom and democracy, in the form of art songs from the 19th century, which are a genuine cultural treasure for our country. I would like to thank Benjamin Appl and Wolfram Rieger for their wonderful performance – and Almut Lustig for accompanying them on percussion.

What does this date, this 9 November, mean to us Germans? What can and what should it mean to us?

9 November is not a public holiday or day of celebration; it is not a day for fireworks or military parades of the kind that our friends in the United States indulge in on 4 July, or our neighbours in France on 14 July, in celebration of their countries. It is also not a day of remembrance in the sense that we mark it with grave expressions with a well-rehearsed and sometimes slightly staid ritual.

9 November is – to my mind – also not a fateful day, as much as this term is bandied about year in, year out. Fate has a ring of providence to it, of higher forces. No, human forces were always at work on 9 November. The forces of progress – and the forces of barbarism. The forces of liberation – and the forces of injustice. And it is especially because this is about human deeds, about what Germans did and what we learn from this for our own actions that 9 November is a profoundly important day.

But why has a day of this importance played such a subordinate role in our official culture of remembrance to date? Perhaps it long appeared to be simply impossible to do justice to 9 November. Precisely because it means so much. Precisely because it unsettles us. Giving 9 November a wide berth may be understandable. Yet we should face up to it – with all of its contradictions.

9 November is an ambivalent day – a bright and a dark day. It gives us palpitations and brings tears to our eyes. It gives us hope for the good that is to found in our country, and it makes us despair in the face of its abysses. It is perhaps especially for this reason that 9 November is a very German day, a day that, like almost no other, speaks volumes about our country. To my mind, 9 November is the quintessential German day.

Hardly any other master of the German language expressed the ambivalence, the inner conflict, the joy and suffering about Germany with such timeless words as Heinrich Heine, the great German Jewish poet. It was his words, set to music by Robert Schumann, that we started out with this morning:

"The old, angry songs
the dreams angry and nasty,
let us now bury them,
fetch a great coffin. […]

How could the coffin
be so large and heavy?
I also sank my love
with my pain in it."

A temptation lies in this image to this day: a great coffin for the past, for love and for pain, sunk deep below the sea of oblivion. It is a dangerous temptation.

Why? On my trips as Federal President, and prior to that as Foreign Minister of this country, I have been confronted time and again with the perception that others have of us Germans. I often encounter a specific image of us – a cliché perhaps, that the Germans are withdrawn and distant, especially when it comes to their relationship with their own country. They are, or so the cliché goes, stiff and humourless, of course, and somehow lacking in emotion.

I believe that this image is wrong. I believe that we Germans have many thoughts and feelings when it comes to our country – only we often do not know how to channel them.

9 November thrusts this difficulty into the sharp relief of a single day. What can, what may a day mean to us on which so much joy and suffering, new beginnings and abyss, so precipitously coincide? What meaning can such a day create, a day that, as Heribert Prantl wrote, is not only about light, but also twilight? I strongly believe that 9 November is a day that tells us a great deal, precisely because of its ambivalence.

1938 reminds us of the crime against humanity that was the Shoah, of six million murdered Jews. This day reminds us of a girl such as Margot Friedländer, who was insulted and threatened, of entire families who were first ostracised, then disenfranchised, persecuted and,

ultimately, murdered. And it reminds us of the millions of Germans who were implicated in or were aware of these crimes, who looked away or denounced others.

1938 reminds us to be watchful and to display civic courage. 1938 reminds us to stand up to antisemitism, to hatred and hate speech, no matter where they manifest themselves today. Nothing can relativise the memory of the Shoah, and no line can be drawn under our responsibility!

1918 and 1989 remind us that freedom and democracy did not simply fall into our laps and that they are never guaranteed for all eternity. 1918 and 1989 show us the incredible courage of democrats, a courage that we can learn from.

9 November says a great deal about our country precisely because it stands for all of this, precisely because it does not offer us any clarity or certainty. It is impossible to understand Germany as it is today without the shadow of National Socialism, the war of annihilation and the Shoah. However, the love for freedom and the courage for democracy – they too are deeply rooted in our history. And it was from these roots that the Federal Republic was able to grow and flourish after 1945.

Accepting this ambivalence, carrying light and shadow, joy and sadness in our hearts, is part and parcel of being a German. That is what 9 November requires of us. And perhaps it is this that makes our patriotism what it is: We can love our country only with these contradictions – but we can love it. We can be proud of the roots of freedom and democracy – without averting our eyes from the abyss of the Shoah. And we can be aware of these abysses, we can remain on the alert for new abysses – without denying ourselves the pleasure in what we have achieved in our country.

Accepting both – shame and mourning for the victims, and respect and holding the trailblazers of our democracy in high regard – this is what this has to be about. This lies at the heart of an enlightened patriotism. An understated patriotism as opposed to pomp and circumstance. A patriotism with mixed emotions as opposed to triumph and self-assurance.

This kind of patriotism is doubtlessly different from the one practiced by other nations. Some might perceive this to be a weakness. Personally, I do not regret this. 9 November, this "German day", is a contradictory yet especially valuable day. It is my hope that we will mark it as such, that we will allow ourselves to get more closely in touch with it as a day of reflection about our country.

If we manage this, then we can join together today in renewing and reaffirming the hope that Philipp Scheidemann proclaimed from the

Reichstag on 9 November 1918: Long live the German Republic! Long live German democracy!