



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the presentation of the Walther Rathenau Award
to Margot Friedländer
on 4 July 2022
in Berlin**

“It is for you. It is for everyone.”

What an impressive statement, Margot Friedländer!

Dear Mrs Friedländer, today you are being presented with the award dedicated to the memory of a great German democrat: Walther Rathenau, who was brutally assassinated by the enemies of democracy. Mr Jung, thank you very much for inviting me to deliver a speech in honour of Margot Friedländer. I am delighted to be here and deeply moved to have the privilege of speaking on this occasion.

The centenary of the assassination of Walther Rathenau was just a few days ago, on 24 June. We commemorated this great politician, writer and industrialist not so far from here, at the Deutsches Historisches Museum. Walther Rathenau was not only an extraordinarily intelligent man, he was a man of immensely diverse gifts: artistic and literary talents as well as business acumen. What is more, he was a German Jew, a Jewish German.

The Israeli historian Shulamit Volkov said in an astute biography that Walther Rathenau had tried throughout his life to reconcile his German and Jewish identities. He did not feel that either identity was completely his own. Volkov wrote – and I quote – that “his life story can also be seen to contain the essence of German Jewish history”. This inner conflict was an integral part of Rathenau’s life and that of many other Jewish Germans. Many of them were successful in business, culture and the media. However, the horrors to come were already casting a shadow, while antisemitism was increasingly poisoning the social climate.

In Imperial Prussia, too, Jews were still barred from working in many professions. Rathenau, who himself was not even permitted to become a reserve officer, suffered due to this discrimination, unable to

come to terms with the fact that Jews were still second-class citizens. In the first German democracy, Rathenau was a member of the new German Democratic Party. He was thus firmly committed to this democracy and served it as a minister. For his opponents, for his enemies, he was the personification of the alleged international Jewish-capitalist conspiracy. Rathenau was ridiculed, vilified, caricatured and threatened – he even received death threats – in the most appalling manner. He was aware of the danger he faced. Just two months before his death, Albert Einstein virtually begged him to resign from his post as foreign minister in order to protect himself and other Jews. In the preceding years, several prominent Jewish politicians had been assassinated: Gustav Landauer, Rosa Luxemburg, Kurt Eisner. However, Einstein was unable to persuade him.

Unfortunately, it has to be said that one of his enemies was a senior representative of the Deutsche Bank, Karl Helfferich – a former deputy Chancellor of the German Empire, a German nationalist and ardent antisemite. Helfferich launched a hate-filled smear campaign against the man he called an “Erfüllungspolitiker”, implying that he had betrayed the national interest by complying with the demands of the Western powers, and accused him of being one of the instigators of the November 1918 revolution. He attacked Rathenau in the most vicious way in the Reichstag on the day before his assassination. He was one of those who sowed the seeds of hate and violence, creating a political climate to which Walther Rathenau also fell victim.

The assassination of Walther Rathenau was an attack on the Weimar democracy. It shook the Republic to the core. In the Reichstag, Chancellor Joseph Wirth gave a very emotional, a stirring speech. He concluded with words directed in particular at Karl Helfferich and the German nationalists: “There stands the enemy, dripping poison into a nation’s wounds. There stands the enemy – and there is no question about it: the enemy stands on the right!”

Walther Rathenau was a martyr to German democracy.

You, dear Margot Friedländer, experienced first-hand what the hate of the early 1920s gave rise to: persecution, terror, the murder of millions of European Jews. You experienced the crime against humanity that was the Shoah. You survived. You know that Walther Rathenau’s fate is a warning for us all – I will come back to that later.

Dear Mrs Friedländer, it is a great pleasure and privilege for me to give this speech in your honour today. Above all else, however, I am filled with gratitude. As Federal President, I am thankful for the miracle of reconciliation which you gave our country and continue to give us anew every day. And on a personal level, I am deeply grateful for the gift of friendship you have given me. I said at the award ceremony for the Leo Baeck Medal in New York last November and I say again today:

without people like you, dear Margot Friedländer, I, too, would be a different person today.

We have met many times during the last few years. Most recently, you were my guest at Schloss Bellevue for a ceremony to commemorate 9 November. Your presence, your words on that occasion, were profoundly moving for us all. Listening to you speak, engaging with you in person, is a gift to all of us lucky enough to meet you.

Above all, it is a gift to those you hold so dear: the young people in our country. Nothing is more important to you than them, and you tell them: it is for you. It is not for me. You tell them of the terrible things you yourself experienced as a young woman. You tell them of the unspeakable crimes which the National Socialists, driven by their fanatical racist doctrine, perpetrated against you and your family. You never sound embittered or angry, nor do you make accusations. But you do sound sad. Your sadness is palpable. Above all, however, people sense your warmth, your affection, your incredible strength: your humanity. It touches our very souls.

You were just a few months old when Walther Rathenau, Germany's first Jewish foreign minister, was assassinated in June 1922. You were born into a large Jewish family in 1920s Berlin, into a European metropolis shaped by the dawn of the modern age and its flourishing cultural and intellectual life. That was your first life. However, you were also born into a city in which democracy was being steadily undermined by its enemies, a city in which political violence was increasing at an alarming rate.

You have described your childhood as a happy one, surrounded by a large family, with a lakeside summer house at Scharmützelsee. After 1933, your parents' marriage began to disintegrate. You wrote in your autobiography that the discord between your parents grew to the same degree that the political situation became more threatening. Your parents' separation was your first painful experience.

But the day your life fell apart was 20 January 1943. That was the day on which you were to flee Germany with your mother and younger brother. It was too late. Your brother was arrested by the Gestapo and your mother turned herself in to the police, so as not to leave him alone. You would never see them again. The only things your mother left you were her handbag, an amber necklace – which I often see you wearing – and a message: "Try to make your life." That sentence is your mother's legacy. You regarded it as an instruction. It became your mission. It was many years before you learnt what had happened to your mother, brother and father. They were all murdered in Auschwitz.

In January 1943, war still raging, you are just 21 years old – and you go into hiding. This is the start of your second life. Anyone who reads or hears of the terrible ordeals you had to suffer in the ensuing

years is shocked to the core. For fifteen months, you hid in Berlin – and yes, there were decent people who helped you. On several occasions, you only narrowly escaped arrest – until, in the spring of 1944, you were betrayed. “I am Jewish,” you said, even on the way to the police station. You were deported, to Theresienstadt, a “middle ground, not life, not death”. There you again met Adolf Friedländer, whom you had known in Berlin. You married while still in the camp. As if by a miracle, both of you survived: you wanted to live.

Having emigrated to the United States, you shared your third life, a full life, with Adolf Friedländer. There was never any question of returning to Germany. After Adolf Friedländer’s death, you began to write, at night, with the depth of thought that nighttime brings, as you say, and I quote: “It was only after my husband died that I could begin to tell my story.” The memories came back, in and while writing. It was this process of remembering that finally made the inconceivable conceivable: to visit Berlin again, and finally to come back. To that Berlin in which you had been humiliated, persecuted, threatened. But Berlin was your beloved home city after all, the city in which people – and especially young people – listened to you. The city in which you had to fulfil your mission. At the grand age of 88!

What a stroke of good fortune for our country that you took the decision to move back here. Ever since your return, you have been tireless in telling your life story, in working for democracy and human rights and in fighting hatred and all forms of antisemitism and prejudice. You share your memories with us so that what happened can never happen again.

The future starts with remembrance, as Aleida Assmann once put it.

Today we Germans know the significance of this sentence: without remembering the crimes unleashed by Germany, the crimes committed by Germans, it is impossible to understand German history. Remembrance must not be allowed to end, because without it we have no future. And memories need to be communicated, as Aleida Assmann said in her wonderful speech when you were awarded an honorary doctorate by Freie Universität Berlin. And that, dear Mrs Friedländer, is precisely the gift you give us: remembrance, by communicating; future, by remembering.

But how will we remember, when there are no longer any eyewitnesses like yourself? This is a question you have been grappling with as one of the last survivors, and that is why you are active in the association “Zweitzeugen”. “Zweitzeugen”, a play on the German words for “second” and “witnesses”, is a wonderful initiative by and for young people who want to keep alive the memories of survivors of the Shoah and pass them on – to the second generation of witnesses, as it were. Of course, nothing can replace the eyewitnesses. However, I am sure

this can be a model for the future, a model for a new form of remembrance and of remembrance policy. We carry the memories onwards so that we have a future – that is what these young people see as their task and their responsibility.

In recent years, unfortunately, we have seen how important this is for our country, for our democracy. This, too, is something I must address here today. Yes, Jewish life has flourished in our country again over the past few decades, and for that I am profoundly thankful. Dear Mrs Friedländer, you are part of this vibrant Jewish life.

However, it infuriates me how blatantly antisemitism is once again raising its head in our country, on the streets, in school playgrounds, on the internet. In our country, of all countries! I was utterly appalled that it is possible in our country for a right-wing extremist to attack a busy synagogue on the holiest day of the Jewish year. In our country, of all countries! How I wish that the attack in Halle had been a turning point. But Jewish people in Germany continue to be mocked, vilified and violently attacked. That is intolerable! It is also intolerable when opponents of government policies to tackle the pandemic present themselves as victims of persecution wearing a yellow star. That makes a mockery of the victims of the Shoah and trivialises antisemitism.

Unfortunately, we are also seeing how in the last few years, and particularly during the pandemic, the tone in many of our debates has become more intransigent, how hatred and conspiracy myths are being spread, how our democracy is once again under attack. I am concerned to see that the protests against coronavirus policies are also attended by opponents of democracy who have but one goal: to weaken and undermine democracy. Today there are still opponents of democracy who resort to violence – in our country, of all countries. I am thinking here of the local politicians and mayors who have told me that they have been attacked and fear for their lives. I am thinking of the murder of Walter Lübcke and the murders committed by the NSU, and of the terrible attacks in Hanau and the Olympia shopping centre in Munich. We know that right-wing extremism still poses the greatest danger to our liberal democracy – and that takes us back to Walther Rathenau.

Yes, a liberal democracy needs debate, it needs controversy, it needs dispute. But when hatred and incitement to hatred are sown, or indeed where violence is used, then a line has been crossed. We cannot and will not tolerate this. Such acts must be met with the full force of the law. A state based on the rule of law must protect those under threat. But the state is only one side. A democracy also needs citizens who are committed to it, who take a stand and do not look away indifferently when people are humiliated, defamed or threatened. Democracy needs confident, empowered citizens who are aware just how precious democracy is and are ready to protect and defend it. This is perhaps the crucial lesson to be learnt from the murder of Walther Rathenau.

Our democracy needs people like you, dear Margot Friedländer. You know what can happen if too few citizens believe in democracy. You know what human beings can do to each other, what happens when human beings dehumanise others. You pass on this knowledge. We have to know what happened so that it will not happen again, as the great Primo Levi put it, and that is your maxim, too.

Our country cannot be grateful enough for this knowledge you have gifted us, for the reconciliation you have gifted us. For all of us, both are at once a warning and a reminder of our duty. Never again must we abandon the Jewish community. That is our responsibility now, and it persists into the future. Not only Jews are called upon to speak out against antisemitism. Everyone else, non-Jews too, must fight this fight.

We cannot change what has been. These are your words, dear Margot Friedländer. It is for the future. It is for democracy. It is for you. Be human! That is the message you pass on to us, to the next generations. Be human!

Dear Margot Friedländer, today I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your humanity, and for your commitment to democracy and to our country. And I know that in doing so I speak for many people in our country. Thank you for the gift of reconciliation.

Many congratulations on winning the Walther Rathenau Award.