



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the event commemorating the 50th anniversary of the
attack on the Israeli Olympic team
held in Fürstfeldbruck
on 5 September 2022**

David Berger
Anton Fliegerbauer
Ze'ev Friedman
Yossef Gutfreund
Eliezer Halfin
Yossef Romano
Amitzur Shapira
Kehat Shor
Mark Slavin
Andrei Spitzer
Yakov Springer
Moshe Weinberg

We have come together to remember and to mourn. We mourn twelve people who lost their lives in a horrific manner fifty years ago, in the worst terrorist attack in the history of the then still young Federal Republic. We mourn eleven sportsmen and a police officer. Eleven of the Jewish athletes, coaches and referees who had travelled to Munich as part of the Israeli team with great ambitions and high hopes.

All hope ended in a nightmare.

In the early hours of 5 September 1972, eight heavily armed members of the Palestinian terrorist group Black September invaded the Olympic Village completely unhindered and took the eleven Israeli sportsmen hostage. They brutally murdered two of them while still in the apartments at Connollystraße 31 and the nine others here, in this place where the German emergency forces' rescue operation catastrophically failed. It ended in a bloodbath.

Eleven Jewish sportsmen were dead, murdered in Germany. In Germany, of all places.

Honoured guests, today is a day of sorrow, remembrance and contemplation. I am profoundly grateful that you, the families of the victims, are here today and also that you, President Herzog, are here today and by my side. To my mind, there was no way we could have a proper act of remembrance without you all, without the families and without the presence of the State of Israel. My thanks go to everyone who helped over the last few weeks to make joint remembrance possible today.

Honoured family members, we cannot fathom what suffering, what pain you have been through. We can only imagine what the loss of your sons, husbands, fathers meant to you and still means to you.

How can life go on for a young woman who has just had her first child, whose father will never come home? How can life go on with the images of the room bearing the marks of murder, and with the knowledge that your husband or father had to endure hours fearing for his life in that room?

How can life go on with the memory that your husband, after he was shot, was left to bleed out in front of his teammates in indescribable agonies?

How can life go on when you receive two postcards from Munich in which your now murdered son wrote that everything was wonderful and he was looking forward to coming home?

I know that the suffering, the pain, the trauma live on in your families to this day. Nothing in your lives is as it was before 1972. Nothing is as it could have been and should have been. That gnawing pain has been with you for five decades.

The Games in Munich were supposed to be completely different from the previous Games in Germany, those of 1936, which the Nazis orchestrated as a bombastic propaganda display, shamelessly and unscrupulously misusing the Olympic ideal for their own ends. Munich 1972 was supposed to be a counterpoint to Berlin 1936. The young Federal Republic wanted to showcase itself as a cosmopolitan, liberal society, recognised and respected among democracies – and demonstrate that it understood its responsibility with regard to the past and acknowledged that past.

Yes, there was the ambition to present “the Cheerful Games” in a Germany that had left spiked helmets and goose-stepping behind for good. But however that may be, there was also a host’s responsibility to take proper care of sportsmen and women from around the world, including and especially those from Israel. From Israel, which had been threatened from the first day of its existence, surrounded by hate and enmity.

People in Israel have always known that the Jewish state has to be strong and well defended. In Germany, the sportspeople from Israel were our guests. Their safety had been entrusted to us. What a great vote of confidence it was to take part, after the crimes against humanity of the Shoah, in the Olympic Games hosted by the country of the perpetrators. There were survivors of the Shoah among the athletes and their coaches.

Intrinsic to the sad and painful truth of this commemoration is the fact that we wanted to be good hosts, but did not live up to the trust that the Israeli sportsmen and their families had placed in Germany. They were not safe. They were not protected. In our country, they were tortured and killed by terrorists.

We in Germany were not prepared for an attack of this kind, and yet we ought to have been; that, too, is part of the bitter truth. We were not prepared for the possibility that foreign terrorists would this time abuse the Olympic ideal, cold blooded and prepared to use every form of violence. We were not prepared for a terrorist attack consciously orchestrated in front of an international television audience.

The efforts of 1972 to showcase Germany as a peaceable, friendly democracy – those efforts tragically failed in Munich. The Olympic Village became an international stage for the terrorists, an international stage for antisemitism and violence.

And exactly that should never have been allowed to happen.

“We stand helpless before a truly despicable act,” said the Federal President of the time, Gustav Heinemann, struggling for composure himself as he spoke the words. It was indeed a truly despicable act. But that alone does not explain the catastrophe of Munich.

Many would later describe the catastrophe as “inconceivable”. For those who had been there at the time, that was presumably the overwhelming feeling. However – should we not have known, we Germans of all people, that the idea of inconceivability is a fallacy that can have terrible consequences? ‘Inconceivable’ is designed to ward off questions. It distracts from the real question: how could such a thing happen that should never have been allowed to happen?

As we commemorate today, we must sincerely and truly remember. Such remembering is painful. It is most especially so for you, the families. But it must be so for us in Germany as well.

The events of Munich 1972 left deep, dark scars in the lives of those who lost loved ones. The trauma of Munich has embedded itself in people’s collective memory in Israel. But the attack also left deep, dark scars for us, in the city of Munich and in the Federal Republic of Germany.

Today's act of remembrance can therefore only be sincere if we are prepared to recognise painful facts – if we acknowledge that the story of the Olympic attack is also a story of misjudgements, of dreadful, fatal mistakes: of, in fact, failure. And that acknowledgement is overdue.

No, the perpetrators did not come from Germany. Responsibility for these murders lay with the Palestinian killers and their Libyan helpers. It is bitterly disheartening to know that there has been not one word of sympathy, not one word of regret from the current political representatives of those countries. It was they, the killers and those who helped them, eight Palestinians and their handlers, who brought their hate and terrorism to Munich. They are responsible for the crime. But that does not absolve us. We bear responsibility too: the responsibility of the hosts for not having prevented what we had an obligation to prevent; responsibility to protect the lives of the hostages who found themselves in the hands of terrorists.

Today, fifty years on, many questions – far too many – remain unanswered. Back then, the Games were resumed on the very day the memorial service was held: "The Games must go on." And the politicians also did all they could to get back to business as usual. The attack was followed by years and decades of silence, of blocking out; years of increasing indifference to the fate of the families. Years of callousness. That, too, is a failure.

How could all this happen? We must face up to that question and search for answers. We must finally want to find those answers.

Why were the surviving perpetrators handed over so quickly and never prosecuted? It is hard to bear that one of them boasts of the crime to this day and gives assurances on camera that he would do it all again.

What exactly were the perpetrators' connections to German right-wing extremists and the Baader–Meinhof Group? Why were the German security forces so badly equipped and so badly out of their depth? Did Germany ignore warnings from Israel – and why was Israeli help with the rescue operation refused? Why were files kept under lock and key, why was indeed their very existence denied, for decades? Why was there not even a committee of inquiry?

We are talking about a great tragedy and threefold failures. The first failure lies in the preparations for the Games and in the security strategy. The second comprises the events of 5 and 6 September 1972. The third failure begins on the day after the attack: the silence, the blocking out, the forgetting.

I expressly welcome the proposal from the Federal Government to now convene an Israeli-German commission of historians. I hope that the commission will succeed in shedding more light onto that dark chapter. That will depend on their having comprehensive access to documents and all possible support in their work.

The experts from both countries will have a great responsibility on their shoulders: their work may bring painful, uncomfortable truths to light; indeed, it may well have to. But we must confront and process the history of Munich 72 – and also our history of failing to do so.

One important lesson of Munich 72 is that we must resolutely fight every form of antisemitism in our country, every form of antisemitic hate and especially antisemitic violence. That is and will remain our responsibility in the face of history.

Another important lesson is that we must be prepared to defend ourselves as a democracy. Freedom and security are not mutually exclusive; they are interdependent. A liberal society can never fully protect itself from terrorist attacks that target one thing, namely freedom itself. But we must be vigilant vis-à-vis the enemies of democracy both internal and external – for we live in a time in which liberal democracies are being challenged more strongly both from within and from outside.

And there is another lesson that Munich 72 teaches us: only when we know the truth, when we own up to our mistakes and failures, can the wounds begin to heal, including those inflicted on our constitutional state in 1972.

Honoured guests, this is of course not about us, and certainly not just about us. It is primarily about those who lost their lives. It is about you, the loved ones left behind. You have a right to finally know the truth, to finally receive answers to the questions that have tormented you for decades. And they include the question of why you were left alone with your suffering, your pain, for so long.

It would be 45 years before a worthy place of remembrance was instituted in the Olympic Park. When it was unveiled five years ago, then Israeli President Reuven Rivlin and several members of the families were there. We mourned together, and we remembered together. But it was to take another five years before agreement was reached on suitable compensation.

Honoured guests, honoured family members, President Herzog, we are united in quiet remembrance of the twelve people who lost their lives. We are united in pain, But let us not forget – it is your pain, the pain of those who lost loved ones. It is your pain, which we have failed to adequately recognise for far too long. And I also know that the understanding we have now reached will not be able to heal all the wounds.

I therefore direct the following words specifically to you, whose lives have been blighted by loss, grief and pain for fifty years: we cannot make up for what happened; we cannot make up for the obstruction, ignorance and injustice you experienced and suffered. That shames me. As the head of state of this country and in the name of the Federal

Republic of Germany, I ask your forgiveness for the woefully inadequate protection afforded to the Israeli athletes at the Olympic Games in Munich and for the woefully inadequate investigation afterwards – for the fact that it was possible for what happened to happen.

I have a duty and a need to acknowledge Germany's responsibility – here and now and into the future. May the outcome of today be that you, the families, feel properly seen and heard in your pain and feel that we take our responsibility seriously.

The friendship, the reconciliation that Israel has afforded us is nothing less than a miracle. May the outcome of today also be that we Germans prove ourselves worthy of the precious asset which forms the foundation of that friendship – the asset which was so badly damaged in this place fifty years ago: trust.