



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at a memorial ceremony for the victims of the arson attack
in Solingen on 29 May 1993 Solingen
29 May 2023
in Solingen**

"[...] I go shopping and stand in the fire I take my granddaughter to school in the morning and stand in the fire I sit at the breakfast table and smell the fire I lie in bed and feel the heat of the fire on my face [...]."

In these words from your novel, Ms DüNDAR, I hear Mevlüde Genç speaking. What you write and how you describe the suffering and sorrow of the Genç family breaks our hearts and takes us back to that night thirty years ago.

Members of the Genç family, we had the opportunity to sit together before this ceremony started and I was allowed to share in your mourning. You told me how the pain and the memories define your lives. You, those who have experienced such suffering, do not actually need an anniversary to remember. Your pain is omnipresent and I can imagine that this pain has not eased even after 30 years. It will never go away.

I am here today to remember the five people, young women and girls, who were murdered on 29 May 1993. Today we stop to reflect and mourn Gürsün İnce, Hatice Genç, Gülüstan Öztürk, Hülya Genç, Saime Genç. And of course Mevlüde Genç, who passed away last autumn.

Thirty years ago, you, the Genç family, wanted to celebrate the most important Islamic holiday, Eid al Adha. You had laid out your gifts and your finest clothes. Little Saime had a particular reason to celebrate: she was proud to be starting kindergarten soon. But instead: flames and smoke, pain and death.

Hatice Genç, to this day you often speak in the present tense when you talk about the attack in which you lost your two daughters. 29 May 1993 will never be over for the Genç, Duran, Saygın, İnce and Öztürk families. Nightmares, memories and fear are your constant companions.

After the horrendous attack, Mevlüde Genç made no secret of her pain and her sorrow. In public, she was held in high esteem as a reconciler. As the woman who even in the tumultuous days after the arson attack called for people not to respond to violence with yet more violence. As the woman who stood up for compassion and humanity, the woman for whom compassion was stronger than hatred.

However, Mevlüde Genç also called for harsh sentences for the perpetrators and time and again insisted, as she put it, on the need to "get to the bottom of it". Mevlüde Genç did not just advocate reconciliation but also that our entire society take a tough stance on right wing extremism, hatred and violence – first and foremost state institutions.

And true to Mevlüde Genç's cause I am also today remembering Hoyerswerda, Saarlouis, Rostock-Lichtenhagen, Mölln – and unfortunately many other places. I am remembering all those right wing crimes that have become engraved in our country's collective memory – and also those no longer mentioned today. Crimes long before the arson attack in Solingen, such as the Oktoberfest bombing in 1980, and crimes of our time, such as those in Halle and Hanau. And also the murders committed by the NSU and the crimes before and after Solingen.

As Federal President, I cannot remain silent about the climate which helped bring about these attacks. I cannot address you today without naming the breeding ground of the arson attack in Solingen and of many other crimes, a breeding ground that is reminiscent of Nazi Germany.

For far too long our country was lulled into the wholly unfounded but constantly repeated assertion that deluded individuals were wreaking havoc. But the perpetrators "do not come from nowhere", said Federal President von Weizsäcker at the memorial ceremony on 3 June 1993. It is true that the social environment, the structures of the perpetrator groups and the ideology motivating the perpetrators were long overlooked, ignored, even repressed. I am talking about right wing extremism, about racism, about hatred.

The attacks by right wing extremists were and are directed at all those who are supposedly different: who have dark hair, who have a so called foreign name, belong to a different religion. They were and are directed at refugees, the homeless, people with disabilities – and also at those who, like Walter Lübcke, for example, openly advocate a tolerant society.

Right wing extremists and racists dehumanise individuals in order to hate them – and thus spread fear and terror amongst all those who are potential victims. I have a word for this: terrorism. This right wing terrorism is responsible for the deaths here in Solingen. This right wing terrorism existed before Solingen and has remained with us after

Solingen. There is a recurring pattern of right wing extremist violence in our country.

In 1992 the hip hop band Advanced Chemistry became known with a song which they wrote as a reaction to right wing violence. It was called "Foreign in my own country". The musicians rapped: "[...] I am not an isolated case, but one of many. Not recognised, foreign in my own country. Not a foreigner but foreign all the same [...]".

And that is exactly how many people felt back then who had come to Germany to work and live. Who, as time passed, saw this country as their country, and wanted to see it as their country. But then fear took hold among them: we are attacked collectively, we are marginalised and threatened – and it can happen to any of us. That was a dominant feeling for many back then in the early 1990s.

Immediately after the arson attack, I have read, rope ladders were sold out here in Solingen. People were scared they would not be able to get to safety from the upper storey of their house in an emergency. Back then, buckets of water were lined up in people's apartments in case a fire needed to be put out quickly. All foreign-sounding names were taken down from doorbells and letterboxes.

Just imagine, ladies and gentlemen, all those of us who do not have to face such experiences, what it must feel like to buy a rope ladder for fear of fire.

I have often heard that particularly the arson attack in Solingen represented a defining moment, a defining moment in the decision as to whether or not Germany is and should be home. In his novel "Our Germany fairy tale", Dincer Güçyeter, recently awarded the Leipzig Book Fair Prize, describes how his mother, who had come to Germany in the late 1960s, experienced the year 1993: "You think everything has found its natural path, that the ground is solid under your feet. But then a new wind gathers, [...], rips doors and windows out of your house. You believe your children will stay here because they were born here, you think they no longer need to have these mixed feelings, they are firmly grounded, and then the screen fills with flames."

You, Mr Genç, and your wife were clear in saying back then: we are staying here. We are taking on German citizenship. We belong here. I am, we are, very grateful to you for taking this course.

And I am grateful that so many others – including you, Minister Özdemir – decided back then: not only is this country our country, but we will help to shape it. Not least in this respect, Solingen was a turning point for many people in Germany with an immigration background: showing and saying loud and clear that they belong and have a damned right to be recognised as belonging after many years of hard toil. No longer caught between two chairs, but sitting firmly on both.

So how do we bring about what Mevlüde Genç called for and proclaimed using the noble word reconciliation? How can our country continue to knit together? How can we strengthen that which holds us together?

To my mind, we need here in the first instance a robust, vigilant and upstanding state. Each and every person in the country we share has to be able to live safely and in peace and the state has to protect particularly those in greater risk of becoming victims. For this it has to do everything, for this it has to do even more. I am astounded when I hear that isolated members of the security authorities who are meant to be preventing right wing attacks are setting up right wing chats online. This is something we cannot and must not tolerate. When I talk about a robust democracy, that means for me being strong against those spreading hatred and violence, strong against those who simply do not want to accept the diversity of our country.

And here the language and words that we use are also a factor. Words can trigger the potential for violence in a society. All too often we have seen words being translated into deeds. If politicians believe they need soundbites to curry favour amongst the far right; if even politicians shift the boundaries between what can be said and what is unspeakable, they are in fact fanning the flames of violence. The arson attack in Solingen which happened against the backdrop of the polarised and hatred driven debate on asylum policy provides a stark example.

However, each and every citizen has a responsibility. What I want is fellow humans who intervene at a bus stop if a girl is being racially harassed or attacked. Who do not tolerate swastikas being daubed on the wall of a school. Who set the record straight if lies, hatred and hate speech are being spread at work, in social media, in the stairwell or at the pub. Silence and indifference are all too often interpreted as voiceless consent. What we need instead is civic courage and bravery!

Thus at this juncture I do not just want to talk about violence but also about the prejudice and discrimination that happens on a day to day basis. After all, the two words resentment and racism have more in common than just letters. Day to day racism when looking for a job or an apartment, when tickets are being checked on public transport, is in fact rooted in deep seated resentment.

I myself, a white man with a clearly German name, do not have to experience what it feels like to be marginalised in everyday life. But I am Federal President of all people in our country. I listen very carefully when people tell me how wearing and hurtful it is to be treated like someone who doesn't belong in their own country. And I mean it when I say in their own country. After all, this country, our shared home, is today a diverse and peaceful home to many.

To me, it is clear: those who really love this country do not hate their fellow human beings.

Even 30 years after the horrific attack in Solingen, we remain stunned, angry, sad. However, we are not intimidated, not helpless, not paralysed.

We share the hope and the commitment of Mevlüde Genç. May the memory of Gürsün İnce, Hatice Genç, Gülüstan Öztürk and Hülya and Saime Genç embolden us further.