



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at the cultural evening "On Loss and Refuge. Exile."  
Schloss Bellevue,  
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"My father was a wandering Aramean." Thus begins a confession of faith from ancient Israel, according to the Hebrew Bible: "Then you shall declare before the Lord your God: My father was a wandering Aramean [...]."

Even at the very beginning of human history, then, we find the experience of exile, of rootlessness, of life in foreign lands. And the three great world religions Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which together name Abraham as their forefather, hark back to an emigrant who had to leave his homeland: "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you." That is what he was told, according to the first book of the Bible.

In dedicating this evening to the topic of exile, in listening to the voices of artists who are living in exile here with us in Germany, who fled their home countries because their lives were threatened or because they no longer had the freedom to speak and act as they chose, we are thus engaging with a topic that reaches far back into history, indeed as far back as the origins of these religions themselves.

Having to leave one's homeland is an ancient human trauma – and one that returns for every individual forced to flee. Having to go into exile is something that affects the roots of every existence, not only existence as an artist but the innermost core of every life.

We in Germany, as a result of our history, have a particular obligation to provide a safe haven to these people, these cultural professionals who in their home countries are politically persecuted and robbed of their rights and their opportunities to participate, whose lives are threatened, who must flee and go into exile. Under the Nazi regime, hundreds of thousands of people and in particular many of our best artists and our intellectuals were forced to leave their home in Germany. They were dependent on others offering them protection and refuge.

The history of Germany over the last century, and particularly of German culture, is to a great extent a history of emigration, of exile.

We have been and continue to be reminded of this history time and time again. On 10 November 1994, the opening speech at the first session of the 13<sup>th</sup> legislative term of the German Bundestag was held, as traditional, by the President by Seniority. This was the writer Stefan Heym. In his speech, he briefly recalled the end of the Weimar Republic, the beginning of the Third Reich dictatorship, and his own life story: "The Reichstag building, in which we find ourselves today, burned down. I saw the fire myself. Shortly afterwards I had to leave Germany, and the first time I saw it again was in American uniform."

Four years earlier, another emigrant had opened the first Bundestag of the reunified Germany: Willy Brandt.

Stefan Heym, as we know, was not the only writer or artist who returned after the war in American uniform. He was among the Allied troops who landed in Normandy. Georg Stefan Troller, whom we have just seen and heard, was also a US Army soldier. And many others who had emigrated or been driven into exile had joined up with the armed forces or secret services of the Allies who sought to free Germany from dictatorship: Klaus Mann and Hans Habe, Ernst Cramer and Friedrich Torberg, Alfred Döblin and Carl Zuckmayer and so many others. It was in the uniform of the liberating troops that these emigrants manifested their love of their home country – and it was in exile that they did what they could to liberate this home country from dictatorship and murderous injustice. One could say: Patriots in foreign uniform.

Likely the most famous of them all was a truly world-renowned German star: Marlene Dietrich. She cared so deeply about looking after the American troops that she wanted to stay on after her concerts, even after the war, and spend hours with the veterans who had attended – "my boys", as she called them.

Germany did not always thank all of its emigrants for their efforts, and so some did not return. Marlene Dietrich's coffin was laid out in the Madeleine in Paris draped in the Tricolore, and Thomas Mann died in Switzerland, in his final exile.

But it seems that none of the emigrants could shake off the longing for their homeland. The Jewish author Mascha Kaléko, who had been so at home in all of the cafes along Berlin's Kudamm, described her longing for the city in the poem *Sozusagen ein Mailied*, or 'A May Song, So to Speak', written in exile in New York:

"Sometimes, in Manhattan, though I'm free now I'm here, /  
Chasing happiness, fleeing no more, / The clanking of chains sounds at  
once in my ear. / And I'm back in the Prussia of yore. / Do the birds still  
sing there, do they dare it? / Does Werder bloom white each spring anew

... / And how does the river Havel bear it, / And the good old lake at Grunewald, too?

Sometimes, among new and friendly faces, / Amid luscious flora – glad to see – / I long inside for barren places, / Sandy pines, it's strange to me. / What do the primrose and geranium know / Of racist ideology and medicine ... / And do the chestnut trees still grow / At Uhland street?"

Ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted that we have come together here in this way this evening. I'm delighted that we have artists among us today who have found refuge here with us in Germany. Some of them will take the floor after me, and so I don't want to say all too much on the topic myself.

Only this: Among those who have found refuge with us are not just great and important artists, but people who have fought passionately for their country, like those who had to leave Germany in another age.

Together this evening, we also think of the many who have not found a safe haven, but who remain at the mercy of their oppressors in their home countries, who are persecuted or detained or have died there. We think, for example, of 22-year-old Jina Mahsa Amini, who was arrested by the Iranian morality police one year ago and met a violent death in police custody. We think, for example, of Osman Kavala and Ahmet Altan, who are in prison in Turkey or unable to leave their country. And we think of Maria Kolesnikova and the many others who are in detention in Belarus, simply because they have called for justice and freedom and democracy.

We know that the conditions they face in detention have been deteriorating and becoming more brutal for months, that detainees receive utterly inadequate medical care, that they no longer have access to legal representation and that many have not seen a familiar face for months now. I want to send an unequivocal message to the Belarusian leader Lukashenko: Your regime is responsible for the lives of these people. We will not look away. We will not forget Maria Kolesnikova and Maxim Znak and all of the others!

Ladies and gentlemen, it is no coincidence that today's event is taking place here and now. The Days of Exile initiated by the Körber-Stiftung will soon begin again, this year – for the first time – in Berlin, and in cooperation with Stiftung Exilmuseum. I am delighted that this is the case, and that over 40 institutions and individuals are involved in the Days of Exile project.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank not just the Körber-Stiftung and Stiftung Exilmuseum for their valuable work, but also the German PEN Center's Writers in Exile Programme – some of you are here this evening – as well as the German National Library's German Exile Archive, Akademie der Künste, the Martin Roth Initiative, the

International Cities of Refuge Network and many others. They all work to ensure that persecuted writers, artists and intellectuals are not forgotten, and that, wherever possible, these people find help, refuge and protection.

This evening, I am very grateful for the participation of: Herta Müller, Senthuran Varatharajah, Yassin al-Haj Saleh, Aslı Erdoğan and Kateryna Mishchenko. And Cymin Samawatie and Mona Matbou Riahi are responsible for the music.

Dear guests, may the wish that the exiled Berliner Mascha Kaléko once put into words in New York be fulfilled for all those who can no longer stay in their home country:

“Lord, give all those fleeing from the sword / A roof, a loaf, a child, a pillow of their own.”