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*Richard von Weizsäcker*

## **Speech in the Bundestag on 8 May 1985 during the Ceremony Commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the End of War in Europe and of National-Socialist Tyranny**

I

Many nations are today commemorating the date on which World War II ended in Europe. Every nation is doing so with different feelings, depending on its fate. Be it victory or defeat, liberation from injustice and alien rule or transition to new dependence, division, new alliances, vast shifts of power - 8 May 1945 is a date of decisive historical importance for Europe.

We Germans are commemorating that date amongst ourselves, as is indeed necessary. We must find our own standards. We are not assisted in this task if we or others spare our feelings. We need and we have the strength to look truth straight in the eye – without embellishment and without distortion.

For us, the 8th of May is above all a date to remember what people had to suffer. It is also a date to reflect on the course taken by our history. The greater honesty we show in commemorating this day, the freer we are to face the consequences with due responsibility. For us Germans, 8 May is not a day of celebration. Those who actually witnessed that day in 1945 think back on highly personal and hence highly different experiences. Some returned home, others lost their homes. Some were liberated, whilst

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for others it was the start of captivity. Many were simply grateful that the bombing at night and fear had passed and that they had survived. Others felt first and foremost grief at the complete defeat suffered by their country. Some Germans felt bitterness about their shattered illusions, whilst others were grateful for the gift of a new start.

It was difficult to find one's bearings straight away. Uncertainty prevailed throughout the country. The military capitulation was unconditional, placing our destiny in the hands of our enemies. The past had been terrible, especially for many of those enemies, too. Would they not make us pay many times over for what we had done to them? Most Germans had believed that they were fighting and suffering for the good of their country. And now it turned out that their efforts were not only in vain and futile, but had served the inhuman goals of a criminal regime. The feelings of most people were those of exhaustion, despair and new anxiety. Had one's next of kin survived? Did a new start from those ruins make sense at all? Looking back, they saw the dark abyss of the past and, looking forward, they saw an uncertain, dark future.

Yet with every day something became clearer, and this must be stated on behalf of all of us today: the 8th of May was a day of liberation. It liberated all of us from the inhumanity and tyranny of the National-Socialist regime.

Nobody will, because of that liberation, forget the grave suffering that only started for many people on 8 May. But we must not regard the end of the war as the cause of flight, expulsion and deprivation of freedom. The cause goes back to the start of the tyranny that brought about war. We must not separate 8 May 1945 from 30 January 1933.

There is truly no reason for us today to participate in victory celebrations. But there is every reason for us to perceive 8 May 1945 as the end of an aberration in German history, an end bearing seeds of hope for a better future.

## II

8 May is a day of remembrance. Remembering means recalling an occurrence honestly and undistortedly so that it becomes a part of our very beings. This places high demands on our truthfulness.

Today we mourn all the dead of the war and the tyranny. In particular we commemorate the six million Jews who were murdered in German concentration camps. We commemorate all nations who suffered in the war, especially the countless citizens of the Soviet Union and Poland who lost their lives. As Germans, we mourn our own compatriots who perished as soldiers, during air raids at home, in captivity or during expulsion. We commemorate the Sinti and Romany gypsies, the homosexuals and the mentally ill who were killed, as well as the people who had to die for their religious or political beliefs. We commemorate the hostages who were executed. We recall the victims of the resistance movements in all the countries occupied by us. As Germans, we pay homage to the victims of the German resistance – among the public, the military, the churches, the workers and trade unions, and the communists. We commemorate those who did not actively resist, but preferred to die instead of violating their consciences.

Alongside the endless army of the dead mountains of human suffering arise – grief at the dead, suffering from injury or crippling or barbarous compulsory sterilization, suffering during the air raids, during flight and expulsion, suffering because of rape and pillage, forced labour, injustice and torture, hunger and hardship, suffering because of fear of arrest and death, grief at the loss of everything which one had wrongly believed in and worked for. Today we sorrowfully recall all this human suffering.

Perhaps the greatest burden was borne by the women of all nations. Their suffering, renunciation and silent strength are all too easily forgotten by history. Filled with fear, they worked, bore human life and protected it. They mourned their fallen fathers and sons, husbands, brothers and friends. In the years of darkness, they ensured that the light of humanity was not extinguished. After the war, with no prospect of a secure future, women everywhere were the first to set about building homes again, the "rubble women" in Berlin and elsewhere. When the men who had survived returned, women had to take a back seat again. Because of the war, many women were left alone and spent their lives in solitude. Yet it is first and foremost thanks to the women that nations did not disintegrate spiritually on account of the destruction, devastation, atrocities and inhumanity and that they gradually regained their foothold after the war.

### III

At the root of the tyranny was Hitler's immeasurable hatred against our Jewish compatriots. Hitler had never concealed this hatred from the public, but made the entire nation a tool of it. Only a day before his death, on 30 April 1945, he concluded his so-called will with the words: "Above all, I call upon the leaders of the nation and their followers to observe painstakingly the race laws and to oppose ruthlessly the poisoners of all nations: international Jewry." Hardly any country has in its history always remained free from blame for war or violence. The genocide of the Jews is, however, unparalleled in history.

The perpetration of this crime was in the hands of a few people. It was concealed from the eyes of the public, but every German was able to experience what his Jewish compatriots had to suffer, ranging from plain apathy and hidden intolerance to outright hatred. Who could remain unsuspecting after the burning of the synagogues, the plundering, the stigmatization with the Star of David, the deprivation of rights, the ceaseless violation of human dignity? Whoever opened his eyes and ears and sought information could not fail to notice that Jews were being deported. The nature and scope of the destruction may have exceeded human imagination, but in reality there was, apart from the crime itself, the attempt by too many people, including those of my generation, who were young and were not involved in planning the events and carrying them out, not to take note of what was happening. There were many ways of not burdening one's conscience, of shunning responsibility, looking away, keeping mum. When the unspeakable truth of the Holocaust then became known at the end of the war, all too many of us claimed that they had not known anything about it or even suspected anything.

There is no such thing as the guilt or innocence of an entire nation. Guilt is, like innocence, not collective, but personal. There is discovered or concealed individual guilt. There is guilt which people acknowledge or deny. Everyone who directly experienced that era should today quietly ask himself about his involvement then.

The vast majority of today's population were either children then or had not been born. They cannot profess a guilt of their own for crimes that they did not commit. No discerning person can expect them to wear a penitential robe simply because they are Germans. But their forefathers have left them a grave legacy. All of us, whether guilty or not, whether old

or young, must accept the past. We are all affected by its consequences and liable for it. The young and old generations must and can help each other to understand why it is vital to keep alive the memories. It is not a case of coming to terms with the past. That is not possible. It cannot be subsequently modified or made undone. However, anyone who closes his eyes to the past is blind to the present. Whoever refuses to remember the inhumanity is prone to new risks of infection.

The Jewish nation remembers and will always remember. We seek reconciliation. Precisely for this reason we must understand that there can be no reconciliation without remembrance. The experience of millionfold death is part of the very being of every Jew in the world, not only because people cannot forget such atrocities, but also because remembrance is part of the Jewish faith.

"Seeking to forget makes exile all the longer; the secret of redemption lies in remembrance." This oft quoted Jewish adage surely expresses the idea that faith in God is faith in the work of God in history. Remembrance is experience of the work of God in history. It is the source of faith in redemption. This experience creates hope, creates faith in redemption, in reunification of the divided, in reconciliation. Whoever forgets this experience loses his faith.

If we for our part sought to forget what has occurred, instead of remembering it, this would not only be inhuman. We would also impinge upon the faith of the Jews who survived and destroy the basis of reconciliation. We must erect a memorial to thoughts and feelings in our own hearts.

#### **IV.**

The 8th of May marks a deep cut not only in German history but in the history of Europe as a whole. The European civil war had come to an end, the old world of Europe lay in ruins. "Europe had fought itself to a standstill" (M. Stürmer). The meeting of American and Soviet Russian soldiers on the Elbe became a symbol for the temporary end of a European era.

True, all this was deeply rooted in history. For a century Europe had suffered under the clash of extreme nationalistic aspirations. At the end of the First World War peace treaties were signed but they lacked the power to foster peace. Once more nationalistic passions flared up and were fanned by the distress of the people at that time.

Along the road to disaster Hitler became the driving force. He whipped up and exploited mass hysteria. A weak democracy was incapable of stopping him. And even the powers of Western Europe – in Churchill's judgement unsuspecting but not without guilt – contributed through their weakness to this fateful trend. After the First World War America had withdrawn and in the thirties had no influence on Europe.

Hitler wanted to dominate Europe and to do so through war. He looked for and found an excuse in Poland. On 23 May 1939 he told the German generals: "No further successes can be gained without bloodshed... Danzig is not the objective. Our aim is to extend our Lebensraum in the East and safeguard food supplies... So there is no question of sparing Poland; and there remains the decision to attack Poland at the first suitable opportunity... The object is to deliver the enemy a blow, or the annihilating blow, at the start. In this, law, injustice or treaties do not matter."

On 23 August 1939 Germany and the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression pact. The secret supplementary protocol made provision for the impending partition of Poland. That pact was made to give Hitler an opportunity to invade Poland. The Soviet leaders at the time were fully aware of this. And all who understood politics realized that the implications of the German-Soviet pact were Hitler's invasion of Poland and hence the Second World War.

That does not mitigate Germany's responsibility for the outbreak of the Second World War. The Soviet Union was prepared to allow other nations to fight one another so that it could have a share of the spoils. The initiative for the war, however, came from Germany, not from the Soviet Union. It was Hitler who resorted to the use of force. The outbreak of the Second World War remains linked with the name of Germany.

In the course of that war the Nazi regime tormented and defiled many nations. At the end of it all only one nation remained to be tormented, enslaved and defiled: the German nation. Time and again Hitler had declared that if the German nation was not capable of

winning the war it should be left to perish. The other nations first became victims of a war started by Germany before we became the victims of our own war.

The division of Germany into zones began on the 8th of May. In the meantime the Soviet Union had taken control in all countries of Eastern and South-eastern Europe that had been occupied by Germany during the war. All of them, with the exception of Greece, became socialist states. The division of Europe into two different political systems took its course. True, it was the post-war developments which cemented that division, but without the war started by Hitler it would not have happened at all. That is what first comes to the minds of the nations concerned when they recall the war unleashed by the German leaders. And we think of that too when we ponder the division of our own country and the loss of huge sections of German territory. In a sermon in East Berlin commemorating the 8th of May, Cardinal Meißner said: "The pathetic result of sin is always division."

## **V.**

The arbitrariness of destruction continued to be felt in the arbitrary distribution of burdens. There were innocent people who were persecuted and guilty ones who got away. Some were lucky to be able to begin life all over again at home in familiar surroundings. Others were expelled from the lands of their fathers. We in what was to become the Federal Republic of Germany were given the priceless opportunity to live in freedom. Many millions of our countrymen have been denied that opportunity to this day.

Learning to accept mentally this arbitrary allocation of fate was the first task, alongside the material task of rebuilding the country. That had to be the test of the human strength to recognize the burdens of others, to help bear them over time, not to forget them. It had to be the test of our ability to work for peace, of our willingness to foster the spirit of reconciliation both at home and in our external relations, an ability and a readiness which not only others expected of us but which we most of all demanded of ourselves.

We cannot commemorate the 8th of May without being conscious of the great effort required on the part of our former enemies to set out on the road of reconciliation with us. Can we really place ourselves in the position of relatives of the victims of the Warsaw ghetto or of the Lidice massacre? And how hard must it have been for the citizens of

Rotterdam or London to support the rebuilding of our country from where the bombs came which not long before had been dropped on their cities? To be able to do so they had gradually to gain the assurance that the Germans would not again try to make good their defeat by use of force.

In our country the biggest sacrifice was demanded of those who had been driven out of their homeland. They were to experience suffering and injustice long after the 8th of May. Those of us who were born here often do not have the imagination or the open heart with which to grasp the real meaning of their harsh fate.

But soon there were great signs of readiness to help. Many millions of refugees and expellees were taken in who over the years were able to strike new roots. Their children and grandchildren have in many different ways formed a loving attachment to the culture and the homeland of their ancestors. That is a great treasure in their lives. But they themselves have found a new home where they are growing up and integrating with the local people of the same age, sharing their dialect and their customs. Their young life is proof of their ability to be at peace with themselves. Their grandparents or parents were once driven out; they themselves, however, are now at home.

Very soon and in exemplary fashion the expellees identified themselves with the renunciation of force. That was no passing declaration in the early stages of helplessness but a commitment which has retained its validity. Renouncing the use of force means allowing trust to grow on all sides; it means that a Germany that has regained its strength remains bound by it. The expellees' own homeland has meanwhile become a homeland for others. In many of the old cemeteries in Eastern Europe you will today find more Polish than German graves. The compulsory migration of millions of Germans to the West was followed by the migration of millions of Poles and, in their wake, millions of Russians. These are all people who were not asked, people who suffered injustice, people who became defenceless objects of political events and to whom no compensation for those injustices and no offsetting of claims can make up for what has been done to them.

Renouncing force today means giving them lasting security, unchallenged on political grounds, for their future in the place where fate drove them after the 8th of May and where they have been living in the decades since. It means placing the dictate of understanding

above conflicting legal claims. That is the true, the human contribution to a peaceful order in Europe which we can provide.

The new beginning in Europe after 1945 has brought both victory and defeat for the notion of freedom and self-determination. Our aim is to seize the opportunity to draw a line under a long period of European history in which to every country peace seemed conceivable and safe only as a result of its own supremacy, and in which peace meant a period of preparation for the next war.

The nations of Europe love their homeland. The Germans are no different. Who could trust in a nation's love of peace if it were capable of forgetting its homeland? No, love of peace manifests itself precisely in the fact that one does not forget one's homeland and is for that very reason resolved to do everything in one's power to live together with others in lasting peace. An expellee's love for his homeland is in no way revanchism.

The last war has aroused a stronger desire for peace in the hearts of men than in times past. The work of the churches in promoting reconciliation met with a tremendous response. The "Aktion Sühnezeichen", a campaign in which young people carry out atonement activity in Poland and Israel, is one example of such practical efforts to promote understanding. Recently, the town of Kleve on the lower Rhine received loaves of bread from Polish towns as a token of reconciliation and fellowship. The town council sent one of those loaves to a teacher in England because he had discarded his anonymity and written to say that as member of a bomber crew during the war he had destroyed the church and houses in Kleve and wanted to take part in some gesture of reconciliation. In seeking peace it is a tremendous help if, instead of waiting for the other to come to us, we go towards him, as this man did.

## VII

In the wake of the war, old enemies were brought closer together. As early as 1946, the American Secretary of State, James F. Byrnes, called in his memorable Stuttgart address for understanding in Europe and for assistance to the German nation on its way to a free and peaceable future. Innumerable Americans assisted us Germans, who had lost the war, with their own private means so as to heal the wounds of war. Thanks to the vision of

the Frenchmen Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman and their co-operation with Konrad Adenauer, the traditional enmity between the French and Germans was buried forever.

A new will and energy to reconstruct Germany surged through the country.. Many an old trench was filled in, religious differences and social strains were defused. People set to work in a spirit of partnership.

There was no "zero hour", but we had the opportunity to make a fresh start. We have used this opportunity as well as we could.

We have put democratic freedom in the place of oppression. Four years after the end of the war, on this 8th of May in 1949, the Parliamentary Council adopted our Basic Law. Transcending party differences, the democrats on the Council gave their answer to war and tyranny in Article 1 of our Constitution: "The German people acknowledge inviolable and inalienable human rights as the basis of any community, of peace and of justice in the world." This further significance of 8 May should also be remembered today.

The Federal Republic of Germany has become an internationally respected State. It is one of the most highly developed industrial countries in the world. It knows that its economic strength commits it to share responsibility for the struggle against hunger and need in the world and for social adjustment between nations. For 40 years we have been living in peace and freedom, to which we, through our policy in union with the free nations of the Atlantic Alliance and the European Community, have ourselves rendered a major contribution. The freedom of the individual has never received better protection in Germany than it does today. A comprehensive system of social welfare that can stand comparison with any other ensures the subsistence of the population. Whereas at the end of the war many Germans tried to hide their passports or to exchange them for another one, German nationality today is highly valued.

We certainly have no reason to be arrogant and self-righteous. But we may look back with gratitude on our development over these 40 years, if we use the memory of our own history as a guideline for our future behaviour.

– If we remember that mentally disturbed persons were put to death in the Third Reich, we will see care of people with psychiatric disorders as our own responsibility.

- If we remember how people persecuted on grounds of race, religion and politics and threatened with certain death often stood before the closed borders with other countries, we shall not close the door today on those who are genuinely persecuted and seek protection with us.
- If we reflect on the penalties for free thinking under the dictatorship, we will protect the freedom of every idea and every criticism, however much it may be directed against ourselves.
- Whoever criticizes the situation in the Middle East should think of the fate to which Germans condemned their Jewish fellow human beings, a fate that led to the establishment of the State of Israel under conditions which continue to burden people in that region even today.
- If we think of what our Eastern neighbours had to suffer during the war, we will find it easier to understand that accommodation and peaceful neighbourly relations with these countries remain central tasks of German foreign policy. It is important that both sides remember and that both sides respect each other. Mikhail Gorbachov, General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, declared that it was not the intention of the Soviet leaders at the 40th anniversary of the end of the war to stir up anti-German feelings. The Soviet Union, he said, was committed to friendship between nations. Particularly if we have doubts about Soviet contributions to understanding between East and West and about respect for human rights in all parts of Europe, we must not ignore this signal from Moscow. We seek friendship with the peoples of the Soviet Union.

## VIII

Forty years after the end of the war, the German nation remains divided.

At a commemorative service in the Church of the Holy Cross in Dresden held in February of this year, Bishop Hempel said: "It is a burden and a scourge that two German States have emerged with their harsh border. The very multitude of borders is a burden and a scourge. Weapons are a burden."

Recently in Baltimore in the United States, an exhibition on "Jews in Germany" was opened. The Ambassadors of both German States accepted the invitation to attend. The host, the President of the Johns Hopkins University, welcomed them together. He stated that all Germans share the same historical development. Their joint past is a bond that links them. Such a bond, he said, could be a blessing or a problem, but was always a source of hope.

We Germans are one people and one nation. We feel that we belong together because we have lived through the same past. We also experienced the 8th of May 1945 as part of the common fate of our nation, which unites us. We feel bound together in our desire for peace. Peace and good neighbourly relations with all countries should radiate from the German soil in both States. And no other states should let that soil become a source of danger to peace either. The people of Germany are united in desiring a peace that encompasses justice and human rights for all peoples, including our own. Reconciliation that transcends boundaries cannot be provided by a walled Europe but only by a continent that removes the divisive elements from its borders. That is the exhortation given us by the end of the Second World War. We are confident that the 8th of May is not the last date in the common history of all Germans.

## **IX**

Many young people have in recent months asked themselves and us why such animated discussions about the past have arisen 40 years after the end of the war. Why are they more animated than after 25 or 30 years? What is the inherent necessity of this development?

It is not easy to answer such questions. But we should not seek the reasons primarily in external influences. In the life-span of men and in the destiny of nations, 40 years play a great role. Permit me at this point to return again to the Old Testament, which contains deep insights for every person, irrespective of his own faith. There, 40 years frequently play a vital part. The Israelites were to remain in the desert for 40 years before a new stage in their history began with their arrival in the promised land. 40 years were required for a complete transfer of responsibility from the generation of the fathers.

Elsewhere, too (in the Book of Judges), it is described how often the memory of experienced assistance and rescue lasted only for 40 years. When that memory faded, tranquillity was at an end. 40 years invariably constitute a significant time-span. Man perceives them as the end of a dark age bringing hope for a new and prosperous future, or as the onset of danger that the past might be forgotten and a warning of the consequences. It is worth reflecting on both of these perceptions.

In our country, a new generation has grown up to assume political responsibility. Our young people are not responsible for what happened over forty years ago. But they are responsible for the historical consequences.

We in the older generation owe to young people not the fulfilment of dreams but honesty. We must help younger people to understand why it is vital to keep memories alive. We want to help them to accept historical truth soberly, not one-sidedly, without taking refuge in utopian doctrines, but also without moral arrogance. From our own history we learn what man is capable of. For that reason we must not imagine that we are quite different and have become better. There is no ultimately achievable moral perfection. We have learned as human beings, and as human beings we remain in danger. But we have the strength to overcome such danger again and again.

Hitler's constant approach was to stir up prejudices, enmity and hatred. What is asked of young people today is this: do not let yourselves be forced into enmity and hatred of other people, of Russians or Americans, Jews or Turks, of alternatives or conservatives, blacks or whites. Let us honour freedom. Let us work for peace. Let us respect the rule of law. Let us be true to our own conception of justice. On this 8th of May, let us face up as well as we can to the truth.

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