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'On the future of a culture of remembrance of the SHOAH'

Ladies and gentlemen,

I don't agree with Mrs Schwan on everything. But I don't want to go into the big politics. We are here because of the *culture of remembrance in Germany*.

Dealing with the new: Hardly any German Jews left in Germany

I have now been President for 45 years as the longest-serving chairman of a Jewish organisation. Let me begin with an observation. Here with us today is *Hermann Simon*, the former director of the Jewish Museum in Berlin's marvellous Old Synagogue. But there is no representative of the Jewish community here. That wouldn't happen in Hanover. This is Berlin. Unfortunately. This is the state of the Jewish communities in Germany today. That has to be said so clearly. I think *Hermann Simon* agrees with me. That is the state of the Jewish communities today, which no longer have any German Jews, not even those who survived the concentration camps and are no longer alive. Today there are actually ninety-five per cent Soviet Russian Jews who came here without any German culture. And we in the Jewish communities have to live with that today and hope that in two or three generations it will be different from what it is today. I regret that very much. When you grow up here with the few German Jews left, when you hear that of the 1050 Jews deported from Hanover on 15 December 1941, only 60 came back, and of these 60, seven or eight rebuilt the Jewish community, among them my father, whom Peter Albrecht still knew. But that's the way life is. We also have to be able to deal with new things.

On the yielding of memory

Let me start with a sentence from *Friedrich Nietzsche*:

"I did that, says my memory. I couldn't have done that, says my pride and remains adamant. Finally the memory gives in."

Ladies and gentlemen, we can imagine today how the memory of the Shoah was dealt with in recent years or between 1945 and the following years, well into the 1980s, when the issue of the Shoah was not even considered. This started in the 1980s, before reunification, and then continued

"Such remembrance naturally hurts. It is about the power of historical judgement on issues that are essential for our democratic community, about right and wrong. And this in the face of the never-ending challenge of dealing with the outcome of which Hannah Arendt said in the famous interview with Günter Gaus: 'This should never have happened'. The event that we all can no longer cope with. The murder of European Jews organised by Germans in the German name and committed on German orders. And Hannah Arendt also said: "It happened, so it can happen again." (Rolf Wernstedt)

And we are currently experiencing moments in world history when this sentence keeps coming to mind. Not for Germany, at least not at the moment. But things are happening in other countries that I couldn't have imagined a few years ago. I couldn't have imagined anti-Semitism here either. A few years ago, I couldn't have imagined that today twenty per cent of all voters would for the AfD, who I don't assume are all anti-Semites. Certainly not. But as long as they don't separate themselves from anti-Semites, they are my opponents, not my enemies. Heinz Galinski, the well-known chairman of the Jewish community here in Berlin, thought I was his enemy. I was not. I was his opponent, his political opponent in the Jewish sphere, but not his enemy.

On personal guilt in understanding the past

Rolf Wernstedt, I don't know if you know him, was formerly Minister of Culture in Lower Saxony and later President of the State Parliament, with whom I feel very close, was for me one of the philosophers among German politicians. And he wrote a lot. He wrote:

"The battle for the future is fought by understanding the past

An important sentence. And he goes on to say in his book "*Mitgift oder Erblast*" (*Dowry or inheritance*), which he refers not only to the Shoah, but also to reunification:

"Those who profess their allegiance to their nation cannot limit themselves to merely taking the assets in the balance sheet of their national heritage for themselves. This does not mean that young people have to walk around with their heads down for the rest of their lives."

And my friend Peter-Alexis Albrecht knows that one of my standards was to say that young people today are not to blame, that nobody here is to blame unless I can personally prove that they are to blame. That's how my father and mother brought me up. My father came from Hanover, was born in Hanover, was in a concentration camp in Riga and my grandparents were killed there. After he was liberated, he came back to Hanover and helped to build up the Jewish community. My father taught me and my brother: "We're not going into that shop! I know who that is." "And we're not going into that shop either! I know who the owner or proprietor is." And we thought about it. For example, when in 1988 we were invited to celebrate in a business that had been founded 50 years ago, but we knew that it was a Jewish business at the time, that was the decisive point for my father, and he said: "*I know from certain people that they are guilty. And we're not going there. But everyone else is not guilty as far as I'm concerned.*" That's a bit simple. My father was a simple man, but a clever man.

Remembering as negation of the forgotten

Let me come back to Rolf Wernstedt, who also wrote the two quotes at the beginning. He also wrote:

"But wanting to tie in with the national in Germany means having to inextricably link this with democracy and the ethical principles of human rights that underpin it."

He said that in 1996, which was a few years ago, and today we have doubts as to whether that is true with the parties that we have next to us today.

I have another book with me by *Aleida Assmann*, who you will also know. And she says it with an important sentence:

"Remembering is the negation of forgetting and generally means an effort, a rebellion. A veto against time and the course of events."

Remember! I said at the beginning that I have now been president of my Jewish association for 45 years and have experienced a lot during this time. I experienced my mother-in-law, who was liberated in Bergen-Belsen. She came from Poland, from Radom. I had met her before I became president and then also had certain obligations. She never went back to Bergen-Belsen after the liberation because she was afraid of it. And I told her at some point when I had to go there every year, Rosa, you have to go there! You have to go there for your grandchildren! You have to tell your grandchildren something about your past. And she went there with me for the first time in the early 1980s, full of fear, and was suddenly standing in the concentration camp and told me: *"This wasn't my concentration camp, it's a green meadow here"*. From then on, she came back every year and was no longer afraid to go there. And the important thing, because this is part of our culture that we have to help shape, is that from then on she also went to schools and talked about her experiences there. Like some other survivors in Hanover, we know the names Henry Korman, Finkelstein, who went to schools and told their stories to the pupils.

Israel and Palestine: Respect and listening

And now I'm coming to the issue of the war in Israel. Because that is exactly what two people are currently doing in Lower Saxony, and not only in Lower Saxony. We have done it several times. I have been friends with

the chairman of the Palestinian community in Lower Saxony, *Dr. Yazid Shammout*, for 14 years now. As you can imagine, it's not always easy. But the crucial point is that we show each other respect. That I believe him when he tells me, 'My mother was expelled from Jaffa'. And not say 'What rubbish! She left voluntarily'. Of course she was expelled, and a significant number of Israeli academics have now also established that what happened in Israel in 1948 was not entirely kosher, as has been portrayed by many, many other academics. We respect each other. We organised our first event together in 2011, 14 years ago. He had the courage to go to the Lord Mayor of Hanover. That was Mr. Weil at the time, and he is now our Minister President. He said there that I would like to get to know the Jewish community. And so we got to know each other and liked each other from the start, as we still do today. We immediately arranged another meeting, which we had in the Jewish community. He came with his board. I had mine with me. You have to imagine five Palestinians standing on the street in front of the Jewish community who felt the same way as my mother-in-law did before she visited the memorial with me for the first time. And they were standing in front of the Jewish community. And as I learnt later, some of them had been thinking: Should we go in or should we leave. And they came in and we had a very sensible conversation. And we agreed that we would have another conversation. And that was crucial for our future relationships between the communities. We had said you take five people and we take five people and you tell your story or your families' stories without being interrupted. Listening, which is very difficult for people. Listening. And then we sat at his house and listened to each other. And I can tell you that when you hear stories from Palestinians or Jews without the media, not made up, but unfiltered, they say: everything he said is true and they take every word from him. That's very important for the way we interact with each other: that we listen, that we show respect for each other and don't just assume that it's all a lie. That's just an aside about my relationship with Palestinians.

The culture of remembrance in Germany

Remembrance culture in Germany is a very difficult matter. When I became president in 1980, Bergen-Belsen was the only concentration camp (apart from Dachau) in West Germany before reunification, and Bergen-

Belsen was the only concentration camp for Jews only. Before that there was the Soviet Russian prisoner of war camp Hörsten with 30,000 dead. However, this no longer existed when the camp was occupied by Jews. Every year on 15 April, we hold a commemorative event at this site. We go there commemorate the 30,000 Soviet dead. We didn't do that 45 years ago. But now we do it almost every year. In 1980 there was a memorial as small as a 'shoebox'. There were no large premises back then. And Lower Saxony actually made a lot of efforts to iron out this disgrace. A short time later, the memorial was extended and brought up to its current state a few years later. And now they are thinking about how to modernise the permanent exhibition, because they want to adapt it to our times.

Photos alone are not enough. You have to approach the schools, you have to work with the schools, work with the children. Work with the new technology. What we've just seen here from *SchuleEins* is part of it today. That is necessary. If you want to tell young people something about what happened back then, you simply can't do it with photos. I could show a picture of my mother-in-law, taken in 1945 in a concentration camp, when she powdered the hair of other prisoners to remove mites and lice. This picture of her hangs there, but it will probably no longer hang in the future, it will only be visible through these 'reality glasses'. If that's the way it is, then that's the way it has to be.

We actually have a lot of young people there today. And that was the demand I made to *Rolf Wernstedt* when he was still Minister of Education: Every pupil must have visited a memorial site in a particular class! And we don't just have one memorial in Bergen-Belsen. We have 20 memorials in Lower Saxony, because there were a large number of other small camps. Let's just take the women's camp in Moringen, where women were murdered. And each one now has a small or larger memorial. But the visits from schools only go from a certain age, ninth or tenth grade. That's when it starts. And you shouldn't just visit memorials, you also have to be prepared. These are not school trips. That's not what we want. The visits must be prepared by teachers. If they put their heart and soul into it, you can tell. And that is the decisive factor.

But today we have a completely different composition of pupils. We have classes in Germany today in which very few have a German background. Many have a Turkish background and say to themselves, that's none of my! But what I said earlier applies. None of those go there are personally to blame. But you have to go there so that something like this doesn't happen again. And that also applies to pupils of Turkish, Syrian, Israeli and German descent. It applies to all of them. Because we don't want something like this to happen again.

Finally, I would like to read an extract from the book "*Sing a Song of Friendship*". Older people will recognise the name: Erwin Caesar. He was an important American music maker in the mid-1950s. The United Nations initiated the book. You will soon realise why I am reciting the poem:

How to spell Friendship

F stands for freedom for you and for me

R stands for rights that our laws guarantee

I means you will be isolated no more

E means Europe lies close to our shore

N stands for neighbour a good one lets be

D means Democracy we love Democracy

S stands for saying no words will hurt

H stands for honour we must not desert

I means other ideas may they ever increase

P means people for prayers and peace

You know why I read that to you. I doubt whether this song is still known in the USA at the moment.

Thank you very much.