

European integration as a lesson learnt after World War II.

What does it mean today?

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I am a German born in Poland.

In 1942, my parents, ethnic Germans from Bessarabia, were brought by the Nazis to Skierbieszów, a small town in southeastern Poland. Being part of a cruel plan to germanize the region, they were put in a farmhouse; a house from which the Polish owners had been forced out at gunpoint just a few hours before my parents moved in. When I was born half a year later, the joy my parents felt about my birth was overshadowed by constant fear of the attacks of the local resistance movement. I can only imagine the agony a Polish mother must have felt at the same time, forced to give birth expelled from her home.

In the hard winter of 1944/45, when the Red Army was approaching, my family fled from Poland to East Germany. And in 1953, we fled again, in secrecy, to West Germany, where my parents hoped to finally live a life of freedom.

I am a son of refugees, and I am a son of Europe.

The story of my family is a European story: a story of oppression, suffering and loss, but also a story of endurance, of new beginnings, of solidarity.

The story of my family is a German story. It took us Germans 40 years – until the speech of Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker in 1985 – to find a balanced understanding of what the end of the Second World War meant for our country:

First, the 8th of May 1945 was the day of liberation from the Nazi regime – brought about by an unlikely coalition including the Red Army. Without the 8th of May, there would be no 9th of May 1950 – the Schuman Declaration which laid the cornerstone for the rebirth of Europe as a project of peace.

Second, it was the day of Germany's complete defeat. The 8th of May stands also for the suffering of millions of people who were forced to flee, were expelled or came under Communist rule.

Both perspectives are deeply engrained in the German soul, just as they are engrained in my family's history: never again.

It is by remembering the pain the European peoples inflicted on each other that we can rediscover what is engrained in the European soul. None of us here is a stranger to the

frustrations that come with all the current European crises. All of us know the challenges that test our resolve to hold on to the European peace project. And yet this is exactly why it is important to listen to each other's stories and to thereby remind ourselves of what makes us European in the first place, 70 years after the war:

Europe is the promise that reconciliation between enemies is possible even after the greatest of horrors.

Europe is the promise that it is possible to respect national differences while at the same time cooperating for the benefit of all.

Europe is the promise that solidarity, humanity and freedom are principles that make a society stronger, not weaker.

Europe is the promise that compromise, not confrontation, that responsibility, not national selfishness, that cooperation, not aggression lead to peace and prosperity.

These are the promises at the heart of our European identity. Being here at the cradle of Solidarnosc, we are reminded that it is not least the new member states that bring fresh impetus to this identity, to our European integration project.

And the world needs us more than ever to prove that it is possible to fulfil these promises. It is our European responsibility to demonstrate to the world the lessons we have learned. I am grateful that the Secretary General of the United Nations is here with us today. There are challenges humanity faces in this century that are far beyond what single nations can solve. Europe's integration is therefore not a mere European project, it is a *global* project. Europe's promises will in the long term only bear fruit if they are not attained at the expense of the rest of the world. This is not easy, not in these times of turmoil. But let's remember our parents' pain *and* our parents' strength in 1945. Remembering should help us, the sons and daughters of Europe, to find the resolve that is necessary for an integrated Europe to be a credible promise to the world.