

“German guilt imposes responsibility to this very day”

Speech by former Federal President Professor Horst Köhler
at a memorial ceremony to mark the 80th anniversary of the
start of the expulsion of inhabitants of the Zamość region

Skierbieszów, 27 November 2022

Translation

I. [Welcome, thanks and memories of first visit to Skierbieszów]

President Duda,

Bishop,

Ambassador Pawłos,

District Commissioner Grzeško,

District Commissioner Bauer,

Mayor Wnuk,

Mayor Sokal,

Mayor Fallenbüchel,

Pupils,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much for inviting me to this memorial ceremony to mark the 80th anniversary of the start of “Action Zamość”, as the German occupiers called it – the expulsion of Polish families from their farms in the Zamość region by the Wehrmacht and the SS and the subsequent installation of German families in the farms. To receive such an invitation is not something that can be taken for granted. So I am very grateful for it. I myself come from just such a German farming family. I was born here in Skierbieszów on 22 February 1943, in the school that had been converted into a hospital. On that day, the Polish chronicler Zygmunt Klukowski wrote in his “Diary from the Years of Occupation 1939-1944”: “The people are tensely following the course of the military operations in the East [the capitulation of the German 6th Army in Stalingrad]. [...] But the Germans here continue to act ‘in their way’. The day before yesterday, the people of Grabowiec were expelled, and in Zamość some individual dwellings were requisitioned [...]” I was not a perpetrator, but I am aware of Germany’s guilt and of the responsibility deriving from it for Germans to this very day.

I have very fond memories of my first visit to Skierbieszów, with my wife, in May 2011. More than ten years have passed since then, but I can still remember the warm reception I received: my conversation with Mayor Barton, my visit to this school and my talks here with Polish and German pupils, the hospitality extended at luncheon in the parish house, my encounter with Mrs Kropornicka, who told me how she had helped me learn to walk.

II. [A look back: “Action Zamość”]

Even then, however, my return to Skierbieszów meant not only a return to my birthplace, but also a return to the site of one of the worst crimes committed by Germans on Polish soil at that time.

The perpetrators of “Action Zamość” were following a perfidious plan hatched at desks in Berlin. They overran the villages and forcibly removed the inhabitants or selected them for forced labour. These crimes, and in particular the crimes against the “children of Zamość”, must not be forgotten. Never must they be forgotten!

Historians estimate that a total of approximately 110,000 Poles, including 30,000 children, were affected by “Action Zamość” between November 1942 and August 1943. Some 7000 people were shot on the spot.

I greatly welcome this memorial ceremony, because I believe there are still too few people in Germany who are aware of “Action Zamość”. And I would ask you, members of the delegation from the Schwäbisch Hall twin district, to pass on your knowledge of the crimes committed here by Germans as well as your impressions of this joint act of remembrance when you get home. We will do that together! The creation, following a decision by the German Bundestag, of a site at the heart of Berlin recalling the extent of the violence and destruction suffered by Poland in the Second World War is long overdue.

III. [A look at the present: war in Ukraine, existing partnerships holding fast]

Anyone who thought that, after the end of the Second World War and the Cold War, there would be no further attempt to change borders in Europe through war and violence has had a brutal lesson to learn with Russia’s attack against Ukraine. Once again, an aggressive propaganda machine is trying to justify violence for which there can be absolutely no justification.

Once again, a civilian population is the target of state terrorism. Not just since 24 February this year, but long before that, Polish voices have warned again and again about the risks to Europe’s security and order posed by Putin’s Russia. Germany now needs to ask itself how the folly of Nord Stream 2 could come about, given Russia’s increasingly aggressive and uncontrolled behaviour. It was not wrong to aim for better relations with Russia. However, clear warning signs were in fact overlooked, and the need to ensure Germany’s defence capabilities and energy security blatantly neglected. We are paying a heavy price for that now.

The German people have tremendous respect for the support and assistance Poland has been giving its neighbours in Ukraine since the war broke out. And, as district commissioner Bauer has told me, the city and district of Zamość have played a substantial part in this. I find it

admirable how those in positions of responsibility, but also the people of the region, are stepping up. My respect and thanks go to all inhabitants of Zamość! Szacunek i podziękowanie dla Zamościan!

Of course, I am particularly happy that the existing partnerships between the Zamość and Schwäbisch Hall districts, between the city of Zamość and the cities of Schwäbisch Hall and Weimar, between the municipalities of Braunsbach and Zwierzyniec and Bühlertann and Skierbieszów are holding fast in this crisis situation. In a spirit of trust, they are engaging in cooperation to support the people of Ukraine suffering as a result of the war: for example, donated items have been transported from Schwäbisch Hall and Weimar to Zamość; some of these have been used to help refugees in Zamość, others sent on to Zhovkva, the twin town of Zamość in Ukraine. There, joint assistance from Zamość and Weimar means that a kindergarten will soon receive urgently needed equipment. So there are indeed already bridges between Poland and Germany that are sound enough to head on into Ukraine. Europe has not allowed itself to be divided by the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. On the contrary. Let us work together to further strengthen these bridges and to build more! The positive examples of German-Polish partnership at municipal and regional level show how we can learn to trust each other. When we meet each other, look each other in the eye, talk to each other, work together for a common purpose, then solid relationships develop.

On 25 October, Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky urged the conclusion of German-Ukrainian town twinning agreements, saying that partnerships between towns and cities provide “a basis for practical solidarity in the light of the war” and “a foundation for a shared future”. This belief has been put into practice in Zamość and Schwäbisch Hall for a long time already.

On behalf of the many people who work with such commitment and energy to ensure that the partnerships between Poland and Germany grow and flourish, I would like to express my sincere thanks to the district commissioners of Schwäbisch Hall and Zamość, Mr Bauer and Mr Grzeško.

IV. [A look to the future: a strong Europe needs a strong German-Polish partnership]

I believe the history of the partnership between Zamość and Schwäbisch Hall also contains a message for relations between Poland and Germany as a whole: dare to trust each other and to move forward together, support each other when one or the other might be lacking in courage or resolve. Look to the future: Europe is our shared future – in Zamość and in Schwäbisch Hall, in Poland and in Germany.

In Poland, Germany has a European partner that has gained and continues to gain strength and self-confidence through many different challenges. Without the fight for freedom of Solidarność, German reunification would not have happened. Today, the whole of Poland is – as the fortress town of Zamość was 450 years ago – a European bulwark for freedom and self-determination.

Together we should think and talk about how the gap between the people of Europe and its institutions can be closed, about how national identities can be better harnessed to strengthen Europe's ability to act and to enhance Europe's defensive capabilities, about how Europe can have more political appeal, in other words about how the vision of a European political union can become reality.

Ladies and gentlemen, just as exchange with France on European policy issues has become a matter of course for Germany, so must the exchange between Berlin and Warsaw. It must be effected in both an open and a respectful manner. It is normal not always to be in immediate agreement on everything, for viewpoints and stances to be the subject of some tussle. That is democracy in practice.

But Putin's terrorism has reminded us once again how necessary a united and strong Europe is if we are to secure our freedom and democracy. The young people I met in the school here in Skierbieszów in 2011, who were as open as they were curious, are now young adults. I believe that the vast majority of young Poles, and the vast majority of young Germans, want a strong Europe. But there will only be a strong Europe if there is a strong German-Polish partnership. Let us work resolutely – and happily – together to move this partnership forward! It is the surest guarantee for what so many generations before us desired: peace, freedom and prosperity for all, in Poland, in Germany, in the whole of Europe. Thank you.