

## „Homecoming to a Foreign Place“

Speech by Former Federal President Prof. Dr. Horst Köhler

on the occasion of a dinner given in honour of his 80th birthday

by the Federal President

Berlin, Schloss Bellevue on 6 March 2023

Translation

Federal President, dear Mr Steinmeier,

Ms Büdenbender,

Family,

Friends,

Colleagues and associates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

A famous poem by Rainer Maria Rilke begins with the line: “I live my life in widening circles...” It is a favourite source of birthday quotes, because the image of concentric, ever widening circles, as seen in nature, is thought-inspiring whilst being easy to grasp. Just like a tree trunk, as time passes each life unavoidably gains in girth and magnitude. We grow through the varied experiences and encounters we meet with along our way, be they pleasant or painful.

I am glad and grateful that so many people who have shared in so many different “circles” or stages of my life are gathered here today. It is you who have enriched my life, through whom and with whom it was my privilege to grow, and with whom I have the pleasure to continue growing!

Rainer Maria Rilke wrote this poem when he was a young man of 24, living in Berlin. At the time, in September 1899, the memories of his first journey to Russia, undertaken in the spring of that year, were still fresh in his mind. They inspired his artistic work and touched him in his innermost being. Rilke’s travels in Russia were for him a paradoxical *homecoming to a foreign place*, to an unknown country, to which he had however long felt strangely drawn. With an added girth of a good twenty years, Rilke wrote that Russia “made me *what* I am, from there the inner me went forth...”

Ladies and gentlemen, I think we all have such places, such landscapes of the soul; they may be near or far away, they are in fact foreign to us, but they touch us in some way, and we have an instinctive connection with their people, even though our lives are very different.

My latest *homecoming to a foreign place* occurred not long ago. Last November, I returned with my wife for the second time to the place where I first saw the light of day some 80 years ago: Skierbieszów, a village in Zamość county, in south-eastern Poland, a place which is only around 50 km from the Ukrainian border as the crow flies.

We had been invited there by the head of the local authority to join the memorial event marking the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Aktion Zamość*, the ethnic cleansing of Zamość. In November 1942, in the midst of World War II, SS units began to implement a perfidious plan to completely Germanise the region. By the summer of 1943, 110,000 Poles had been driven from their homes and farms to make space for ethnic Germans, of whom however barely 13,000 came to Zamość – primarily from Bessarabia and south-eastern Europe. Among them were my parents. The ethnic cleansing of Zamość was intended to be a beacon project for the Germanisation of the entire German administered part of Poland during World War II (“*Generalgouvernement*”). It was in fact an example of the brutality of the German occupation of Poland. Particularly moving is the fate of the estimated 30,000 “children of Zamość”. Many of them lost their parents and their families, were robbed of their homes, deported to the Reich and put into *Lebensborn* homes for “racially pure” children. Many others died. – Together with a delegation from the twinned district of Schwäbisch Hall and our Polish hosts, we commemorated the victims of this crime against humanity – as President Andrzej Duda called it in his speech.

An old man who had witnessed this campaign first-hand urged everyone at the memorial ceremony in Skierbieszów to ensure that what had happened would not be forgotten, but would be taught at school.

80 years are not a reason to forget. We need places where a culture of remembrance can be kept alive, and I am grateful that a Forum for Remembrance and Exchange with Poland is to be established in Berlin, on the basis of a decision by the German Bundestag. This will not only serve as a memorial to the six million victims of the German occupation of Poland, but will also be a location for education, exchange and dialogue, for young people in particular.

I am still moved when I think back to our visit to Zamość. I was surprised and impressed in equal measure by the openness and friendliness with which the people in Skierbieszów und Zamość met me – despite the difficult past between our two peoples and despite the current discord in German-Polish relations.

It is thus my absolute pleasure to see that our guests today include the head of Zamość county, Mr Stanisław Grzeško. Mr Grzeško, I hope that you will be shown just as much hospitality today as my wife and I were privileged to receive in Zamość last November!

My trip to Skierbieszów was a kind of homecoming to a foreign place. It was also a gift. In spite of the still painful wounds of the past, I felt that I was a welcome guest. Let me return again to Rilke and Russia, the country for which *he* longed. In view of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, which started two days after my 79<sup>th</sup> birthday and has now driven us and unsettled us for more than a year, in view of the aggression evinced by Russia, it is admittedly hard to understand Rilke’s Russian romanticism and emulate his love for this great old country. By and large, Russia and its people are foreign to us now, we do not understand its government’s reasoning. It is trampling international law underfoot, law that is the result of decades of hard work.

War rages once again on European soil. The realities of the past year have dealt a devastating blow to many things we Europeans used to take for granted: Russia as a guaranteed source of cheap energy, the US as a guarantor of our security and China as a guarantor of economic

growth. This long-established business model doesn't function anymore. The *Zeitenwende*, the watershed, makes it imperative for us to be willing to change profoundly.

As Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel noted back in May 2017, immediately after the first G7 Summit attended by US President Donald Trump, "The times when we could fully rely on others are coming to an end. [...] We Europeans really must take our destiny into our own hands."

What does all this mean for Germany today? I think it means at least two things:

1. Given its size, interests and location at the heart of Europe, Germany can no longer evade its lead responsibility for a bright future for Europe.

2. Germany can similarly no longer evade its responsibility for European defence capabilities. In my opinion, this absolutely must include a genuine European defence union with armed forces that are able to meet military threats to us and our neighbours robustly and - in the truest sense of the word - well-equipped. "Friendly disinterest" in the Bundeswehr is no longer sufficient.

However, peace in Europe requires more than simply holding off hostile forces. Peace in Europe lives first and foremost from understanding between the peoples and nations of our continent. For such understanding to prevail people must meet, for it is personal contacts that give rise to cooperation in a spirit of trust. – My eyes are now drawn again to Mr Grzeško, and to the man sitting next to him – Mr Bauer, his counterpart from Schwäbisch Hall. The local authorities of Zamość in Poland and Schwäbisch Hall in Germany have maintained a twinning arrangement for more than 20 years. And this twinning arrangement is not just an empty gesture, as was demonstrated last year when a chain of helping hands was forged from Schwäbisch Hall through Zamość and on to Zhovkva, the Ukrainian town also twinned with Zamość, enabling urgently required goods donated in Germany and Poland to get through to people in need.

Mr Federal President, on 25 October last year, you and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky jointly called for the establishment of German-Ukrainian town twinning arrangements, because you considered these to provide "a basis for practical solidarity in the light of the war". The truth of this assessment is reaffirmed by the successful partnership between Schwäbisch Hall and Zamość.

Creating opportunities for people to meet, to break down and overcome prejudices on both sides and thereby foster trust and let friendships grow – that is what Europe needs. This is especially true in times of crisis, and particularly in those places where there is a risk that what has already been achieved on the long road to reconciliation will be forgotten. It is my conviction that a strong Europe draws its strength from both a strong Polish-German partnership and a strong Franco-German partnership. Europe is our shared future!

“I live my life in widening circles

that reach out across the world.

I may not complete this last one

but I give myself to it.”

Those are Rilke’s words, translated by Joanna Macy. And my response is this: I, too, will try to complete another ring. Although I am already 80 years old, I want to push forward the implementation of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. As it is the purposeful answer to new nationalism and war in the world.

The colours of the button I wear symbolise the 17 sustainable development goals agreed in 2015 by the United Nations General Assembly under the chairmanship of its Secretary-General, Mr Ban Ki-moon. They call for peace in the world and cooperation between nations. I consider it a great honour, Mr. Secretary General, that you are here with us today.

I also want to raise more awareness for our neighbouring continent Africa.

Yes, I want to try some more! But today I have just one aim: to be grateful that I may enjoy this evening with you all.