

Opening address

given by **Ministerialrat Christoph Stille**
Ministry of Education for the State of Hesse

at the get-together held by the
"Projekt Jüdisches Leben in Frankfurt"
on 18th May 2016 in
German National Library, Frankfurt

Dear former citizens of Frankfurt, dear children and grandchildren, ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues and students,

I am very much delighted and honoured to be able to welcome you today at the German National Library in Frankfurt. I do this also on behalf of the Minister of Education of the State of Hesse, Prof. Dr. Alexander Lorz, who sends his cordial welcoming regards to you.

Every meeting with survivors of the Shoah and their relatives is a deeply moving moment for me. We stand in front of you, shattered, and filled with shame thinking of the fate, which was inflicted on you by the guilt of our ancestors. Grief fills our heart when thinking of the European Jews that were murdered.

Visiting a city and a country, in which you made such horrible experiences, is not the most natural thing of the world. We could expect detachment, reservation, doubt, and we understand them, because images and memories of what happened could force themselves into your minds even more poignantly than they do anyway. In addition to that the questions might have come up, which people you would meet here, which current experiences would be waiting for you.

If any of these reservations were there, you have overcome them, which I see as a sign of trust, the trust that you would come to a different country, and this trust is something we consider as a gift and are grateful to you for it.

More than a decade ago, financial compensation for forced labourers during the time of National Socialism in Germany was finally enacted and put into effect. For the very same time, a trust was founded and named "Remembrance, Responsibility and Future"; its commitment is focused on human rights and reconciliation. It supports projects that enhance the understanding of history, that are dedicated to promoting human rights and that concentrate on the victims of National Socialism.

The name of this trust could also be used as the programmatic title for our common endeavor: Remembering, deducing responsibility for our future from insight into history and as a result acting in a responsible way, thus working for a better future. Remembering makes people become aware of past events and at the same time makes these events relevant for how people act today. Remembering the past demands discussing history and taking a stance in the end.

However, in Germany after the Second World War, dealing with NS was a longlasting and also a difficult process. For a long time, excuses dominated.

(1) The first excuse: A considerable group of people placed the responsibility for many atrocious crimes into the hands of a small group of criminals at the top of the National Socialist Party and the Government. But historical research clearly showed that many more people were involved in wrongdoing and indictable [pronunciation: indaitable] offences and also war crimes and atrocities. Police, soldiers, staff in concentration camps and of German rail, customs officers, civil servants in tax departments, personnel in all kinds of companies etc. – everywhere, many “ordinary men”, as Christopher Browning has put it, willingly had their part in injustices.

(2) The second excuse was that crimes during the war and long before were committed in secret and most German citizens just did not know what really happened. That was totally wrong. Boycotting Jewish shops, sacking Jewish civil servants, denying them the permission to work in certain jobs and running or owning businesses, setting synagogues on fire, expelling Jews from one’s own neighbourhood - all that happened openly in front of the eyes of every German citizen.

Many Germans decided not to know their nextdoor neighbours anymore; students stopped talking to their classmates and were not allowed to be friends with them or chose not to play with them any longer. All that could be seen every day by people who wanted to see that.

(3) Also an excuse was: I did not participate.

Eventually, a considerable number of Germans profited when Jewish businesses were confiscated, when Jews were disowned without compensation and their businesses put into German hands. Quite a few Germans benefitted when former colleagues were not allowed to work f.e. as doctors and lawyers anymore. Thus, many Germans, the communities and the state clearly profited in a financial way. Götz Aly, a historian who intensively studied this subject, calls it „Massenraubmord“ – murder and robbery, committed by masses.

The idea, that a clear line could be drawn between perpetrators, executioners and bystanders has to be reconsidered; the lines between people watching crimes and people committing crimes became blurred and less discernable than people used to think they were.

In the German Democratic Republic – the East German state founded in 1949 – the ruling communist ideology prevented an open and honest discussion of who had to take the responsibility for National Socialism as its rise was largely blamed on capitalism. Jewish victims were sometimes marginalized in ideological discussions of that time.

All that changed only gradually and took a lot of historical research and discussions to alter that.

We owe continuous remembrance to the victims. To those who were murdered, to those who survived, but whose families and friends were murdered, to those whose lives and hopes were destroyed; we owe continuous remembrance to those who became victims to various injustices and offences as well as their children and grandchildren who still perceive the results of the crimes committed in the past.

Victims suffered distress and agony that was and still is beyond words to express and describe it. As we know from the survivors: The distress did not just include physical suffering like starvation, cold and torture. Jews also endured psychological suffering

like permanent fear, feeling at the mercy of despotic people, total insecurity about what will happen to oneself in the next moment. All that was accompanied by the constant worry about one's relatives.

National Socialists reduced Jews to numbers, the total eradication of Jewish culture was also meant to eradicate the memories of these human beings; they were meant to be finally and irrevocably forgotten. Our duty and challenge is to let that not happen.

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The tormenting question why and how that could happen still has its grip on us. We will continue to do research into causes, development and effects of National Socialism and historical research is still very lively and fruitful in this part of German history.

Without any doubt, National Socialism was not an unfortunate accident in history, not some kind of "accident at work". That idea is strongly contradicted by the fact that there were strong traditions of anti-Semitism arising from very different sources.

These traditions grew stronger and came to a head because of the growing influence of theories of evolution and race.

National Socialism seemed unconditional and absolute like a religious ideology, dividing the world into friends and enemies, denied some people the right to live and overrode opposition. Thereby, it rendered a complicated world into a world apparently easy to understand. We recognize similar simplifications also in present developments.

The ideology of National Socialism denies everything, we deem right. We – I speak about European and Atlantic morality reflected in the documents of American and French Revolution - stand for human dignity and human rights, the equality of men, their right to live, to be free. National Socialism denies other people their being human, their right to live, National Socialism is the utmost and fundamental contrast to our values and convictions.

The particular monstrosity of the crimes, the industrially organized genocide of European Jews, of women and men, children and old people, the extent of inhumane and barbarian acts must not be forgotten. We need to be aware of what was possible with human power in order to be prepared for what could be humanly possible in future times. This is what I have in mind when I talk about responsibility.

Responsibility means: More than shedding a critical light on past events, history – and commemoration – it has a moral function, because it shows what happened should never have been allowed to happen and must never happen again. In an essay called "learning from History?" (with a question mark at the end) the Frankfurt philosopher Jürgen Habermas once declared history to be a "critical teacher telling us, how we should not have done it".

We bear responsibility especially concerning the younger generations of students. They must learn about what happened between 1933 and 1945. They need sound historical knowledge. Curricula and textbooks used in school play an important role here. Just last year, textbooks were analyzed in detail in order to examine the representation of Jews in educational material. The Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany and the Central Council of Jews in Germany will publish a common

declaration for teaching German-Jewish History; that declaration will point out which history topics and projects are to be emphasized in school.

Jews and Jewish culture is an active, important and integrated part of German history.

Some examples of topics in the curriculum:

- The perspective of Jews
- The history after 1945
- And the Jewish life and culture of today

Many thanks to Dr. Martin Liepach und Dr. Wolfgang Geiger, two colleagues who contributed a lot to the study concerning textbooks.

Especially in oral history projects with people who were eye-witnesses of National Socialism young people can find out about atrocities of that time and develop empathy by sharing someone's painful memories.

Many eye witnesses of the time of National Socialism have passed away. Thanks to the project "Jewish Life in Frankfurt" we can still read the biographies, impressions and reports of some of the Jewish citizens of Frankfurt on the project's website. Especially, I would like to thank Dr. Nadja Schäfer and Gretel Ghamsharick for their participation in the project, finally my warm thanks go to Angelika Rieber – who was recently decorated with the "Bundesverdienstkreuz", a medal for extraordinary achievements in different areas by the President of the Federal Republic of Germany. Congratulations.

Therefore, I ask you, if that is possible for you, to take part in an oral history project at a school. Teachers, students and other school representatives are here today. These projects are to promote our common work on a better future; keeping in mind the suffering of the past and the responsibility of Germans resulting from that. Students of today are not responsible for the past, but they are responsible for the future. And so we are.

Dear guests,

The next days will see a lot of revived memories and new experiences. You will see places again where you used to live years ago – and where your relatives have lived. These places used to be your/their home.

I wish you some eventful, pleasant days in Frankfurt.

I wish interesting conversations with interested people.

I wish you with all my heart that these encounters will provide you with exciting impressions that you can take back home.

I wish you a good time.

Thank you.