



**Petra Pau**

Vizepräsidentin des Deutschen Bundestages

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## **A culture of remembrance must strengthen human rights**

1. “Auschwitz” is a synonym. A synonym for mass murder. A synonym for a unique genocide.

Millions of Jews were murdered. They were shot or gassed simply because they were Jews.

Not only in “Auschwitz”. The Holocaust took place in almost all European states, in both well-known and more obscure places.

Jewish and non-Jewish organisations called in Berlin last week for unmarked mass graves to be cared for properly at last.

2. I come from Berlin. It was in my city that the annihilation of all Jews was planned, decided on and coordinated.

There are many memorial sites serving as a reminder of this: of the unparalleled genocide, but also the courageous resistance by a few.

A few examples of these memorial sites include the “House of the Wannsee Conference”, the “Topography of Terror” and the “Memorial to the Murdered Jews”.

Another example is the sculpture in remembrance of the protest against the *Fabrik-Aktion* on Rosenstraße in 1943, when courageous women saved the lives of their Jewish husbands.

3. Since 1996, the German Bundestag has held a ceremony of remembrance each year on the 27th of January – the date of the liberation of “Auschwitz”.

In remembrance of what happened, and as a warning to prevent it from recurring, the main speech at this ceremony of remembrance is held by survivors of the Holocaust. The speech given by Imre Kertész in particular has stayed with me.

The winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature warned in his speech that what was previously unthinkable, once it has happened, can happen again.



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I consider that a central idea as regards the culture of remembrance. What happened then can never be allowed to happen again!

That is why it is not enough to establish memorials at the sites where the industrialised genocide took place and to commemorate the victims.

The Holocaust grew from apparently small beginnings, in everyday life, at the heart of society. The way for it was paved in the minds of people who supposedly were not involved.

Jews were increasingly considered inferior. They were excluded, treated like lepers, and singled out as the 'other'.

Only after this spiral of discrimination had been accepted by the population, almost entirely without opposition, did the mass murders begin.

This chapter of history leads us logically to the conclusion that negative developments must be 'nipped in the bud' before they can take root. This should also underpin our culture of remembrance today.

4. In this context, I would like to describe something I experienced recently. In Germany there is a touring exhibition about the life of Anne Frank.

It is a modern exhibition, with videos and interactive elements. This helps young people to understand intellectually what happened.

That is good for the mind. But it rarely touches the hearts of the young visitors.

The really interesting thing was that the exhibition was staffed by 16- and 17-year-olds, in other words, young people of almost the same age as the visitors.

And they didn't start by talking about 'back then', which for many could feel almost like another world. They talked about everyday life today.

They talked about feeling left out at school, about lack of respect for others, about instances of discrimination which are far too common.

Approached in this way, the school children suddenly saw Anne Frank's story in a new light.



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They realised why it is the case that what has happened in the past can certainly happen again, if they themselves do not oppose it.

5. And what place is free of these everyday forms of exclusion? Solely because people are different in the way they live, are different in the way they love, are simply different.

Consider the Sinti and Roma in the eastern European states. Or the referendum in Switzerland against minarets.

We are witnessing survivors of the Holocaust again being denounced as traitors, for example in Hungary.

We are witnessing racism in football stadiums. And we know that asylum-seekers are often treated as inferior by the authorities.

Or consider Pope Benedict XVI, who has rehabilitated the Society of St. Pius X, despite its members engaging in Holocaust denial.

6. I belong – like most people today – to a generation which bears no guilt for the crimes of the Nazi regime.

And we should not attempt to burden future generations with any historical guilt complexes.

In the case of the Federal Republic of Germany, this also applies to the many immigrants who live there.

What is far more important is the simple and yet far-reaching question: how can we achieve a way of living together which combines respect for each other and solidarity with each other?

That is my central priority for a culture of remembrance. Or in other words: Human dignity shall be inviolable, for all people!

This principle, enshrined in the Convention on Human Rights, has not been honoured. Calling for it to be respected is also part of the culture of remembrance.

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