



Deutschland 2016

Speech by
OSCE Chairperson-in-Office and Foreign Minister
Dr. Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the
Interparliamentary Conference on Combating Anti-Semitism
(ICCA)
German Foreign Office, Berlin
15.03.2016

Excellencies,
Esteemed representatives of Jewish organisations,
Fellow Members of the Bundestag,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me say how very glad I am to greet you here in the German capital. We are in Berlin – the city where, more than 70 years ago, the annihilation of Jewish life in Europe was decided, planned and put into action. It was just a few metres from here, on Bebelplatz, that the Nazis burned books by Jewish authors in 1933 – a prelude to the murder of Europe’s Jews. And this very building used to be the Reichsbank; it was here, in the vaults beneath your feet, that the Nazis stashed the gold they had pillaged or, more often than not, taken from their Jewish victims.

And today, ladies and gentlemen? Today, you have come to Berlin from over 40 different countries to send out a resolute message together in opposition to anti-Semitism.

I am very glad that you are here – for anti-Semitism is not, as we might have hoped, a historical phenomenon that we have left behind. On the contrary, racism and anti-Semitism still exist in Germany, Europe and other parts of the world. The attacks in Paris, Brussels and Toulouse are very frightening reminders of that fact. It is also revealed, however, by the prejudiced and hate-fuelled sloganeering that we are hearing in many parts of Europe – including here in Germany.

We are here because we share the position that we will not accept anti-Semitism, hate-speech and threats in our societies and must instead take a stand against such things, actively and jointly.

“History does not only cast shadows on the present. It also casts light.” That’s something Israeli historian Menachem Ben Sasson once said to me, and I find it a most illuminating thought for the endeavours that lie ahead. The shadows that history casts on our present situation mean that Germany – clearly and irrevocably – acknowledges its historical and moral responsibility for the Shoah.

The light cast by history, for me, means that that responsibility is accompanied by a very clear call to action for the future. We are called upon to invest every possible effort in combating hatred and anti-Semitism in our societies.

We should use the light that history casts on the present, as Ben Sasson put it, to honestly illuminate, acknowledge and tackle the problems and new challenges we face in that struggle. That, too, is the aim of this conference, ladies and gentlemen!

It is my firm belief that we can fight anti-Semitism most successfully by working together. That will require cooperation among parliaments, governments and civil society, and we all have a responsibility to help make it happen.

That is why combating anti-Semitism is also one of the focuses of our Chairmanship of the OSCE, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, which we have assumed for this year. Germany has been active on this issue for some years within the OSCE. Our work has involved a number of important highlights, such as the Berlin anti-Semitism conferences of 2004 and 2014. The 2004 Berlin Declaration was a milestone. In it, the states not only condemned anti-Semitism as a danger to democracy, human rights, and security and cooperation in Europe but also expressed their support for concrete operational steps to combat anti-Semitism at national and international level. In 2014, we reaffirmed that joint obligation.

We intend to build on that during our Chairmanship – and not just with declarations but with real action. In the context of our Chairmanship and with Germany’s support, the ODIHR, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, is running a multiannual project called “Turning words into Action”. The focus is on improving security for Jewish facilities in the OSCE area, conducting effective information campaigns to combat anti-Semitism and boosting dialogue as well as active involvement at the level of civil society.

I am particularly pleased to report that we to a large extent have the German Bundestag to thank for this project seeing the light of day, as its Members made special funding available. This makes it a good example of the important role that parliamentarians have to play in our joint efforts!

Ladies and gentlemen,

We have taken some important steps together in the fight against anti-Semitism in recent years. However, we need to keep asking ourselves in what areas we can and must do more. That’s another way in which we intend to use our OSCE Chairmanship – and today’s conference is an important opportunity for a bit of that frank soul-searching.

If I can return to the metaphor we started with, for my country, for Germany, that soul-searching reveals a picture with plenty of light in it, but a number of shadows too.

It is wonderful to know that Jewish life is once again flourishing in Germany. We can observe that development not only here in Berlin but in many other parts of the country too.

Synagogues are being opened; so are nurseries and schools. Most pleasingly, rabbis can again receive their training and ordination in Germany. A year and a half ago, I had the privilege of visiting the White Stork Synagogue in Wrocław, 75 years almost to the day after Germany's invasion of Poland unleashed the Second World War. And there I sat in the old White Stork Synagogue 75 years after that event, witnessing the ordination of new rabbis – rabbis who had been trained here in Germany! It was a deeply moving ceremony.

Berlin, or Germany, is a real magnet for many young Jews nowadays. Berlin has become home to thousands of Israelis. They come here in their grandparents' footsteps. They are curious about our country. And many of them stay for quite some time, to work, study and live in the place where their families were put through unspeakable ordeals.

Major Jewish cultural events are held in Germany these days. Last summer, hundreds of young athletes came to Berlin to take part in the largest Jewish sporting event in Europe, the Maccabi Games. Yes, without a doubt, Jewish life is flourishing again in Germany and in Europe. And so it should – it belongs here! We are fortunate to have Jewish life back, we are enriched by it, and – as I personally see the matter – it is nothing less than a miracle given our history.

Many of you in this room today have had a hand in bringing that about, through your work for Jewish communities and initiatives to foster German-Israeli friendship. Let me take this opportunity to express my most heartfelt thanks to you all!

But if we're talking about the light history casts on the present, it also means that we mustn't turn a blind eye or a deaf ear when people spout xenophobia and anti-Semitic slogans, issue threats or even – as we sadly have seen and keep seeing – carry out violent attacks.

It worries me when experts find that around one in five Germans harbour latent anti-Semitic attitudes.

One thing is for sure: anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish rhetoric have no place in our society.

And that includes the world of sport. It's good that anti-Semitism in football is to be discussed as part of this conference, and with the involvement of people directly affected by it, such as athletes from the Berlin sports club TuS Makkabi.

Another important topic is internet hate and our European responses to it.

I am still horrified by the wave of anti-Semitic propaganda and attacks that broke out in many parts of Europe during the war in Gaza in summer 2014 – not only in market places and streets but on social media too. Nothing, including the dramatic military confrontation in Gaza, justifies such conduct. That's our unequivocal response to that!

This conference is also focusing on the fight against anti-Semitism in Muslim societies. This is an important subject, particularly here and now, with thousands and thousands of people seeking refuge here after fleeing war, terrorism and violence in the Middle East.

We have to be quite clear on this: anyone living here – whether they've been here for years, whether their stay is long or short term – has to respect the fact that anti-Semitism goes against our constitution, against our civilisation, and flies in the face of everything we believe in and everything we've learned.

On the subject of integrating new arrivals, we also have to make it clear that taking a truly heartfelt stand against anti-Semitism is part of finding your place at the heart of German society.

There is simply no getting around that, since there is no place – nor can we allow there to be a place – for anti-Semitism in our concept of a free, democratic and tolerant Germany.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Many of the challenges I have spoken about today do not affect Germany alone. They are relevant to all of us in Europe and in many other parts of the world.

My appeal is therefore this: let's set to work together. The OSCE gives us a framework in which to do so. And let's learn from one another to find the best ways and means to combat anti-Semitism and racism.

The ICCA is an excellent forum for that. I hope you all enjoy stimulating discussions and productive dialogue!

Thank you very much.