#75 befreiung

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Ladies and gentlemen,

When I started to write this text, the coronavirus pandemic was a marginal phenomenon. Now, it has completely taken over our lives and decided that the event for which this address was meant would not take place. After all, the virus has claimed many lives and caused immense suffering.

Nevertheless, I would like to address you here and now, because the Shoah and the misery I write about as well as the far-right tendencies that I cannot but mention later are, I fear, "immune to corona". The topic is, unfortunately, as acute as ever.

A mitzvah is a mixture of an act of duty and a good deed. When boys are 13, they take part in a Bar Mitzvah, girls have their Bat Mitzvah when they are 12. This is an age that makes them mature enough to take on responsibilities that a community or society needs. For me, it is a kind of a special mitzvah to be allowed to speak here.

To begin with, I would like to bow before those people whose fate took them here, who had to spend years of their lives here, who survived or died. I know that all we say today, all you hear can only be approximations of what they had to go through. Still I would like to try.

My parents are survivors of the Holocaust. My father Jacob was with the partisans in the Croatian mountains; my mother Thea and her sister Jelka, my aunt, survived the concentration camp on the island of Rab. It is thanks to their survival that I live.

My parents believed that Yugoslavia could be rebuilt under Marshal Tito, until they were driven out of the country. They came to Germany, which helped them to settle down; they died there at an advanced age.

My aunt Jelka came to Italy. She will be 100 in May. She is tough, a genuine survivor. Not even the virus managed to do her in. It hurts to know that she has to go through all this now, on top of everything else.

In short, she is in good health, yet ever since I have been little, I have regularly heard her pray at night: that Hitler should not come back, that the compensation payments should not end, that the Nazis should die a miserable death. I wonder whether she means the old Nazis or the new ones. How does she know of all the new right-wingers in Germany, Hungary, Denmark and elsewhere?

However, that would go too far.

Her prayer is more like an incantation; sometimes, she goes on for an hour or two before she falls asleep. My reassurances in the morning have little effect. "What do you think you know," she says. What can I reply to that?

She then looks out of the window and sees the old Europe pass by: the time on the promenade in Split when she was a young girl, the war, the humiliation, the loss of her home and her youth, the many people who died.

On other days, she looks as if she wants to say farewell to the century. She has watched the world over a period of 100 years: war and devastation, the landing on the moon and the falling of the Wall – and Italy's 64th post-war government. And now, living in Lombardy, she has to face the coronavirus pandemic. This can really make you tired.

Sometimes I think that she cannot go because she has not yet finished with it all. What is she waiting for: an explanation, a reason, an excuse – from whom? The moment will come when she has to go, and her life will just be a memory.

The survivors leave us, taking the old Europe with them.

And this is the moment when I – when we come in, we, the second generation. We grew up with more or less traumatized parents, oscillating between "Do listen very carefully" and "I no longer want to talk about it".

Those who spoke a lot about it, as my own parents did, would not speak about everything. They did not want to be seen as victims only. Or did they want to spare me? Above all, they wanted to make a fresh start and live on.

Those who talked little left the worst unsaid. They had lost a part of themselves. Yet we, the children, learned early to hear what was not said and talked about.

I remember dreaming of the daily routine in the camp and of escape so vividly as if I had been in a concentration camp myself. Why did I have such nightmares? And what do I do with them?

Legions of therapists took charge of the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors ever since it had become clear in the 1990s that and how traumas can be passed on. Sleeplessness and eating disorders, mistrust and claustrophobia – such and other issues were discussed in long therapeutic sessions.

When I was 14 or 15, I tried to be kind to my parents. I protected them from my puberty: no big outbursts, no boundary transgressions. What is the Holocaust compared to puberty? I wanted to spare them, to look after them. Shouldn't it have been the other way round? I felt they needed more help than I did.

Yet what I asked myself above all was, what do I do with all that; with that – partly unconscious – knowledge. Repress it or forget it? Am I not responsible for it?

There is a joke, and I know what you think now: Can she not keep quiet even in front of a memorial? This is the joke: Moishe can't fall asleep and is tossing and turning in bed. "What's wrong?" asks Flora, his wife. "I'm due to pay Aaron the money back I owe him, but I can't." Flora thinks about it and advises: "Write him that you can't, then you will not be the only one to have a sleepless night."

Do we need to talk about it all the time? Do we have to make an issue of it again and again -- until all the others are unable to sleep? Would that be a way? Perhaps.

The Jews are people who do not sleep and do not allow others to sleep, the saying is.

The fact of the matter is that I do not think of liberation every 75 years only. I do not think of it once or twice a year, on 9 November and 27 January. No, there is a small detail nearly every day that makes me sit up. I do not always fall into the black hole of the Shoah stories. Sometimes, it just passes by. Often, I am unable to move for a few hours. Whether voluntary or not, this has always been a big issue in my life. Wherever I turn, it is there.

It comes up in my books and stage productions. Perhaps it is even my artistic DNA. It feeds all my works. What has a Rossini opera got to do with the extermination of the Jews, or an operetta like *The Bat* with the Second World War? Nothing, and yet ...

It would be wrong to say that my books can only be understood against the backdrop of the war. And yet: I plug the holes in a story that I cannot explain with my writings. I comfort my mother although she is already dead. I ask God where he has been all the time.

This is not to say that I would be suffering from a lack of ideas without the Holocaust. Do not misunderstand me. I am lucky enough to be able to work as an artist. This gives me the opportunity to approach the issue from different angles, to face up to it. It allows me to tell stories that would perhaps be lost: of Lea who had to prostitute herself in Auschwitz and of Mendel who had to cart away the dead bodies from the gas chamber.

The Shoah and the way in which it influences subsequent generations is and remains a central topic in my life. I suspect that this is true for many members of the “second generation”.

How do **we** live with the memories and stories, and how do **we** share them? What do we do to make sure that society does not forget our ancestors, their suffering, their death? How do we let our children know what happened? So that they know where they come from, what happened to our families during the war and why we are so mercilessly meshuga. (And, above all: What can we learn from it?)

The second generation of Jews. The second generation of non-Jews.

After all, the war swept through the whole of Europe, leaving its mark on our grandparents and parents, and it did not spare either side. We children and grandchildren are sitting in the same boat, Jews and non-Jews. The boat is heavily loaded, but it floats.

When I go on a book tour, my experience is that people want to know and want to speak about it. I read about special operations units, gassings and arbitrariness. Listeners come voluntarily. They face up to the issue; together, we confront hell. The hell of the camps, the nightmare of the Third Reich. We talk and we listen.

Sometimes, somebody cries. We often laugh together. There is guilt and embarrassment on one side, and anger and intransigence on the other.

But how does reconciliation work?

There are seminars where children of Holocaust survivors and children of Nazis practise forgiveness. Sometimes, such weekends work quite well, yet sometimes, after it is over, the participants start to hate each other more than before. They are out for revenge ... That thing with revenge is really complex. Even Shakespeare had a tough time with it ...

What does reconciliation really mean? Is the mere fact that we remember here today, in whatever form, a sign of reconciliation? Yes, I think so.

Ladies and gentlemen,
When giving a speech on a day like this, the questions are big and the answers difficult.

One answer could be: Reconciliation is to feel safe in Germany. To have trust in policymakers that they will watch out and refuse to succumb yet again without scruple and full of stupidity to the sloganeering and resentment of the far right.

Yet sometimes, I'm not so sure about it, about the German Government keeping a close eye on the constitution protection authorities, the police and the armed forces.

After all, there has been the careless way of dealing with it all in the NSU trial, the killing of Lübke, the attack in Hanau, and I sit up and take notice.

It is a great feeling that people have sympathy. But it helps neither me nor us to be told, "I am concerned, I am really worried". What action will follow? What do policymakers really do?

I am, for example, certain that the education budget still has room for growth. Money and more money must be invested in education and more education. Only when we manage to reach out to children and young people – the next generations – will we achieve anything at all.

I admit that this is not easy. I know that the people at the memorials have been thinking about that for years, offering excellent exhibitions and tours.

I have been dreaming for a long time that the Holocaust Remembrance Day at the Bundestag will be organized by a school class. I am convinced that the young people will do it with a great sense of responsibility, seriousness and dignity.

We can and must trust our children taking responsibility, so that they will one day be able to remember and sympathize voluntarily. Perhaps voluntary mourning is a paradox. Who would volunteer to think of millions of dead, of the many extermination camps, acts of humiliation and war? And yet, I am convinced that remembrance is possible without mandatory pressure and duress. I believe our young people are capable of that.

Ladies and gentlemen,
Germany was the epicentre of the disaster. It was here where the most inhuman methods were invented and the murder of millions of people planned, subsequently to be executed in the whole of Europe.

This genocide is unique. When today the far right denies the Holocaust, the survivors justifiably feel mocked.

“How can you live in Germany?” my friends abroad ask me. More recently, I have often been asked in Berlin whether I am afraid. “Are you more afraid now than in the past? Do you hide? Do you stay at home more often? Do you want to emigrate?” “No,” is my defiant answer, “I’m not afraid. What about you? I will only be afraid when you are not.”

Honestly, strictly in confidence, and just between you and me: Of course I am afraid. But every reasonable person is now afraid, whether Jew, non-Jew or atheist. When a few brutal, cracked up, orthodox terrorists blow themselves and others up, this is frightful. When far-right populists stir up hatred, deny the Holocaust and carry out attacks, it is awful.

It is becoming worse every day, and it is drawing closer every day. I have terrible, fully illustrated visions of the future, and fear is the most harmless feeling in them.

Yes, I am worried because anti-Semitism has become acceptable. It has always been around. But now, it appears to me, it is acceptable and almost chic. People talk about it at parties as if it were a snack.

It is more than disgusting that racism is part of the game on the Internet – but not only there. That, too, could be controlled and prosecuted much better. I wish it would.

Emigrating would be an option, but where to? My friend Albert told me that Portugal would be good, but only the Azores. What do I do on the Azores?

No, I do not want to go away. I do not want to be afraid. And I do not want to hide. Instead, I fall back on an ability that, usually, I do not necessarily appreciate: suppression. I suppress the mounting anxiety in exchange for courage. Sounds easier than it is, but it works regardless. After all, I do not want to barricade myself in my home nor will I have my sharp tongue forbidden. But, above all, I do not want to emigrate.

Going away and leaving the field open to the terrorists or tasteless, dangerous and manipulating right-wingers? It would be ridiculous.

I have been living in Berlin for more than 30 years, spent an aggregate two years in traffic jams in Potsdamer Strasse, waited what feels like 20 years for the opening of the new Berlin airport – and now I am to leave all that behind without any ado? Just because some racist, women-hating extremists and politicians do not like me?

At the very top of my to-do list is: do not be afraid. And my to-do lists are sacred to me.

I will defend a peaceful Europe until all the others have left. It sounds like a declaration of war, and it is. I will not leave Germany because I feel at home here. Some may find this astonishing, because there is no shortage of racist and anti-Semitic statements here in the Federal Republic of Germany at the moment.

But there are many more who think differently, and there is a democracy that allows me to stand up against racism.

No, whenever I feel like it, I will go to the synagogue on important holidays, or to a church or a mosque. Perhaps I will do nothing of that. But I might, because my country allows people to do so.

I will not have life forbidden, least of all by people with crazy standards.

You can’t buy democracy. It does not evolve on its own. I know that our President Steinmeier is very worried about democracy in Germany. I can understand that. We are all called up to work on it.

It is bitter: You see a drop of ink in a glass of water, but you do not see a drop of water in an inkpot.

There are very many citizens in Germany who think differently, who stand by us Jews, who defend democratic Germany. They are here to remember it all together with us, to mourn and to make sure that it never ever happens again.

It is the highest Jewish praise to say of someone that he or she is “a mensch”. You refer to someone doing good as “a mensch”. This, I think, is a big challenge for us all: trying to be a mensch.

Thank you for listening to me.