



European Commission - Speech



Speech by President von der Leyen at the solemn ceremony on the occasion of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day

Brussels, 27 January 2022

President Metsola,

President Michel,

Honourable Members,

Liebe Frau Friedländer,

I think that it was hard for all of us to hold back our tears when we were listening to you, Margot Friedländer, a survivor, a witness of the greatest tragedy in European history. You told us about the images that got stuck in a young women's mind and in her memory, the horror you witnessed. You told us of how hard it was to find your way back to life. And yes, this was the Nazis' plan, not just to exterminate millions of people, based on ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation, but also to take humanity out of the people, to strip them of all dignity, all identity, all love for life.

But your testimony, Margot Friedländer, and your energy at 100 years shows that dignity and identity are indestructible. I cannot even imagine how hard it must be, liebe Frau Friedländer, to bring these memories back to the surface. And I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart. It is the greatest service, the greatest act of love for all of us and future generations. Because you make us see, you make us free. Our freedom is built on the memory of the Holocaust. Because the very reason why our Union was founded lies in two simple words: never again, 'nie wieder'.

My gratitude is even greater as a German with Europe in her heart. Because I feel the deep scar in my country's history and the indelible responsibility in our collective history. We want to keep our eyes wide open. We want to understand what happened and why, so it never happens again. And you, liebe Frau Friedländer, made us see and made us understand.

There is one thing about your life that strikes me immensely, you spoke about it. Indeed, right after the war, you decided to leave Germany and Europe because the pain was too big, and the past would never get past you. But then, 20 years ago, you decided to come back, even if the memory was still alive. In fact, precisely because the memory had to remain alive. You came back, so that history could never come back. You explained your decisions, as we have just heard, with the words: 'What happened cannot be changed, but now it is up to you,' the next generation. And yes, the next generation, they deserved to hear your story. They became your mission.

And today, I would like to tell you: Your mission is our mission too. It is because of this mission that we have to come up with our thoughts and our work. And this is why we came up with our first Strategy to combat anti-Semitism and to foster Jewish life in Europe. We have listened to the warning that is coming from people like you. Anti-Semitism has not disappeared. It still poisons our societies. A stunning 70% of European Jews do not feel safe when wearing a kippah or a Star of David. And throughout the pandemic, Jews have been the target of all sorts of conspiracy theories and hate speech. But this time, we will not close our eyes. 'Nie wieder', never again.

Preserving the memory is the first step to avoid that history repeats itself. With the Strategy, we are working so that all schools in Europe teach the history of the Shoah. We want to raise youth ambassadors of remembrance, as the next generation who will keep the memory alive. And we will encourage students to learn about Europe's Jewish culture and traditions. For instance, just ten days ago, Jewish people around the world planted trees to celebrate Tu Bishvat, the New Year of trees. Our children should know about it because it is part of our European culture and history, and because it teaches us to take care of our planet and our future.

Liebe Margot Friedländer,

Honourable Members,

Today, we have listened to the story of how life and dignity were taken away from millions, right here

in Europe. People were killed and humiliated, their names replaced by numbers on their forearm, and all of this, just because of who they were. The Union we want to build is a place where everyone can be whoever they want to be. A place where a Jewish woman like Simone Veil, a survivor of the Holocaust, can raise to become the President of this proud European Parliament. A place where everyone is entitled to the same rights and is treated with the same dignity. This is what 'keeping the memory alive', truly means. A continent that is finally united in its beautiful diversity.

Vielen Dank, thank you, liebe Margot Friedländer, for sharing your memory with us.

Long live Europe.

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