

Federal Chancellor video podcast no. 37/2013

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The questions were asked by **Samuel Vingron**, 17, secondary school pupil at the Jewish Moses Mendelssohn school in Berlin.

Samuel Vingron:

As a citizen of Jewish faith, who was born and raised in Germany, I consider both events of 9 November – the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Night of Broken Glass – to be particularly important dates, which are symbolic of the contrasts in German history. What are your feelings in light of the concurrence of both of these events on 9 November?

Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel

I have similar feelings to you, that 9 November is an exceptional day in Germany's history. To begin with it marks the darkest chapter in our history. The Night of Broken Glass on 9 November was an event which caused unbelievable humiliation for people of the Jewish faith – businesses were destroyed, synagogues ruined, there was public stigmatisation, whole families were rounded up and taken to concentration camps. It was really an absolute lowpoint of German history. Unfortunately with the Shoah and the utter betrayal of all civilised values which ensued, history took an even more dramatic turn. But equally, in 1989, 9 November was a day of tremendous joy and great hope. For me, the fact that 9 November marks both events – in different years of course – shows us that we must always be aware of our past so that we can shape the future responsibly. And 9 November 1989 shows that it is possible to achieve democracy and the rule of law by peaceful means, and that also gives us hope for the future.

9 November 1989, the day of the fall of the Wall was not so long ago and there are still many people who can remember it. With the Night of Broken Glass it is quite different. The generation that was alive then and of which some people have served as eye witnesses has since nearly died out. What programmes is the Federal Government planning to ensure that the memory of National Socialism still remains present?

Luckily we still have eye witnesses, and I have been able to meet many of them personally. First of all I would like to thank them very much. As it is anything but easy for people who endured such horrors, who experienced concentration camps, who were persecuted, to even talk to us – the Germans – at all today. Secondly we must of course prepare for the time when we will no longer have eye witnesses, and this is why we have a strong culture of remembrance. In the capital, Berlin, there are now many places which enable you to gain an understanding of the events – places such as the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, the Topography of Terror or even the Jewish Museum. The Jewish Museum is a place where the real pain of the destruction of Jewish life in Germany can be felt. That is definitely the impression that I get when I am there, because you see just how much Germany – as a whole – lost by destroying Jewish life as it did. And then there are different actions, spread right across the country, one which I think is very good is the project of small brass plaques. This ensures that in places, in all the towns in Germany in fact, one can read what happened – what happened, for example, on 9 November on the Night of Broken Glass or on other occasions

when Jews were persecuted. And this means that you continually pass a street or specific place and are forced to remember, I think that is very important. And then the Federal Government, and also the Länder, run many programmes against extremism and against anti-Semitism. And moreover we need all people in the country to have courage in their convictions, to not tolerate anti-Semitism.

Yet even today there is a great lack of awareness when it comes to Jewish citizens in our society. For instance, according to a study commissioned by the German Bundestag in March 2013, one in five Germans harbours latent anti-Semitic sentiment. Nonetheless most Jews of my generation feel safe in Germany. What can the German State, what can politicians do, to ensure this remains the case?

First of all it is very good that nowadays there is once again a vibrant Jewish scene in Germany. The Federal Government supports this Jewish life. We are also grateful for the fantastic work that the Central Council of Jews in Germany carries out – integrating people of the Jewish faith who have come here from Russia. Here excellent work to foster integration takes place, for which I must express my gratitude. Nonetheless we must say – it is depressing and nearly inexplicable yet nonetheless reality, that no Jewish installation can be without police protection, that police officers must be constantly present and stand guard in front of kindergartens, in front of schools, in front of all institutions. Therefore we must repeatedly discuss the issue, state that there is no place for anti-Semitic tendencies here, but we have yet to reach this goal.

Nowadays, modern anti-Semitism also manifests itself as criticism of Israel. What starts out as an acceptable and sometimes even understandable opinion often proves to be pure anti-Semitism. What is your assessment of growing anti-Zionism in Germany and what could the State and society do to counter it?

I think that we have to speak very openly with people in Germany about this. It is legitimate to voice criticism, including of Israel's policies. Nevertheless responsibility for Israel's security is part of Germany's national ethos. We want an Israeli State that can live in peace with its neighbours. Therefore we advocate a two-state solution and also hope that progress will be achieved in these peace talks. However one cannot use criticism of Israeli policies – which of course also exists in Israel, the people of Israel have very varied political opinions – and which one has the right to express, as a veil. When generalisations come into play, and anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism are expressed, then I at least, take this very seriously.

One issue on which I personally stake great hopes is that active peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Government have been relaunched. How can the German State support the peace process in the Middle East?

We are working proactively for a two-state solution – a Jewish State of Israel and a Palestinian State. We are encouraging the two sides to approach each other and both to be prepared to make compromises. I have held many talks on this matter with the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, just as I have with the Palestinian President Abbas. We support the intensive efforts of America, of Secretary of State Kerry, to move these peace talks forward and as always, Germany stands ready to step in whenever it is desired or required. We support the Palestinian Authority in that we provide assistance, aid – material aid, we help foster

economic development, because we believe that economic development will play a pivotal role in making people believe in the peace process. And of course we have very close relations with Israel. What I think is very important is that we don't only talk about the past, but rather that we also hold German-Israeli intergovernmental consultations, comprising broad-ranging cooperation with many elements of the Israeli Government, and thereby also strengthen our relations. So Germany has many contacts on both sides, and uses them in order to encourage everyone to head down the difficult, but in my view, still favourable, path of a peace process.