



REMARKS AT LEO BAECK MEDAL AWARD CEREMONY

Ambassador Amy Gutmann

October 25, 2022

Thank you, Dr. Marwell. Ambassador Haber, former Ambassadors Kimmit and Lauder, distinguished guests and dear friends – thank you for being here today. There is no responsibility I feel more deeply than keeping alive the memory of Holocaust victims and survivors. Given the focus of Leo Baeck Institutes on preserving the history and culture of German Jewry, this award means so much to me, both personally and professionally, as a teacher, scholar, university leader, and now as the U.S. Ambassador to Germany.

I cannot help but be struck by the inscription on the medal, “... so that the memory of a great past may not perish.” I dedicate this medal to the life and memory of my father, Kurt Gutmann.

Let me tell you just a little about one of the greatest people I have ever known. He was the youngest of five children in an Orthodox German Jewish family, in his early twenties when Hitler came to power. He was an apprentice in Nuremberg, home to the biggest Nazi Party rallying ground, where he boarded with a Christian family. The family treated him well but when he saw them flash the Hitler salute at a Nazi march, he knew it was time to act.

He fled Germany, the only home he ever knew, at age 23. Later he organized the escape of his parents and four older siblings – first to Bombay, India, and then to the United States after World War II.

At a remarkably early age, under incredibly challenging conditions, Kurt Gutmann had the wisdom, the foresight, and courage to act on the deeply troubling developments in his home country. His heroic actions saved the life of his entire family. He is why I stand here today.

My father spoke to me sparingly about his past in Germany. He did not want me as a child to know his emotional trauma. He passed away suddenly when I was only 16. But in those formative years, he taught me about the Holocaust through his words and his deeds. He instilled in me the importance of standing up, early and often, against all forms of hatred, bigotry, and discrimination. This is what carrying forward the lesson of ‘Never Again’ means.

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As the first-generation daughter of a refugee, I never dreamed that I would one day become the president of the University of Pennsylvania, among America's oldest and the world's most innovative universities. Or that the President of the United States would personally call and ask me to be his Ambassador to the very country my father fled. Yet so much of my life's history and work has led me to this moment.

My scholarship and teaching focuses on democracy. In the United States and Germany, we overestimate how enduring democracies are. We tend to take them for granted. Democracies require our care, our resilience, and our action to survive and to thrive. Everything we do makes a difference. And everything we don't do, also makes a difference.

In the United States, Germany, and worldwide, we are witnessing a troubling rise of antisemitism, racism, and hate crimes. Prominent cultural and political figures take to social media with faintly veiled antisemitic dog whistles, and they do so with their audiences' apparent approval. Many constitutional democracies have retreated from earlier gains they made in tolerance and respect for the rule of law. As my father's early escape from Nazi Germany and the extermination of millions reminds me daily, the hell of the Holocaust did not happen suddenly. When hate flourishes, violence is never far behind.

In January 2020, at the ceremony marking the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, Marian Turcki said it best. Speaking for fellow survivors, he issued a final warning to a human race that will soon lack eyewitness testimony of the depths to which humankind can, and did, sink. "Auschwitz did not fall from the sky," he observed. "It was the destination reached after a thousand smaller steps, each one stripping a single minority of its dignity and humanity... Democracy itself lies in the fact that the rights of minorities must be protected." Turcki called this the "11th commandment": "Thou Shalt Not be Indifferent."

To recognize that democracies are fragile, that defending democracy takes work, means that we cannot rest with identifying the challenges we face. We also must respond with action.

One of our greatest challenges today is countering Russia's illegal and brutal invasion of Ukraine. The extent of the devastation and the human toll of Putin's war of choice revives memories of World War II. If we mean "never again," we must stand together with the people of Ukraine until they win.

One thing is certain: when we help Ukraine, we are also defending our own security and democracy.

Our coordinated transatlantic response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine marks a new period in transatlantic solidarity. Germany has contributed mightily to this renewed solidarity by deciding to modernize its military, to massively aid Ukraine, and to shift its energy policy away from dependency on Russian energy.

Long reluctant to spend on its military, let alone deploy it abroad, Germans are beginning to trust themselves to lead in a more pronounced way on security and defense matters. Diplomacy is always the first recourse – but often not enough to change brutal tyrannies. This, too, we must learn from World War II. Were it not for the massive defense investments, shared sacrifices, and military force of the Allies, Hitler would have won.

And now we have Putin. Without military might, Ukraine could not protect its citizens nor defend its sovereignty. At this historic moment, as in many others, saying “never again” truly means acting now by saving lives and defending democracy.

After my father fled the Nazis in 1934, he never set foot in Germany again. For the rest of his life, he bought no German goods and spoke only English to me.

Living as I do now in Berlin, I think my father would be pleased with how Germany has acknowledged its past. I want to be clear: The work is far from over, but Germany has worked hard to own up to its history — and apply the lessons of that history. Germany is profoundly aware of the historic responsibility it bears towards Jewish victims and all victims of Nazi persecution, and also toward the State of Israel. This responsibility, a cornerstone of German policy, requires both remembrance and eternal vigilance. The warning of “never again” must never end.

Last month, our Embassy was honored to host the European premiere of the pathbreaking film by Ken Burns, Lynn Novick, and Sarah Botstein – “The U.S. and the Holocaust.” Among our 500 hundred guests were 200 high school and college students, many of whom engaged with this vital history for the first time. And first among equals of our many distinguished guests was Holocaust survivor Margot Friedlander, who moved back to Berlin from New York at a robust 88. She celebrated her 100th birthday last year.

Dedicated to eternal vigilance, the Leo Baeck Institute works closely with the Jewish Museum Berlin, Europe’s largest. It exhibits Jewish history in Germany from the fourth century to the present, and vividly chronicles the repercussions of the Holocaust in Europe.

Educational outreach activities of organizations like the Leo Baeck Institute, the Jewish Museum Berlin, the Central Archive, and many more are critically important in Germany. I would like to thank the director of the Jewish Museum Berlin – Hetty Berg – for being here tonight.

A vibrant Jewish identity depends on our knowing history. Who were the founders of the Jewish communities after World War II? What were they struggling for, and against? How did they beckon the will to rebuild Jewish life, in the words of Josef Schuster, the highest representative of the Jewish community in Germany, with “shattered souls in a shattered country”?

Just as important today are great cultural institutions here in the United States, where we have also witnessed a dreadful rise in antisemitism. Since opening in 1993, the Holocaust Memorial Museum has actively engaged over 40 million people, including over 10 million school children.

In 2011, Steven Spielberg asked me if I would be willing to bring the Shoah archives to Penn's campus. My response was immediate and positive. These tremendous testimonial archives are accessible and open to the public. Why do I think all of these great educational resources are so important? Because they convey an essential and eternal message, and it is this. Let us never, ever say: That was history, and things are different now.

And so, as perhaps you can tell, my role as President Biden's envoy to Germany is truly not just a job. It is a mission.

When I am asked about the role of Judaism in my personal and professional life, I often say that doing good in the world and being proud of who we are, these are essential parts of being Jewish. Spiritually speaking, we bring our hearts and our minds into inspiring harmony with something eternally important. Tikkun olam , for me, is a most worthy personal and professional challenge. All of our lives are made richer – and each of us larger – than we can possibly be alone when we become engaged, productively, with larger communities and causes.

I always carry with me a photograph of my father. When I look at it, I think, you would be so proud of not only your daughter, but of your country, the United States, which became your country. And also of the country that you had to leave – and what they have become: Two of the greatest allies still fighting what you taught me is a fight that could never end.

This award is a tribute to you, Dad – and to the memory of all those who perished and those who survived the Holocaust. Thank you.