Dear Ernie,

distinguished guests,

ladies and gentlemen,

dear friends,

this is a very special moment for me. And it is far more than an honor for me to speak to you on this very fateful calendar date.

Ernie’s story is a story about hope.

Although there is no place on earth with less hope than what was the infirmary in Auschwitz.

And it is an almost incredible story that the very young man from Mannheim was saved by the question for someone with a good handwriting - what he learned. And the question was asked by a longtime inmate, who came from his hometown, Mannheim.

The city and the country, he was born in, had hounded him, had tried to eliminate him, had imprisoned him to concentration camps. His relatives killed by his German countrymen, he survived and devoted his life to his personal vow, similar to the vow of Buchenwald, „Never again“.

In 2007, more than 60 years later Ernest Michel came back to Mannheim to speak to us on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of our city. He was invited by young Germans, he now calls „friends“ – and he is right. Today the city he was expelled from cultivates a vivid relationship with its Israeli twin city Haifa. Today, that city he was born in, is represented by a relative of the man who saved his life in Auschwitz.

To me it seems like the completion of a circle.

And it is a story which truly shows that „the future is open“ and which shows that it is possible to shape our destiny.

The Germany of today is a strong democracy. This, we owe to the acts of many.

We owe it to the American and allied soldiers who defeated Germany and defeated the terrible Nazi-regime with it, to the American politicians who decided to give the Germans the chance to return to
the international community as a western nation, anchored in freedom and democracy. We owe it to the surviving Germans, persecuted democrats “of the first hour” who rebuilt Germany and to the survivors of the holocaust, who told their stories to the German public and with it sent a clear message: that they wanted to shape a better future and that Germany is a part of their future.

So did Ernest Michel.

Later on, and we commemorate 20 years of these joyful events, the reunification of Germany was strongly and in some respect decisively supported by native German Jews: I’d like to mention Henry Kissinger, Fritz Stern and Lord George Weidenfeld.

Our experience after the end of the Nazi-regime and the war, the experience that it was possible to create an open and free society, shows us that the Nazi-regime was not unavoidable.

There may be a fate for the single human being – and this evening tells about it, but there is no such fate for societies. It all depends on us. The danger and threat to free societies is not the strength of the “bad ones”, it is the silence and the indolence of the “good ones” among its citizens and the lack of appreciation for the democratic system. And Ernest Michel’s promise was not to be silent and indolent, but active, energetic and strongly audible.

In line with this we define our commitment to remembrance.

It is an obligation to the victims.

And it is a safeguard to create a good presence and future.

Without remembrance we don’t know who we are – as human beings, as a city, as a nation.

Without remembrance we are not able to understand the presence and our role in the world.

And without remembrance we do not retain a sense of the moral abyss the world experienced with the Nazi regime and we cannot share the feeling of the human catastrophe which has a lasting effect until today.

Ruth Klüger, a survivor, asked: “Wasn’t Germany civilized? Are we civilized today? And if we are, how do we prevent a fall into barbarianism again?”
We need a sense that it is a very thin layer of civilization we are standing on.

Therefore remembrance is so important.

There was a slow process of realization in German society after the war.

The denazification was far from complete. The refusal to openly debate the Nazi-past led to the 1968-turmoils in Germany at least as much as the Vietnam War.

Since then and at the latest since 1985 – when Richard von Weizäcker, the German President at that time, delivered a speech, in which he called the 8th of May also a day of liberation - we have a constantly increasing examination of the past.

Teaching on the holocaust is a mandatory part of the curriculum in German schools.

Each German student learns about the holocaust.

In Mannheim we have a particular wide range of activities on our historical heritage and responsibility, by realizing encounters between Jews and Non-Jews within our city and by the cooperation between people from Israel and Germany.

Ernest asked me to tell you about it.

Let me start with our relation to Israel. As you know Israel can rely in particular on the support by the German government. But in addition to this longstanding commitment, there is a growing number of exchanges between Israel and Germany. An important role is played by Israeli-German twin cities. There are 83 city-twinning’s right now and dozens of other friendship-relationships between cities in Germany and Israel. Nearly a quarter of all city-twinnings of Israeli cities are with German partners. Since 2009 Mannheim is the 5th German twin city to Haifa. This relationship started with an exchange of students and a partnership of schools in Haifa and Mannheim more than 25 years ago. There are now close relations between 5 schools, between scientists, the city administrations, artists, music schools and so on. Many friendships emerged. We founded an association to support the Haifa foundation. A friendship concert Haifa-Mannheim for the foundation will take place in two weeks from now. It will be conducted by Dan Ettinger, who is the principal conductor of our Orchestra at the National Theatre in Mannheim since last year and is also chief conductor of the Israel Symphony Orchestra. But this is just one example.

In 2009 nearly 150.000 German tourists visited Israel; almost 50.000 tourists from Israel came to Berlin, mostly young people. It is the second largest visitor group in Berlin after Americans. So there is a significantly rising mutual interest.
As a city we are glad that we are home of a Jewish community again. A milestone in our postwar history is the re-erection of a prominent synagogue. In 1987 the new synagogue was inaugurated. It is located near the place where the old main synagogue was built and destroyed. The synagogue is right in the city center, less than a hundred meters from my office. Many important events in our city take place in the Jewish community center. It is an integrated center for all. Even Turkish families rent the ballroom for weddings. There is a kindergarten in the building which is run by the Catholic Church. The Jewish community is the landlord. Most of the children are of Turkish origin. And of course there is a vivid Jewish life again.

As a city we see our particular responsibility to preserve democracy and to preserve the commemoration of the horror of the Nazi regime. In 1943 Siegfried Marck, professor in Chicago pointed out to the special potential of the cities: He laid foundation to the hope that there was a possibility to establish a democratic Germany rooted in the democratic tradition of the German city administrations, a tradition which is much older than that of all other political entities on German soil.

In the late 80ies we started - as many German cities - to invite former Jewish citizens with one accompanying relative or friend to visit Mannheim and the region for a week. These encounters are deeply moving. The visits are always covered by the local media. Some of those former citizens visit schools to tell students about their fate in Mannheim and Germany. We have now started to invite those again who refused the first invitations, because we experienced that some changed their mind. More than three hundred couples have accepted our invitation. And we really don’t take this for granted.

Mementos of the victims and of what happened to friends and neighbors who used to live among the Christian population are the so-called „Stolpersteine“. Stones to stumble upon – figuratively. The German artist Günther Demnig installs these stones with the names of victims in the front of houses where they used to live. We started 2007 and 50 are now present in Mannheim. They are installed in more than 500 cities – mostly in Germany.

The stones for the parents of Ernest lay in front of their former home in Richard-Wagner-Street 26. I know this place very well. I was raised in the house next to it, number 28 and my mother is still living there.

On each January 27th, on the national Memorial Day for the victims of the Nazi regime, we gather in our city hall. Each year a different aspect is given attention to. The life stories of individual victims are being focused on during these events, schools and students are always involved. On October 22nd every year we remember the deportation of the Jewish population 1940 to Gurs (France). Two weeks ago I accompanied the prime minister of our state to Gurs with other mayors to commemorate the deportation. Yesterday, if I were not in New York, I would have participated in a conjoint religious service to commemorate the destruction of the synagogues and the escalation of the persecution.
Many books were published by the city and other institutions about the fate of victims, the crimes in Mannheim between 1933 and 1945 and about the Jewish heritage. There are still research projects going on: co-funded or conducted by the city of Mannheim. In recent years many projects to find traces of the victims were conducted by young people. Apart from several memorials in the city and on the cemeteries you will find a signpost to Gurs exiting from the main hall at the railway station. This was realized as part of a youth project.

The Mannheim system of historical routes and with more than 140 signs in the city center covers in particular the Jewish heritage and the persecution.

Each year another school gets the so-called “Cup of Abraham”. The schools devote themselves to creating projects for tolerance and the understanding between Christians, Jews and Muslims and against violence and hate. Every two years we celebrate an event called the „Mile of Religions“ to promote understanding and cooperation.

In 2003 we realized a memorial in the heart of the city. At the most frequented spot in Mannheim we erected a cube of glass with the names of all the Mannheim victims of the Shoah. We wanted to have their names back in the heart of our city. And as research is going on, the list is still not complete.

It reminds of the victims. It reminds of the Shoah.

But – and this is a difference to the memorial in Berlin, with this memento we also want to remind of the Jewish heritage and the important and constitutive contribution of the Jewish community to the Mannheim society.

It is a memento of the devastating damage of the Nazi regime to our society.

Mannheim was a strong representative for the German-Jewish culture:

In the Weimar republic three of the four main leaders of the democratic parties in the city council were Jews. Over three generation members of the Jewish family Lenel served as presidents of the chamber of commerce. Ludwig Frank, a Jewish lawyer, Social-democrat and Member of Parliament, was a politician of national importance before the First World War, in which he died. Henry Morgenthau sen., American ambassador in Constantinople during World War I, is born in Mannheim and emigrated at the age of ten with his parents to New York City.

People from Jewish families formed our city in the fields of law and education and culture. Otto Selz was president of the business school Mannheim, the most important business school in Germany today. He was murdered in Auschwitz – as so many. Paul Eppstein was the founder of our adult
 evening school, Max Hachenburg the most important professor for corporate law in Germany; Bertha Hirsch and Bernhard Kahn supported education for poor families and workers, Bernhard Herschel donated for the central baths and Henriette und Julius Aberle for the art museum – our Kunsthalle, which was one of the most effected museums by the Nazi-regime because of its modern collection, our principal conductor 1933 was Joseph Rosenstock, Herbert Tannenbaum owned the most important gallery. Their names are still present in our city. Schools and libraries are named after those citizens. Max Beckmann’s portrayal of Herbert Tannenbaum for example was bought by Mannheim citizens and with help of the federal government a few years ago.

The first mayor who was not appointed after the war, but was elected, was Fritz Cahn-Garnier, who had served as city-lawyer before 1933.

When guests are visiting our city we always refer to this part of our history.

The history of our city shows that the incorporation of the Jewish community and many Jews in the city-society didn’t offer shelter from the Nazi terror.

The hatred towards the Weimar Republic and the hatred towards the Jews had the same source.

In post-World-War-One Germany there was a widespread aversion to western values, an aversion to the values of the enlightenment: freedom, human rights, democracy, rationality, liberalism, modernity, individuality.

Especially the German-Jewish culture represented these values.

We should cherish this German-Jewish culture.

On the other side stood a German tradition of thinking which stressed that Germany would not be a western country - a tradition that saw modern values as a threat to the so-called German values and culture and the German people. Fortunately this German tradition came to an end. And there is no sign of a continuation or of a revival of this unfortunate tradition.

These poisonous roots are cut.

Quite on the opposite sidethere is now an inclination among Germans to identify with the victims. This is understandable, but we cannot speak for the victims and we must not. We must not abandon the responsibility for Germany’s past.

Those, who want to bring to bear the positive traditions of the German-Jewish history as well as basic positive German traditions, who want to refer to Einstein, Heine, Mendelsohn, Kant, Goethe, Beethoven and Schiller must not deny the responsibility for November 10th and the following.
This is how we understand our work of commemoration and creating encounters.

There will always be recognition and remembrance for what has happened.

And there is the appeal of Primo Levi, who said: „It happened. So it can happen again."

From this grows our joint commitment to humanity, human rights and free societies. Something we must struggle and strive for in our daily lives, as political leaders and with our moral dedication within our communities and societies.

I came here today from the city of Mannheim, the city I hope Ernie can call “his city” again, to close a circle and to look to the future, a better future, with you.