Remarks about the Washington Principles 20 Years later in Berlin as prepared for delivery

“Good evening.

“It is an honor for me to be here tonight in the Journalists Club of the Axel Springer building, a building and a company that has shown great courage, and outstanding leadership since its founding in 1946.

“If anything represents the new Germany based on honesty and clarity, I believe it is Axel Springer.

“But I'm afraid our topic tonight, Nazi looted art, the Washington Principles, and the fact that we are still dealing with this topic, 73 years after the end of the War is simply not acceptable.

“And it diminishes the honor of Post-War Germany.

“I will not mince words today.

“I” may not be welcome here after what I say, but I think it is best to be completely honest with all of you.

“This entire problem is not because of any one person.

“It’s not any one office, it’s the whole system.
“You have a word for this in German that we don’t have in English, “an-kundigungs-politik”

“There is plenty of blame to go around:

“Governments…

“Museums…

“Collectors…

“Dealers…

“The silent public…

“And even local politicians who cancel long-planned exhibitions for either political gains or other reasons.

“However, this is not just a German problem, but there is an obvious reason why Germany should be at the forefront of solving this issue.

“The entire reason we are here, the greatest theft of art in history, and the murder of many of its owners, all started less than 3 kilometers from where I stand.

“Let me be even more frank, If Nazi-Germany had not stolen so much Jewish owned art in the first place, we would all be doing something else tonight.

“And we all know, it did not stop in 1945.
“Hardly.

“People and institutions that would otherwise consider themselves honest and good citizens managed to look the other way during, and after the War in order to keep the art they wanted, and by doing this they have continued the crime.

“The lingering effects of Nazism continue to haunt Germany.

“For your sake, and for ours, this must stop here and now!

“20 years ago, in order to finally solve the problem of Nazi-looted art, the U.S. State Department gathered representatives from countries around the world.

“The Washington Principles were the result.

“These principles called for archives and records to be opened in order to identify stolen art and return it to its rightful owners, to conduct provenance research and to establish rules for returning looted art.

“44 countries signed the pledge 20 years ago, and yet, here we are today, 20 years later and the problem is still unsolved.

“It is so easy to promise to do the right thing, and I appreciate everything that was initiated by State Minister
Naumann and continued by his successor and today by State Minister Grutters.

“But can we please see more results?

“I’ve been waiting for years, and I see nothing. Nothing.

“The huge gap between official announcements and actual deeds must end.

“Germany has promised much, but has, so far, done the bare minimum to solve this problem.

“There are, very likely, pieces of art in many museums in this country in storage, or rarely displayed on museum walls, that were taken from Jewish homes between 1933 and 1945.

“Although, some museums have done some provenance work, we have not seen enough.

“We ask.

“We are promised.

“But we see nothing.

“I believe there is a simple reason for this – curators don't want to give up great works of art or admit that their predecessors built great collections on stolen objects.
“We have no idea if we are talking about many paintings, or just a few.

“Every museum, whether federal, state or, municipal, and even private collections, should do an exact accounting of all of its art obtained from 1933 on with the provenance information.

“All museums must put all their art work on their websites with its provenance research.

“This way everyone, everywhere, will know exactly what lies within the museums’ walls.

“There are trained provenance researchers that can do the work for German museums and private collections.

“Use these experts!

“Remember, if even one work of art is tainted it casts a shadow on all the rest.

“And, it casts a dark shadow on Germany. Over and over we have heard that the concerns of claimants are taken seriously, but the reforms instituted by the Limbach Commission were done half-heartedly and remain unfinished.

“The Commission has to decide just what it is.
“No one wants to go to the Limbach commission today because it is not viewed as independent or impartial, and its mandate and basic rules are unclear.

“An independent secretariat must be established.

“More money is needed if this is going to be done right.

“Otherwise, you are leaving this problem for the next generation.

“What should have been done during the lifetime of the survivors, must not be passed on for your children to clean up your mess.

“These are the excuses we keep hearing:

“First, it's the fault of federalism, meaning it's always someone else's task to solve the problem.

“Next, it's data protection and privacy which makes it impossible for a painting's history to be known.

“Some research is published with half the sentences blacked out, what does this mean?

“It makes it look like they are hiding something.

“There is the budget law and the foundation law that makes restitution of art close to impossible.
“There is the lack of funding that I mentioned earlier, and there is the enormous amount of bureaucracy that brings the work to a glacial pace, which makes it virtually impossible to get anything done.

“To this day the problem remains unsolved.

“The German Lost Art Foundation must finally be given a defined mandate, along with enough people and resources to do their job.

“It is completely unacceptable that there is still a discussion about whether this all started in 1933 or 1935.

“Even having this discussion is ignorant and insulting.

“As president of the World Jewish Congress I represent the Jewish people, the people who are most affected by this problem, but do not live here in Germany.

“Germany must support cooperation with researchers throughout the world.

“The federal government of Germany must take responsibility and make it a top priority at the state and municipal levels.

“Ultimately, we are not talking just about restituting art.

“We are talking about restituting history.
“We are talking about historical honesty and historical justice.

“No one in this country is allowed to say the Holocaust never happened or deny its enormity.

“But when this issue continues, when museums hold on to a piece of art that was stolen from a Jewish family isn't that exactly what they are saying?

“Germany has been so honest and so responsible since 1945.

“Germany is respected, as it should be.

“That is why it is imperative that Germany should lead the world now in moving forward and solving this issue once and for all.

“There will be a panel following me that you should listen to featuring Professor Raue, Dr. Gielen, Professor Parzinger, and Katrin Stoll.

“We are fortunate to have their wisdom and experience.

“Tonight, I explained the problem to you.

“This is not impossible to fix, "das ist machbar," this is doable.
“Next time we meet I want to congratulate Germany for its leadership, its vision, and its sense of justice.

“It is time for a new message. And it should read:

"After more than 70 years Germany says enough!"

“Deutschland sagt: es reicht"

"Germany leads the world in solving the theft of Nazi Era Art."

“With these headlines, Germany will finally resolve the last outstanding issue of World War II and, together, we can all finally move forward.

“I pledge to you that I will be by your side. I will be here to help you in this great and noble endeavor.

“Please, do not reject my offer and do not continue to cover up this problem.

“Do the right thing.

“Thank you.”