Speech by Federal Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier on the occasion of the presentation of the World Cultural Heritage Certificate for Hamburg’s Speicherstadt and the Kontorhaus district with the Chilehaus

2016-06-27

Ladies and gentlemen,

I’m delighted to be here today, in the heart of Hamburg.

Red-brick gables; towers reflected in the canals; the hustle and bustle in the offices; the whiff of tea and coffee in the air, of cloves and pepper, the scents of the big wide world – Hamburg’s Speicherstadt and the Kontorhaus district with the Chilehaus are unique.

The wonderful buildings we see through the window epitomise the Hanseatic tradition of trade and commerce. They epitomise trade and change, an outward-looking approach and an openness to the world. The goods brought over the world’s seas to the port of Hamburg were stored and refined in the warehouses here. The adjacent Kontorhaus district developed into Europe’s first office quarter. We’ve just visited the Chilehaus designed by Fritz Höger, which is rightly described as an expressionist icon. And as we looked down from the rooftop terrace of the Chilehaus, it became very clear to us that if Hamburg is Germany’s gateway to the world, then this very area is the beautiful and breathtaking side of that gateway.

These buildings, ladies and gentlemen, symbolise your city’s openness to the world. Today it is being designated as the common heritage of humanity.

On that, Olaf and the people of Hamburg, I would like to congratulate you most sincerely!

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The wonderful Speicherstadt and the Kontorhaus district are not just places to admire. Rather, they define our identity, for places like these heighten our awareness of our own history and of ourselves. They also help us to define our place and find our bearings in today’s world.

That’s why protecting these sites is so important. Moreover, that’s why the images of the brutal destruction of cultural heritage reaching us from the crisis regions in the Middle East and North Africa are so shocking. This destruction poses a very real threat to the future of humanity’s culture.

One example of this is the oasis town of Palmyra, which was in danger of being razed to the ground by Islamist hordes last year. Incidentally, Palmyra isn’t as far away from Hamburg as a glance at a map would suggest. For just like the people of Hamburg still today, the people of Palmyra were among the most renowned merchants in the late Antique period. Their town was a cultural centre which symbolised tolerance among cultures and religions. We want to help to preserve Syria’s cultural heritage. Just a few weeks ago, we and

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co-hosted a conference of experts on this very issue here in Berlin. And let me tell you that the huge political and social tensions in Syria were palpable among the Syrian representatives. Nevertheless, they talked to one another. And finally, it was the Syrian participants from all groups who presented the results of the workshops together.

To my mind, that shows that the protection and preservation of cultural heritage can help foster peace.

A world heritage title such as the one Hamburg is receiving today is therefore not just an award. I believe it also serves as a reminder of our obligation to protect cultural heritage around the world.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

This world heritage title is cause for much celebration today.

I’d be delighted if we at the Federal Foreign Office – as host of the key

UNESCO

World Heritage Conference last year – were able to contribute towards this success.

However, I would also like to expressly thank all those who have worked for many years with dedication, strong nerves and great perseverance towards this recognition.

I’ve heard that there’s an old Viking proverb which says that we cannot change the wind, but we can adjust our sails.

You, ladies and gentlemen, have proven excellent at adjusting your sails. You have all done an outstanding job and achieved your goal! The whole of Germany – but in particular the people of Hamburg – can be proud today. Thank you very much.

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