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**Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends from Nieuwerkerk, dear Han,**

I was born on May 8th, 1970 – exactly 25 years after the end of the Second World War.

When I was 15, learning about the war and the horrors of the Nazi regime in school, the war had already been over for 40 years. To me, at that age, 40 years felt like forever. The war seemed as distant as the Middle Ages – something from another world, another time.

Now and then, my father would share a story from his childhood. He told me how, at the age of nine, he met his father for the first time. A stranger approached him outside the house – a man just returned after years as a prisoner of war. That man was his father. It's a sad story. And as a teenager, I couldn't fully grasp what it meant for a boy to meet his father like that.

When I was 20, the Berlin Wall came down. And suddenly, Germany was one country again. I had only ever known a divided nation. That Wall – the last great symbol of war – was gone. Germany was reunited. The war and its consequences seemed, for a moment, truly over.

You might expect that, as time moved on, the war would feel further and further away. But for me, the opposite happened.

The day the Wall fell, the Second World War felt more distant than ever before.

But since then, it has steadily come closer.

The crimes committed by Nazi Germany – the inhuman cruelty, the pain and suffering we caused – have become more and more real to me. My sense of responsibility has grown year by year.

When you have a family of your own – people you love and want to protect – the suffering of others becomes more tangible.

The suffering of our European neighbours.

The suffering we, as Germans, brought upon them – especially here, in the Netherlands.

The suffering of six million murdered Jews.

Of the Sinti and Roma.

Of persecuted homosexuals.

Of people with disabilities.

Of those who were murdered in concentration camps for their religious beliefs or political convictions.

Vandaag, terwijl we samen herdenken, wil ik oprecht mijn excuses aanbieden voor het leed dat wij Duitsers tijdens de nazidictatuur hebben veroorzaakt.

**Dear Han, dear citizens of Nieuwerkerk and Zuidplas,**

To forgive does not mean to forget.

It means to be willing to build a better future.

I cannot undo the suffering.

But I can honour the trust we've built.

We can look back on more than 50 years of growing friendship.

Our countries, our peoples, have found a path to reconciliation.

We've shared 80 years of peace.

We are no longer just neighbours. We are friends.

Even our armed forces are united in cooperation.

And in today's world – a world once again facing conflict, fear, and division – that friendship, that trust, is more important than ever.

Only if we stand together can Europe stay strong.

**Dear friends,**

It took 25 years after the war before a German government first spoke publicly and officially about its end.

That speech was controversial. Many said: "You don't celebrate a defeat."

It took another 15 years before Germany held a national memorial in parliament, when President Richard von Weizsäcker called May 8th the "Day of Liberation."

Today – 80 years after the end of the war – to stand here with you, to remember together, touches me deeply.

To share this Day of Liberation with you is an honour I will never forget.

**Thank you – from the bottom of my heart – for allowing me to be part of this ceremony.**

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