



**Speech  
by  
the President of Iceland,  
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson,  
at a State Dinner given by  
the President of Germany,  
Joachim Gauck  
Berlin  
25 June 2013**

Your Excellency President Joachim Gauck  
Madam Daniela Schadt  
Honoured guests

On behalf of the Icelandic people I should like to express gratitude here this evening for the friendship and collaboration between our nations and recall the journey that for centuries linked our peoples, from the earliest days of Icelandic history to the turmoil of the present age: a journey marked by milestones in the arts, culture, education and commerce.

As a result of Martin Luther's publication of his Ninety-Five Theses in Wittenberg, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, which you used to serve, Your Excellency, became the national church of Iceland. Worship and poetry flourished under its protection; it proved to be one of the pillars in the preservation of our language and for centuries it was the bedrock beneath our society of farmers and fishermen, giving them support and courage in their struggle with the forces of nature. Before launching their open rowing boats to make their catches out at sea, fishermen never failed to say a prayer for a safe homecoming.

It was, in fact, German merchants who gave Iceland its first Lutheran church. This was built in Hafnarfjörður, and your predecessor, President Johannes Rau, unveiled a monument to this notable historical connection during his visit to Iceland in 2003.

In the days of the school at Bessastaðir, in the first decades of the nineteenth century, German poets exerted a great influence on the pupils

there, inspiring in them a desire for freedom and feelings of patriotism which later became the driving force in the campaign for Iceland's full independence.

Bessastaðir, which is now the Presidential residence where I hope to be able to welcome you and Madam Daniela Schadt before long, was also one of the farm properties owned by Snorri Sturluson, among the great authors of medieval Europe. His contribution to European literature includes his Edda, a treatise on the art of poetry which contains much of what is known about the pagan religion of the North, and the history of the kings of Norway and other sagas. This treasure-house later provided material and inspiration for Wagner and other leading figures in German literature and music. Iceland's medieval writings, and the unique society from which they grew, became a field of study in which many notable German scholars did pioneering research, producing important editions.

Literature – the sagas and poems of past centuries – was the cornerstone of Iceland's culture, and there are many links with Germany in its development in recent times. In Leipzig I will unveil a memorial plaque to Jóhann Jónsson, a poet who, together with Halldór Laxness, Gunnar Gunnarsson and other major writers in Iceland was under German influence and turned to Germany for inspiration. And we should not forget Nonni, the boy from Akureyri who became Pater Jón Sveinsson and lies buried in Köln. He became famous in many countries for his adventure stories set in the scenes of his youth. A new biography of this extraordinary man won the Icelandic Literary Prize last year.

It was therefore a source of great joy in Iceland when our country was chosen to occupy the position of honour at the great Frankfurt Book Fair in 2011. There we also celebrated the publication of a large number of modern Icelandic works in German translations, and we were delighted at the success scored by our young writers. That year saw the publication of more than 200 books of various types, either translated from Icelandic or written by German authors about Iceland. Although Iceland recently came first in an international survey of the most peaceful societies in the world, millions of German readers have enjoyed the excellent crime thrillers by Arnaldur Indriðason, which paradoxically grew from the same soil.

We in Iceland are also grateful for the education which the pioneers of Icelandic music, Sveinbjörn Sveinbjörnsson, Jón Leifs and Páll Ísólfsson, received in Germany, and we appreciate the opportunities that many German opera houses continue to give our young singers. And the other arts are also in the picture: Berlin is, in a way, the second capital of

the Icelandic art scene, with Ólafur Elíasson as one of its leading figures. We had an interesting conversations at his workshop last night.

While Germany has been one of our main trading partners, the German influence on Iceland's modern culture has taken so many forms that it can be seen almost everywhere. And this is true not only in the humanities and the arts; many pioneers of engineering and the sciences learned their skills in German universities and research institutes.

This basis in culture and trade has also strengthened our collaboration in the European and international arenas – within NATO, the European Economic Area and many other organisations. Together with the other countries of Europe, we benefit from the peace and prosperity which in recent decades have made our part of the world into a region of progress, even though it faces many problems at the moment and the future seems more uncertain than often before.

Urgent tasks call for our attention elsewhere too, especially in view of the new significance of the Arctic region, both because of climate change and the many natural resources to be found there and because new shipping routes are opening up across the Arctic to Asia.

The Arctic Council, which Iceland founded together with other Nordic countries, the United States, Russia and Canada, has recently become a forum where Germany and other continental European states, in addition to China, India and other countries in Asia, will be represented in the future. Debate and cooperation on the future of the Arctic will therefore be a new strand in the bonds between Iceland and Germany, one that will involve plenty of tasks and opportunities in science, research and commerce.

On Thursday I visit Bremerhaven, which, in collaboration with Icelandic ports, may become an important link in the new chain of cargo transport routes that will join Europe and Asia in a new way via the Arctic region.

The melting of the Arctic ice cap also reminds us how important it is that clean energy sources be given greater priority in the economic systems of Europe, and indeed the whole world. Iceland can offer technical know-how and engineering skills and experience, particularly in the field of geothermal energy, to help Germany and other countries on the European mainland find the way to a new, sustainable energy system. Collaboration in this field could be of great significance in many parts of the continent. This is a message that we will be putting across at a special forum tomorrow.

The Arctic, climate change and sustainable energy – these are some of the main items on the agenda at the present time, and it is here that Germany and Iceland will be presented with many challenges; plentiful opportunities, but also indications of the moral obligations we all have towards future generations and the planet itself.

Culture, faith and history have linked our countries through the centuries and produced a rich legacy.

Your Excellency, we convey to you and the German people Iceland's gratitude and friendship and our hopes for a continuation of our fruitful association in the future.

It is in this spirit that I ask the honoured guests to stand and raise your glasses in a toast to the President of Germany, Joachim Gauck, and to Madam Daniela Schadt, and to the eternal friendship between our peoples.