Conferentie - Bridge to the Future

Arnhem, Friday 19th September 2008

About understanding

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Talking about peace generally means wishful thinking. Every Christmas, Easter, even on ordinary Sundays we pray for peace and nobody seems to listen. The absence of peace has accompanied mankind from the very beginning; in the intervals between actual wars people have spoiled other people's lives through all kinds of meanness – that's nothing new. Almost every atrocity people are capable of inflicting upon each other is already described in the Old Testament.

Humans are not a particularly nice species. Underneath the thin layer of civilisation lies an abyss of horrifying darkness. So called „normal" people, husbands, fathers, respected neighbours turn into monsters, if the conditions are accordingly. Of course I foremost think about the Nazis in my own country, but looking around the world and through history after WW II there are numerous examples: from Chile to Nicaragua, from Cambodia to Eritrea, Angola, Srebrenica –we have to talk about 9/11 in New York, about Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, what about Simbabwe or South Africa, where poor black people kill poor black refugees. Darfur in Sudan is a nightmare, Somalia as well, South Ossetia is a new spot, where people who lived peacefully together in one community suddenly are at each others' throats.

The list is endless, and as we see in the Middle East, it never stops. Yet there are examples, not many, that things can be turned around. Look at Europe – how did these countries fight each other! The European soil is drenched in blood. But immediately after WWII intelligent people discussed putting an end to this. Names like Winston Churchill, Robert Schuman, George Marshall come to mind, who already in 1946 lay the cornerstone to the European house. I won't point out all the steps which were necessary to reach the stage where we are now. But it worked, do you believe it? It's not that we suddenly love each other – we don't. But we get along, and what counts is that we are commercially so closely intertwined that we will most probably never fight wars again – at least not inside Europe.

How does this work? How can people, human beings, individuals, who just recently have killed each other, develop a more or less civilized relationship? What kind of emotions are involved in wars? Do those murderous gangs in Africa and elsewhere, do soldiers who commit a massacre hate their victims? Are they carried away like sharks in a blood frenzy? Or do they do what they do because they believe they have to defend themselves – against women and children?? Is this xenophobia, and if so, why? I have no answer, but I understand that this foundation „War Requiem – Bridge to the Future" tries to establish answers, which could possibly heal wounds.

During the research for my book, which our hosts here asked me to talk about, I came across an odd phenomenon. I learned that feelings apparently can waver back and forth in a heartbeat. But

let me first tell you what this book is about. It is called „My father's country" and it describes Germany through several generations from roughly 1800 until the end of the Second World War. It does so using one family – my family – as the leitmotif through the decades. What I'm trying to do is to tell history by means of people – because history, as we all know, is always human beings' lives.

In this respect my protagonists are examples, exchangeable. They are typical representatives of the influential German bourgeoisie, decision-makers of the kind who were not enthusiastic about Hitler, but didn't object him either, at least not after he came to power. They illustrate the straight line, which leads from the Kaiserreich, - Wilhelm II, 1888, to be more precise - till the Third Reich and the catastrophy of WW II.

The time of the Nazis, mind you, is not limited to those 12 years from 1933 until 45, as we're always told. Such a disaster doesn't drop from a clear sky. It started way back in the 19th century. Hitler found a richly tilled field from which he could harvest. In contrast to Prussia the new Kaiserreich was shaped by numerous inferiority complexes f. ex. in comparison to the old established superpowers in Europe. This caused the German nouveau riche-empire to develop a ridiculous arrogance and let it's megalomania bloom. What a nonsense: the country was rich, successful, 40 years of peace well-used. Of course the Kaiser could have avoided WW I - well, he didn't. A state – each state at that time - became ennobled through war. The ruinous results were not anticipated. Later the Versailles treaty was a gift for Hitler, the shortcomings of the Weimar democracy helped him gather his followers. Anti-Semitism was socially accepted not just since Martin Luther, it thrived throughout the 19th century, and „die Judenfrage" was a frequently discussed topic not only among right-wing intellectuals.

An important part in this sequence of generations in the book is played by my grandfather, born in 1872. He was a wonderful man, sensible, intelligent, as a conservative very much aware of his responsibility in public life, an adorable father of four. He was a German patriot, educated in England, which was not a contradiction. He loved England, thought it to be much more liberal than Germany - the Victorian England, mind you. But when he went into the First World War – he was a captain in the cavalry, what else? -, he suddenly seemed to be a different man. His admiration for England disappeared from one day to the other. I find in his war diary from 1916, and I quote: „ The news of our first sea battle has just come in." That was the Skagerrak battle, a thorough nuisance from the strategic point of view – anyway: the Germans won.. And here's the grandfather: „Hurrah! This is wonderful! Our fine navy! England – the big mouths! Rulers of the waves retired! Just a few more Zeppelin bombs on London – right on the Bank of England! How lovely that would be!"

He must have been crazy, mustn't he? Suddenly he hates England, - his beloved England! – he sees her as the real enemy, among others because of the British dumdum bullets, a predecessor of the cluster bombs of today and strictly forbidden by the Geneva convention. But on the other hand the grandfather praises the German gas grenades, deathly for thousands of British soldiers, and of course also forbidden by the Geneva convention. So what's going on in his mind? Does war mean that people loose their senses?

But see what happens after the war: There is a 180 degrees turnaround. The grandfather writes the most sensible letters to his son, my father, guiding the young lieutenant through the depressing end of WW I, and shortly afterwards takes up his business in Britain again, smoking peace-pipes with his former partners – no dumdum-bullets any more, no gas grenades, no reservations because of the British starvation-blockade. He wants to send his son, my father, for a business

apprenticeship to England. Does he remember at all how he hated Britain just a few months back?

Don't misunderstand me – I don't object to reconciliation, why should I? On the other hand – can we trust it? Twenty years later WW II started, and with it the whole misery again. My grandfather couldn't know that of course, so I take it that he was serious about his wish to put his animosities behind him. This war (WW I) had cost 1.8 million Germans their lives, left four and a quarter million men - Germans - wounded, caused the Kaiserreich to become a republic and kicked off the so-called „Golden Twenties", a murderous decade with its all-consuming passions. And the next war was lying in ambush.

I followed my parents, both born around the turn of the century, through their day-to-day-lives, trying to detect as much as possible about their economical, cultural, political, practical circumstances. As they were middle-class intellectuals with a traditional background they luckily wrote everything down - just like their respective parents and grandparents did. So I could indulge in generations worth of documents, which opened up those people's world for me. There are personal diaries, diaries written for the children, diaries for their parties, guests lists, annotated seating orders at dinner tables, with comments about the food – and what it cost. There are books where they wrote down what everybody got for Christmas and for their birthdays, including the employees – and what it cost. I found travel diaries, diaries, where they logged what they thought about the books they'd read, the exhibitions they'd seen, the music they'd heard. In the guestbooks people wrote poems, the chronicle of the tennis court listed the games, in the hunting lodge there was a hunting diary.

In addition I read newspapers and magazines from the respective times. I dug myself into historical analyses, I compared „my" people with other people's memoirs .The goal was to find out what made my protagonists tick. Why did they think the way they did, why did they act like they did? Why would my parents become members of the Nazi party, was it out of conviction or because everybody else did? Why did my father enter the SS, and what made him leave it again? What shaped people's opinions, where lay their experiences and traumata, what did they carry from generation to generation? I had to adopt an almost clinical approach, ignoring the fact that it was family I was writing about. What is family in this respect? I hardly knew anyone I was dealing with. They were not „my folks", yet they were, and naturally I would not have had access to all these materials had it not been family.

I tried to describe, to understand - not to judge. Naturally we have a better view in hindsight than those who were right in the middle of it. So I tried to listen: how did they feel? And why did they consider things to be right which we condemn today? When we look at Nazi-Germany our main subjects are the persecution of the Jews and the war. It was kind of bewildering for me to realise that people actually „lived" in between, They travelled, had guests, worked hard, they educated their children, went to the movies, read books, decorated Christmas trees. – Politics and the fate of the Jews were just one topic among others. at least until they lost loved ones in the fighting and the bombs exploded above their heads.

In WW II my father was an officer in the military intelligence, which means that he couldn't/ wouldn't talk. His diaries were confiscated by the Gestapo, but I figure he wouldn't have written anything in them which would give a hint, what he was up to. He didn't tell my mother either, she says because he wanted to protect her. So I had to speculate what brought him to the gallows in Plötzensee, and I do think I found the reasons. Because by now I know him so well. He was a supporter of the Nazis in the beginning, not an enthusiastic one – I wonder, why people who went along with Hitler are always described as „fervent" admirers. There were many practi-

cal reasons to join in – anyway, he who at first thought that through and with the Nazis Germany could become an orderly state again, eventually realised what the regime really was up to.

He served on the battlefield in the Soviet Union, back in Berlin he was trying to protect Germany' long range weapons, the German rockets V1 and V2, from espionage They were manufactured in Nordhausen in the Harz-mountains. On his occasional visits there he experienced one of the worst forced labour camps in the country. I think in both locations the father finally understood just who he was serving and turned his back on them. He joined the plotters of the assassination attempt on Hitler on July 20th 1944, and that brought him to the death cell in Plötzensee.

The drama which developed now has biblical dimensions. Here was my sister, 18 years old, married to a cousin of my father's, a lieutenant colonel, who had brought the explosives to Stauffenberg in Berlin. His wife – my sister - with whom he had experienced a wonderful intensive love affair, was giving birth to their first child. She was in labour when the news of the failure of the plot came in. Her son was born on the morning of July 22. By then his father was already in jail, he was never to see his child. My father was caught a few days later, knowing that his daughter would be left in deep loneliness, if not worse, and while his own marriage was in a deep crisis. My parents didn't have a chance to reconcile. My mother never recovered from that.

Did I have to write that down? Yes, I had to. Because fate doesn't make a difference between bigger and smaller catastrophes. There is frequently one beside the other, and it depends on the eye of the beholder, which one is bigger or smaller. There may be a war going on and the world is exploding – life goes on underneath (or on top of it, or in between - as you like). I am sure that while the battle of Arnhem was raging many individual catastrophes were making things even worse, on all sides. We're talking about life with all its urgencies, with missed opportunities and lost chances.

I did not write a book about heroes. At least not specific ones. I don't want to single anyone out: everyone who is killed on a battlefield, in bomb-shelters, through massacres, in gas-chambers, labour-camps, each one starving or freezing to death while on the run, being a victim to what people do to people, in my eyes is a hero. In this respect my father and my brother-in-law were heroes - two among many. I'm afraid there are many more to come.