

Dahrendorf Lecture & Colloquium

“Europe when I was 20”

Oxford, 2nd May 2019

I turned twenty in 1976. I was then an undergraduate student of English literature, Geography and Philosophy at Cologne university.

Politically, the mid-seventies were years of great hope and of dreadful tragedies. The hopes were on a truly multilateral future: 35 Heads of State had come together in Helsinki and signed the CSCE Final Act in 1975. Great Britain, Ireland and Denmark joined the European Community in 1973 and talks had started for the southern enlargement of the EU.

In the same year 1973 the Federal Republic and the GDR had become members of the UN.

I think that it was in those days that I started to believe in the superiority of multilateralism, a belief that has never left me.

I also mentioned dreadful tragedies, as the mid-seventies in Germany were also the years of the terror of the Red Army Fraction (RAF). In the year when I was twenty they murdered Siegfried Buback, the general attorney of Germany; Jürgen Ponto, the CEO of the Dresdner Bank; Hanns Martin Schleyer, Chairman of the Federal Association of German History. Germany was for months, for two years, in a situation of shock.

Europe as a promise or a mission of unity had, however, entered my life some years before I turned 20.

I attended a rather traditional boys' grammar school in a small Westphalian town. In 1973 the school decided for the first time to celebrate a "Europe day". For that day the curriculum was cancelled, and we discussed the possible and bright future of Europe, discussed it with our teachers, many of them veterans of the second World War, some of them with only one arm, only one leg, or severe epileptic attacks. I vividly remember a long session with my German teacher, a man without thumbs and without toes because of Stalingrad, a session on Europa as a united European Nation? A peaceful Europe without frontiers, with a single European army, a European passport, a European currency?

You could sense the euphoria in the classroom but there was at the same time a huge shadow looming over this wonderful vision as we knew it would have to stop just a few miles east of Göttingen, east of Kassel. The reality of the Iron curtain was not far away.

The talks with our teachers and with my family showed me very early that Europe did not only mean euphoria but first of all reconciliation. My family and my name made me read quite early about the 3rd Reich. I realized then, and I have seen since then a united Europe as the greatest protection against the danger of a return of German nationalism. You see: I do not really trust my fellow citizens.

I think that looking back into recent history is not so dominant anymore when we discuss Europe today. But it remains most important to me. And feeling very strongly about Germany's responsibility towards mankind after the Nazi catastrophe with around 60-65 million people killed I think we must do everything to convince our citizens and our neighbors of the virtue of a united Europe.