

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

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Dear Director, dear staff members, dear relatives, dear graduates--it is indeed an honor, a pleasure, to be here as a foreigner on this beautiful day and celebrate this important occasion. You have immersed yourselves in the German language for a period of one whole year, knowing it well at the time you entered, presumably even better when you now leave, and you have used your command of the language to discuss important issues in philosophy and world politics. In short, you have not only been trained in language competence by "native" resource persons, and others: you have been learning by doing, and by doing important things. For what could be more significant than trying to come to grips with world politics of war and peace in our conflict-ridden world, and with the deeper issues of the human condition with which human beings have always been, and presumably always will be concerned?

You have been studying a language, and you have been studying German, and these two words, "language" and "German" will be the two points of departure for my remarks today.

Why is it so important to learn foreign languages? Let me try to give three reasons why this is of supreme significance, and let me try to make three non-trivial points about what you have succeeded in doing.

First, by learning another language you see your own language from the outside. Your own language is no longer the only way of

communication, it is one way. You not only know in an abstract sense that there are other ways of reaching out to human beings, at least one of those other ways is within your field of competence. In having taken this step you also strengthen the significant step from words to concepts. You know that for everything there is in the world, concrete or abstract, there is the English way of referring to it, but there is also a German way--you may not know it yet because your studies have not come that far, but you trust that you may either be able to find it in a dictionary, or with the help of a "native" find some reasonably equivalent German way of referring to that "thing", whatever it is. The process is known as translation, but has a deeper significance. Perhaps the deepest significance lies exactly in the point that no translation is ever perfect. The conceptual pie so to speak, is never sliced exactly the same way by different languages. Hence, by learning another language you are forced to come to grips with the rather important circumstance that there may be more than one way of looking at phenomena, that languages are not absolute but are debatable positions already taken, and to some extent taken for every member in that language community. A blow to absolutism!

In other words, you learn to break out of the magic of your own language into a much richer understanding. And the basic step here is from command of one language to command of two. Once the step from 1 to 2 is taken the step from 2 to 3, 4 and so on may sound like a formidable task. But the basic obstacle has

already been overcome: thinking in terms of concepts, with words seen as approximations, with interpretations rather than as something absolute. And you will also find that the task of learning more languages becomes much more easy in purely practical terms, at least if you are wise enough to do so before you start approaching old age, let me say before you are twenty-five. It is the safest investment that you can possibly make. I myself had the good luck of having a father who had the wisdom to put aside some sum of Norwegian kroner when his three children were born, and when we matured, by definition at the age of eighteen after high school, that little investment also matured and became ours on the condition that it was used for language studies. He did not quite correct for inflation, but I was able to squeeze some summer schools in important language capitals in Europe out of the amount of money that accrued to me. And he got a most grateful son!

So permit me to congratulate all of you students with having been so wise in the choice of your parents that they did what my father did: invest languages in their children, well knowing that this is going to pay off, and certainly not only in economic terms. And to congratulate the parents with having been so wise.

The second point to be made would be language as a way of seeing your own country from the outside. We live our lives structured by two figures, Self and Other. Sometimes Self is simply our own small egos, sometimes something larger, like our country; sometimes Other is anybody else than ourselves, sometimes something larger, like another, even

"evil" country. In a sense it is more easy to take the position of another country than another person next door; the latter may discuss in your own language, the former invites you into his own awareness of social reality the moment you start talking his own language. Even your own countrymen start sounding differently when you can listen to them with ears trained in, for instance, German idiom. It is not a question of better or worse, that will to a large extent depend on personal taste, but certainly a question of difference. Your own country and its politics is one among several, and that will cure you of a certain provincialism which curiously enough seems to be more developed the larger a country is, and the more people abroad are competent in the language of the country. The United States is an example of a country of that type, certainly having a global reach as measured by its institutions in general and corporations in particular, with the English language being spoken almost everywhere. But precisely for that reason U.S. citizens tend not to take the important step that you have taken, and are able even when travelling extensively to preserve their vision of the world as some kind of extension of the United States. Isolated by a world language -- being provincial precisely because its origin was too cosmopolitan for the classical nation-state model of one country-one nation-one language.

Third, by being competent in two languages you constitute a live bridge between two cultures, and two or more countries, the English-speaking and the German-speaking world. As to the latter let us just remember: you are bridges not only to the Federal Republic of Germany, but also to the German Democratic Republic or Eastern Germany, to Austria, Luxemburg and German-speaking

Switzerland and to many people talking German, and very well, in Eastern Europe--Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Rumania, Yugoslavia and also parts of Italy and parts of France. And in addition to that you would be surprised to see how many people are able to talk German in various parts of South America.

A bridge connects. This may be for good and for bad: over a bridge can pass goods and services, but also "bads" and "disservices" such as aggressive military personnel and hardware. It is up to you to decide how you want to be used or use yourself as a bridge between countries and cultures. But the potential is there, in any one of you, to tie the world a little bit better together. If you add more languages, and it is extremely gratifying to learn that several of you have exactly that intention, then you become multiple bridges, connecting several islands, in some kind of complex venetian geography. In short, you can become an important factor in the fabric of peace. For in the foreseeable future we shall still have nation-states in our world, and a nation-state has a tendency to become a community of people sharing the same language, at least the same dominant language. But these nation-states have to be tied together, and every single person or organization capable of carrying trans-national interaction is a part of the cement in the building of world peace. So, you are parts of that cement, perhaps not the most inspiring metaphor I could come up with, but not too bad when you consider its implication.

And that implication can perhaps best be understood by turning to the second point of departure: Germany. You may be too young to fully feel the horror surrounding the name of that particular country forty, forty-five years ago. So permit me once more to reminisce, I was nine years old when the German Army came to my little country, Norway and started a process of occupation, later on nazification. Norwegian civilian resistance was able to stop nazification, and my father was a part of that effort. Our resistance was not sufficient to bring an end to the occupation by a militarily very superior country--that had to wait until the end of the war which essentially was fought elsewhere, and for the major part in Eastern Europe in general and the Soviet Union in particular--where the Germans lost 10 million of the 13,6 million they lost and had 95% of their troops until D-day come with the invasion of Normandy in June 1944.

Earlier that year, February 1944, the Germans caught up with my father who was chief physician at a hospital and in the resistance movement, and arrested him, in the middle of the night. It is the kind of experience a thirteen year old boy should rather be without: to see one's own beloved father carried away by two brutal policemen, treated in a way he had never been treated in his life, humiliated in front of his family. I mention this because it had the predictable consequences: it made me profoundly anti-German. Not just anti-nazi. Anti-German.

I would like to make use of that as a point of departure to tell you exactly what that meant. It meant refusing to talk German even

though this was the language very freely at our disposal in our schools, having been imposed upon us as the major foreign language by the occupational authorities. It became a national sport, an act of resistance by any pupil in the school, to confuse accusative and dative, some students having more natural talent in that direction than others. As you fully know from your immersion into the intricacies of German grammar the opportunities for taking a wrong step are many; I think we made use of most of them. We showed Germany soldiers the way to the other end of the town when they asked for such simple things as where the neighborhood cinema was located. We were proud of such acts that probably did not contribute very much to liberation or to solve conflicts with Germans.

After the war it took me twenty years to overcome these feelings. I simply hated the country, the people, the language, the music, the literature, anything. Unfortunately Germany was located in such a way that the country I loved, Italy, was difficult to get at without passing through the country I hated, Germany. But there was a method: I had a motorbike and could pass Germany at night. I remember very vividly an occasion in the nick of the night, having to stop for some gasoline needed even by my highly fuel economic motorbike. The German servicing my vehicle, watching my license plate, exclaimed in German: "Oh, you are a Norwegian! A wonderful country, I stayed there from 1941 to 1945, very many beautiful girls-" He could hardly have said anything worse, and it solidly reenforced my anti-German feelings. "Ein schönes Land. So viele schöne Mädchen". Oh, when do they ever learn?

Of course I overcame this. But the experience taught me one important lesson: be careful in referring to people who criticize Washington foreign policy as anti-American. I am one of them: I find Washington's foreign policy by and large lamentable, but I see myself as highly pro-American. Of course, this does not mean that there are not anti-American people around, even in high numbers, who feel as strongly about America as I felt about Germany: many of them located in the Eastern part of the Mediterranean, as we all know very well. They may have reasons as good or better than mine. But by and large you will find around the world a majority of people being extremely able to discriminate between their attitudes to U.S. foreign policy and their attitudes to U.S. citizens as individuals and the country itself as the wonderful country it is, filled with opportunities, with smiling, generous, helpful, nice people, welcoming foreigners in their midst.

So, what happened to Germany? An old and fine civilization, crystallized in its language which can be spoken in a very precise and scientific manner, and in a very soft and poetic manner. We all know of the admirable German achievements in science and culture, but we also know of that other streak in German civilization. I guess most nations are suffering from an overdose of nationalism; in the German case that overdose became lethal not only for others but also for themselves. They entertained the fantasy of being auserwählt, with rights over others, even the right of exterminating them. The goal was 11 million Jews—to get rid of what they saw as the basic enemy; and 100 million Russians or Slavs in order to

provide more space in those vast territories to the east, Ostmark where the German race should dwell for centuries, millennia. It should be noted that they construed these sickening fantasies, the nazis, as defense, defense of that superior race, the German people.

We all know how it came to an end 8 May 1945 with der Führer, Hitler himself, a burnt out corpse in the ruins of Berlin. But what happened latter?

I think we have been witnessing three phases in the history of Germany after the Second World War.

First, a phase that lasted about twenty years when the majority of the Western German population for all practical purposes had not undergone any real political change. They engaged in an enormous amount of self-pity and self-righteousness, comparing the bombing of German cities with Auschwitz as if there was no difference between those who initiate a hideous campaign to exterminate a whole nation and those who tried to stop them from doing so--however much we can discuss the ethics and the efficacy of the methods used against Hitler-Germany. Western Germany was brown in this phase; maybe light brown, but still brown. Nazism was outlawed, not illegitimate.

The next phase, perhaps as long as ten years, was red; marxist red. This was the phase of the German Student Revolution, of a marxist fanaticism that can only be characterized as deeply teutonic in its inhumanity, theoretical sharpness and at the same

time political extremism. This was the period that saw the birth of the RAF, the Rote Armé Fraktion with its series of terrorist acts that I do not think can be explained as a people's war of self-defense. Police methods were used against them, and I think rightly so although they can certainly be the subject of controversy in some particular cases as over the fate of Bader and Meinhof.

But then came the third phase, the green phase. Of course the green movement is not the majority movement in the German population. But what it signifies among the youth is a definite break with the past, meaning by that the teutonic past of Germany as a nation not like others, one which is born to great deeds and also great suffering whether it is to usher in a Hitlerite thousand year Reich, or a socialist revolution. What the greens tried to do and are still trying to do has been grossly misunderstood in this country: the introduction of soft values of peace and love and respect for the environment, equality between the sexes and the equality between the two Germanies and the rest of the world in a political rhetoric grown stale from centuries of deafening cries for a special position for the German people. Of course the movement stands to the left since the general position of German rhetoric has been to the right, even/also when it takes on a marxist character. To see oneself as the leader among peoples, as exercising leadership in the world will always be a position to the right unless this should come by by a process of democratic appointment, not of self-righteous anointment. And, needless to say, that type of nationalism was and is particularly prominent among people--like Hitler--capable of speaking only one language: their own.

The green movement should not be confused with its parliamentary expression, the green party. The green movement is considerably larger: when the German parliament in October 1983, with 55% of the members against 45% voted in favor of installing the Euromissiles-- a colossal error in my view--only about 5% of the population were in favor of that decision. Imagine 95% had been in favor: what a massive sign of belligerence, of subservience to the super-power, of readiness to equip themselves with the weapons that for sure will attract Soviet nuclear weapons in the very beginning of a war. The neighbors of Germany find considerably more reassurance in this act of rejection than in the German Parliaments act of acceptance--with the possible exception of the French who seem to have nothing against regarding Western Germany as their new Maginot line, capable of absorbing a Soviet attack if that should ever come. What the future holds I do not know. But the German people have changed, and in a basic way. And let me add: more capable of speaking other languages than their own!

But we are gathered here on this beautiful of May not to speculate on world politics and philosophy, or at least not primarily so. Early this morning I was thinking of that wonderful poem by Goethe:

"Über alle Wipfeln ist Ruh
Über alle Gipfeln spürest Du
Kaum einen Hauch
Warte nur
balde
ruhest Du auch."

But it obviously does not fit. It has started blowing a little bit, one cannot possibly say that there is silence and quiet in all the treetops, over the hills surrounding this place of extreme beauty--

I might even go so far as to say: as beautiful as my own home country, Norway that has contributed considerably to the population of Minnesota!

Moreover, even though my wife has told me that these nice flowers in front of you carry a funeral message to Japanese in their colors: yellow and white-- there is also that touch in the final lines of Goethe's poem. Just wait, very soon, you will also be quiet--. Hardly very appropriate for you people.

I expect just the opposite! And I am certainly not going to be that middle-aged man whom I used to regard with considerable skepticism when I was your age, always busy on occasions like this sending young people out into life! Not at all, you are certainly sending yourselves into life and you are perfectly capable of doing so. All I can do is to wish you good luck, to congratulate you again on the wisdom of having added to your competence the finest of all instruments in human command, one more language. And to have gained access to one more of human kind's many civilizations, to one more nation with a very tragic history in the recent past, but also with a recent ability to cure itself of Chosen People complexes. Germany is increasingly joining the nations of the world, as a good world citizen, as one among many, in what may one day become a peaceful family of man in a much better world. There is much to learn from that experience for other peoples who suffer from similar complexes--especially if they want that phase to end less tragically than for Hitler's Germany.

I wish you good luck!