



F ♦ R ♦ O ♦ N ♦ T ♦ P ♦ A ♦ G ♦ E

What does it mean to be German?

Richard von Weizsäcker

Two sets of questions have to be faced when dealing with the German identity issue. One of these is: I am a member of a people, the German people. What characteristics do we Germans have as a people? What does it mean to be a part of this people? What distinguishes us Germans from other nations?

But I am also a human being, and this brings us to the second set of questions: What bearing has the fact of being a German on my personal identity as a human being? A great deal, or little or nothing? Does this fact leave me more or less indifferent, or does it constitute a challenge for me? Does it mould my consciousness? Does it bestow upon me some special responsibility? Does it, specifically as a German, face me with tasks I would not otherwise have? If so, what are they? Are the answers to these questions different according to whether I am old or young? Whether I am a Protestant or a Catholic? Whether I live in the German Democratic Republic or the Federal Republic of Germany?

Let it be made clear right away that this is a difficult topic, and that no answer to these questions is likely to make the headlines, for I do not propose to make any statements which will arouse either strong objections or enthusiastic support. There are no simple answers, no answers that are either generally applicable or immutable.

Identity, first of all, is the question of how one understands oneself, an altogether personal matter. Each one of us has his own experiences and focal

points, and these have to be respected. We must not impose things on each other. Nor can we shape people's approach to life by means of resolutions adopted either by church diets or by parliaments.

But identity is also the question of how one is perceived by others, whether and how our fellows and neighbours can understand us. In other words, it is a question concerning our ability to coexist with other nations and respond to things which our neighbours expect from us. Therefore the question as to what it means to be "German" is of special importance.

First of all, to be a German is a natural occurrence. It is the consequence of the fact that one was born and raised here, that one speaks the German language, that one feels at home here and therefore is a part of one's own people. I am a German, just as a Frenchman is a Frenchman, and a Russian is a Russian. It is neither a shortcoming nor a merit. I did not choose to be a German, just as I did not choose the time in which I am living, the age that is shaping me: the latter part of the twentieth century. There is a strong tradition that permeates me as a German, quite irrespective of whether I am aware of it or not. The traditions of religion and culture in Germany, of social development and the political past have also played a part in moulding my existence.

One has to come to grips with this fact, for human beings are not impotently abandoned to this legacy from the past. Human beings can impress a new direction upon their traditions, can exert an influence on their day and age. That is what freedom consists of, and also responsibility. All human history is mutation and change, and history itself is the most important documentation of human freedom in our possession. My being a German is therefore not an ineluctable fate, but rather a task. We are all co-responsible for giving some content to our being Germans that will make us comprehensible to ourselves and to our neighbours, content in which we ourselves will feel at home, which will make us bearable and welcome to our neighbours, and for which we can respond to our descendants. What, then, does the term "German" really mean?

If we ask what the term embraces in a geographical, political and cultural sense, it is by no means easy to give an objectively valid answer. That is a consequence of our eventful history, especially as far as our borders are concerned. Perusing a historical atlas, practically each new page will show a political entity of different shape and size. This is due to our position at the centre of the continent. Nobody has quite so many neighbours as we have, and

**The author is President of the Federal Republic of Germany.
This text is drawn from the speech delivered
to the 21st Evangelical Church Conference,
Düsseldorf, June 8, 1985.**

all of them have always tried to exert influence on the political structure of Central Europe.

German history has never been simply the prerogative of the German people only. The Germans have experienced the fact that history means change more than other peoples. And history has not yet given a definitive answer to the question of the political form of Central Europe. Even the present form is not likely to prove to be history's last word, and this fills people in Europe with very different feelings: some with concern, some with hope, and others with mixed feelings. Vis-a-vis all these people, be they concerned, hopeful or in doubt, we have a great responsibility.

Being German, however, does not only mean being subject to continuous historico-political changes. There are also good reasons for fluctuations in our self-awareness, reasons which affect our identity and go hand in hand with our history. There were times when we were glad to be a German, to attract attention - there were others we preferred to be small and hardly noticeable.

This may be explained by looking back from the present, a look which will bring the reasons for our present-day self-awareness into better focus and equip us for the road ahead. Some people may well wonder why we should once again engage in this exercise of looking backwards into history: after all, our present concerns and problems are far removed from the question of our German identity, and are mainly related to the issues of our own day. And among the things which seem to cause most concern to people today there is the hard core of unemployment and the related concern young people feel for their future, as well as the concern for peace after so many years of ever-growing arms expenditure have failed to increase our feeling of security. The great tasks of our time are related to the contrasts between rich and poor, to artificially stimulated over-production of foodstuffs in our society and

tremendous famines in the Third World, to the need to protect Nature both for its own sake and for the sake of our children. The land is in danger of dying because we insist on trying to get excessive yields too rapidly from it, and we thus cannot escape the feeling that we may be only sorcerers' apprentices to our scientific and technological abilities: do we really dominate them, or do they dominate us? In genetics we are today struggling to find gen-ethics. But is our moral strength up to this task?

And lastly, here at home we live in great freedom. We are very good at enjoying this freedom, and securing the rights it gives us. But we may well wonder whether we are equally as good at accepting the duties this freedom involves, at occupying it with responsible contents, at making it accessible to others who are still waiting for it, and at sharing it with others. All these are undoubtedly amongst the great tasks of our times: our thoughts circle round them, and they form part of our self-understanding, of our identity.

But they also imply some questions. Are these specifically German problems? Have they come into being, are they there for us to contend with because we are Germans? Can they be solved within our intellectual and political setting in Germany? The answer is clearly negative: peace and environment, hunger and justice, media and science, all point far beyond our own borders. These problems do not of their own accord found a specifically German identity. But precisely because they are general problems and yet occupy such a prominent place in the consciousness of many Germans, and especially of young Germans, it seems at first sight that many in our midst, particularly the younger ones, are not very interested in the problematics of our German identity. After all, we do not want to illude ourselves.

But is this really so? Let us for the moment take a look at the problem from outside. I recently went to Holland and talked to many young people there. I asked about unemployment, the environment and peace. But their real interest, their real concern, was quite different. Some asked: Is your attitude to the past like our own? Or do we have to fear you? And others, though well aware of the division of our country, see it in a very different light from ourselves. As far as they are concerned, the division of Europe did not primarily displace the East into the West; for them, rather, the creation of the Federal Republic of Germany moved the West - namely the West of democracy - further East.

Not all Dutchmen and indeed not all our neighbours think in this way, but

when people are concerned with the solution of some of the problems named above, and also some I have not yet mentioned, they do not by any means overlook the fact that we are Germans. Over and above this, our approach to life is also nourished and sustained by springs that originate deeper down and reach further back. If we want to be at peace with ourselves, if we want to have a clean slate with our neighbours, we also have to face up to our origins, to our past. And when we do so, we realize that the questions posed by our Dutch friends are not wholly without justification.

Over the last year, a far-reaching and often excited public discussion of these themes has evolved, with altogether salutary results. The discussion has showed us just how present the past can be. No doubt, the voices heard in the course of this debate were as widely different as were personal fates at the time in question. Yet one thing came clearly to the fore: we must know the past, we must not avoid remembering at the very points where it hurts, we need a basic understanding of this period common to us all. When a people does not know how it stands with respect to its past, then it can also easily stumble in the present - in short, it has an identity problem.

But let me for a moment - very briefly - reach much further back than forty years, for our identity did not commence in 1945. For example, the identity of the Germans is closely connected with the Reformation. Long before they could constitute a political entity, the Germans were already religiously divided, more sharply so than most other nations - almost torn and shattered, resulting in far-reaching consequences at the state level as well. Germany is the land of Martin Luther, the land of the Reformation. From this, we Protestants often drew the conviction that we had a particularly close relationship to the concept "German". There was a tendency to put Catholics out of bounds. The foundation of the Reich under the leadership of Protestant Prussia and Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* against the Catholic Church contributed to the development of different forms of German self-awareness among Catholics and Protestants.

After all, real integration was achieved only after the Second World War, not least as a result of the common fate suffered during the church's persecution by the National Socialists. Today, religious confession no longer has a separating character as far as German identity is concerned. But precisely because this is fortunately so, and because numerically we are almost evenly distributed among the two confessions, we Germans should endeavour to provide ever

greater stimuli for ecumenism and should always set ourselves this task. For the sake of our faith and for the sake of Christian witness in the world, this is something that is urgently needed. And it also tallies with the personal needs of most members of the community in the still separated churches.

Culture plays an important part in moulding the self-awareness and identity of the Germans. Historically speaking, it was culture which first brought into being a German national feeling. What was at stake in the early days were not political aims, but rather spiritual and intellectual autonomy. In the eighteenth century, people did not want to be French. Lessing's national theatre and Herder's national culture are part of this movement. The great achievements of classical philosophy and poetry, with Kant and Goethe well out in the vanguard, had worldwide repercussions. They made the Germans, all of them, conscious of being members of a culturally respected nation. People were proud of being German. Yet the relationship between culture and politics, between spirit and power, often created special problems for us Germans. Schiller expressed this lament in his lines:

*Deutschland? Aber wo liegt es?
Ich weiß das Land nicht zu finden.
Wo das gelehrte beginnt, hört das politische auf.*

(Germany? Where is it situated?
I cannot find the country.
Where the learned begins,
The political comes to an end.)

Hölderlin described the Germans as "poor in deeds and rich in thought". Thoughts range back and forth, but deeds are done here and today. Nietzsche said: The Germans are of the day before yesterday and the day after tomorrow - they do not have a today. And lastly, Thomas Mann sings the praise of German interiority, the musicality of the soul, as the most beautiful German characteristic. But in our midst he sees a revolt of mysticism against clarity. He describes the relationship between the German disposition and politics as an *Unverhältnis*, a "non-relationship".

Now all these are subjective judgements, and I am not concerned here with using them to demonstrate something "typically German". What I wish to say in connection with culture is simply that whenever we Germans took culture

seriously and looked for our own cultural approach, we were not only welcomed by others, but also rendered a good service to ourselves. And this is still true today.

This is not a front-line position against our technical age. Even less so is it a non-political approach. Culture is a way of life, and thus includes politics too. Culture understood as a way of life is perhaps the most credible policy. It is culture which strengthens our identity, and it does so precisely where state and the system's limits of society both burden and divide us in our self-understanding.

But let us get back to the development of politics and the state. In the days of Napoleon, awakening national consciousness among the Germans became the driving force behind a political movement for freedom. The struggle for national identity took place not only in Lessing's theatre, but also on the political stage. Following the defeats of the early democratic movements associated with the Frankfurt Parliament of 1848 and the forced desertion of Austria, Bismarck created the national state.

He visualized the German role as mediator and bridge between East and West. In the meanwhile, however, the national self-consciousness of the European peoples had begun to assume some dangerous traits. There was a tendency to feel superior to other nations. Each country glorified its own image, deprecating that of others. Exaggerated self-appreciation strengthened the urge for more power. Industrialization and colonialism made headway.

Following Bismarck's exit, the dams of moderation gave way in Germany. Germany was not the originator of nationalism, but rather a belated convert and characterized by a dangerous feeling that the gap had to be made up: "full steam ahead", as people used to say in the Wilhelmine age. Since the Germans now also began to expand throughout the world, they led an overwhelming array of neighbours to join a coalition against them.

At the end of the First World War, Germany was beaten and suffered the humiliation of Versailles. Responsible peace efforts followed in both France and Germany, but could not cope with forces acting in the opposite direction. Nowhere had nationalism been overcome. In Germany it gained new strength and, against the background of severe social and economic distress, it assumed extreme forms. Hitler placed the German nation as the supreme value. For no

reason other than its being German, he claimed for it the right to dominate the world as the Germanic race.

The consequences were violence and war with half the world. Jews and others were herded together in the occupied territories and exterminated. The holocaust ran its course. Genocide, annihilation, unprecedented hate. Death and unfathomable suffering all around us and also in our own land. Germany was destroyed, vanquished, occupied, and partitioned. What did the word "German" mean after that? Behind us there lay an abyss of violence and guilt. Behind us lay a tremendous effort which had consumed the entire forces of the country. We had been freed of the National Socialist system of injustice, but for many people there was to be more suffering. For there followed violence against innocent people, who found themselves driven out of areas where they had lived for centuries.

In those days it was difficult to be a German. The Germans were not at peace with themselves. Indeed, how else could this have been after all that had happened, after all the disappointed illusions, all the superficiality of "not knowing", and the pangs of conscience, after all this lack of truth? But German history did not come to an end in 1945. For nearly four decades now, a liberal democracy has existed on German soil. This, too, is part of our history - a good part. When people anywhere in the world speak of Germans today, they also think of freedom, democracy, and a state of social justice.

Our democracy has its shortcomings, just like all the others, and we may even attribute some of these shortcomings to typically German characteristics. Yet this does not get us very far. Our particular experiences and memories constitute not only a burden for us, they also provide helpful and protective insights. Our experience of dictatorship, war and unjust rule has hardly any equal amongst other nations.

In the heritage of our history, with its interplay of dark and light, this is a particularly burdensome chapter. But the better we understand it, the more clearly we preserve its remembrance, the more unambiguously we accept responsibility for the consequences, the less likely will the past induce crises of identity for us, the better will we understand ourselves, the better will we be understood by our neighbours. There are many people who say: these everlasting concerns with the past - we had nothing do with it, we do not want to be burdened by it. But I believe the exact opposite to be true. Not to look at

Richard von Weizsäcker

the past would constitute a burden. But with confronting the past, the burden is removed and we are freed for the tasks that await us in the present.

Division constitutes a particularly heavy burden for us. People in the GDR, above all, suffer greatly from this division. They live in a state and a system of alliances of “real socialism”, and both their experience and their life are existentially determined by this. For us in the Federal Republic, this means in the first place that we should be careful in making judgements about life in the GDR, and think twice before giving advice of any kind. There is nothing we know better than them, nothing to be patronizing about. But we have every reason for turning to the people in the GDR with both head and heart, for feeling closely related to them and making use of the many possibilities for



The Dresden uprising. A barricade in the Grosse Frauen Strasse

visits and personal contacts. I feel particular joy when we receive visits from the GDR: Erfurt and Dresden, the Margravate of Brandenburg and the island of Rügen are more closely connected with ourselves and our identity than any beautiful sunny beach in the Mediterranean, although not all who have had the opportunity of visiting the GDR have actually done so.

But those who make public statements here in West Germany should also realize, and never forget, that they must always ask themselves whether what they are about to say can be justified with regard to the Germans in the GDR and is not merely designed to obtain approval and acclaim in their own circles. People over there are listening very carefully to what is said on our side, often far more carefully than we do ourselves. For example, they sense with finely tuned antennas whether a given politician seeks to put himself in the position of a citizen of the GDR and tries to reflect his point of view, or whether he primarily uses *Deutschlandpolitik* as instruments to score points over his domestic opponents.

Some things will hardly find understanding in the other part of Germany. For example, when people here keep talking about reunification while at the same time vociferously yelling "Germany, Germany" as fans of the West German team in some inter-German match against its counterpart from the GDR. Of course, there is nothing wrong with encouraging one's own team. But firstly, there is no reason why we should not take pleasure every now and again in the truly impressive performances of sportsmen from the GDR. And then sport, rather than hindering us, should help us to recognize and maintain our position as Germans.

Today we live in two mutually independent states and in two different social and alliance systems. The concept "German" is substantially affected by the fate of division. And yet it has not become a victim of this division. The men and women in the GDR are not only citizens of their state, they are also Germans, Germans just like ourselves. The end of the war brought in its wake the definition of occupation zones, while the East-West conflict led to the splitting of Europe and the division of Germany, and the subsequent incorporation of the two parts into power blocs with different values and aims. Germany's historical middle position was converted into a double outpost position. Today the boundaries between the two antagonistic blocs coincide with the boundary between the two German states. The Federal Republic has become the East of the West, the GDR the West of the East.

Richard von Weizsäcker

Putting an end to the division of Germany presupposes overcoming the division of Europe. Thus, despite its present "twofold outpost position", Germany still remains characterized and moulded by its position in the centre of Europe, and although this centre is divided, it is the centre all the same. For us in the Federal Republic, this may be expressed in two basic facts.

Our ties with the West form one of these. We belong to the circle of Western democracies. It is a set of values and constitutional provisions which bind us to those others dedicated to the same inbuilt principles. This dedication to a libertarian and social state of law - which, though it always stands in need of improvement, is also capable of such improvement - is final and irrevocable.

The second basic fact is our relationship to the Germans in the GDR. This is both a human fact of life and a political task. The centre of our continent should not covey conflicts. Rather, it should strengthen the forces that will promote peace and can overcome the blocs. Bearing in mind the human bonds which unite us, and our central geopolitical position, we should endeavour, notwithstanding our different systems, to come closer to our near and distant neighbours in the East, and live peacefully by their side. Never in their history has this been more important for Germans than it is now under the sign of division and the atomic age.

This dual position, deriving from our clear bond with the West, and our will to overcome our differences with the East, is often felt to be uncomfortable by both Germans and our neighbours. The truth is that division places a heavy burden on the more directly affected and that it deprives them of their human rights. It is equally true that there exists a German question that is uncomfortable.

When a person has a problem, he wants to be in a position to find an answer and thus put an end to the problem. And when an answer cannot be found, he generally prefers to deny the existence of the problem itself. This is human and it is comprehensible, but problems do not disappear from earth simply because people cannot find an answer to them. History has shown this time and time again. In Berlin I heard a formulation that everybody will understand: the German question will remain open for as long as the Brandenburg Gate remains closed.

This strikes the very heart of the question. It concerns the freedom of human

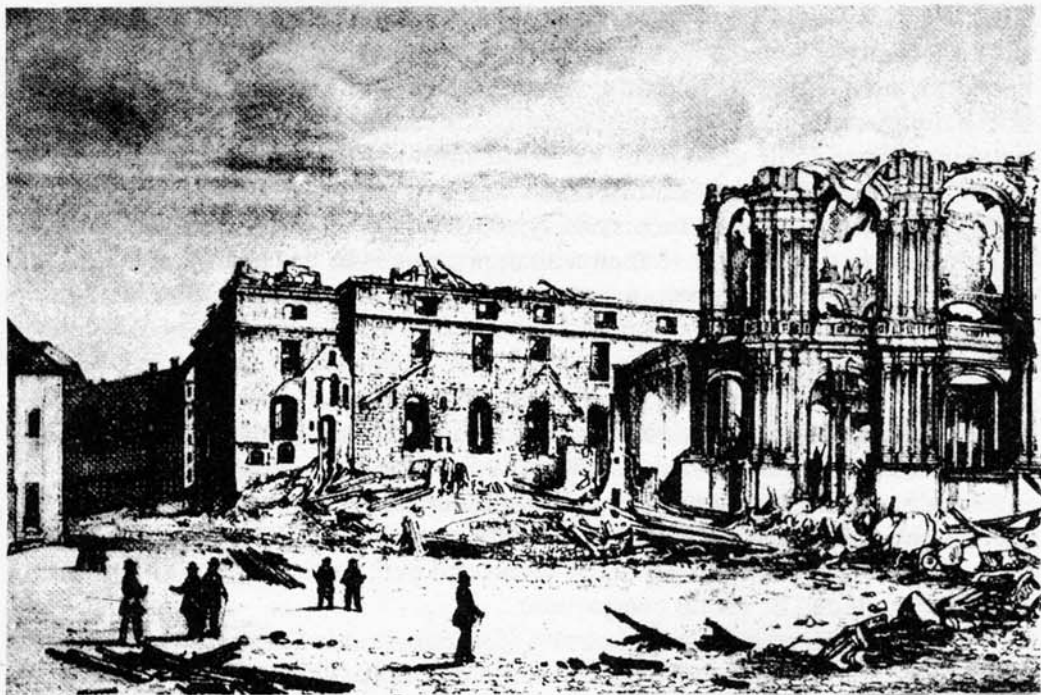
beings. Nowhere can this be felt more clearly than in the middle of divided Berlin, yet it is no less the concern of all Germans and all Europeans. To live with a German question is nothing new for Germans. In the middle of the nineteenth century, indeed, political events in Germany were altogether dominated by the German question. The struggle then was for unity and freedom in the sense of constitutional rights and civil liberties. These two goals constituted the poles of a field of force. In Germany, the struggle for a libertarian constitution had become interrupted after the failure of the 1848 revolution. But it had not been abandoned. For the time being, unity was given precedence over freedom, which was not yet achieved with respect to some important fields.

Today, once again, the German question is located between the poles of unity and freedom. But the situation is different from what it was at that time. Freedom is now at the core of the question. Progress in the direction of unity, at the price of freedom, would be a step backwards.

As already said, it is not only Berlin and Germany that are divided. Equally divided is the community of states in Europe. Seeking dominance, the European nations fought against each other for too long. Though they shared the same historical and cultural roots, consciousness of the communion of the European peoples was pushed into the background by the struggle for power and the excesses of the different nationalisms. The European world wars of the present century were self-destructive fratricidal wars. Now that they have ended, consciousness of European unity, of our belonging to the same stream of historical development, and of our founding our private and public life on related values, is growing again.

The issue of unity facing us today is primarily an all-European one. Its substance is not constituted, as it was in earlier days, by questions of national frontiers and territories. We are not concerned with displacing frontiers, but rather with depriving them of the separating character they exert on men. We are concerned with the dignity of man, with human rights, with freedom of religion and conscience, freedom of speech and movement. We need to reflect on the preservation of Nature, and on just progress for the Third World.

European unity does not mean unity in a single state, or equality of systems, but rather a common road in a context of a respectfully human progress of history. In this sense, the German question has become a European task. To



Devastation in Dresden following the 1849 uprising

work for such a goal in Europe with peaceful means is, first and foremost, the task of the Germans, a task which would be far more difficult if in the two German states we were to become indifferent to each other. It is precisely the feeling of belonging together in separation and across existing systemic boundaries which strengthens our motivation and better befits us for the task.

Many of us went to the GDR during the Luther Year in 1983, and for many of us, this visit became an unforgettable experience. Indeed, when I reflect about my identity as a German, I cannot but think also (and profoundly) about Wittenberg. As I then had occasion to say in the market square of Wittenberg, we do not limit ourselves within the boundaries of beliefs, parishes or countries. Though in the Federal Republic and the GDR we live under different conditions, different social systems and different personal spheres, we must both respect this. Neither of us wants to give inappropriate advice to the other. Yet even though we do live in two states, we remain Germans both here and there. We are bound together by more than language, culture and responsibility for our history, for we also have our essential goals in common.

This begins with the very simplest: we breathe the same air, and air does not stop at frontiers. To keep it clean is our common interest. The peace we seek cannot be divided between East and West. Struggling for this end, we ought not to divide men into dreamers and realists. Peace between individuals and nations will not come upon us as we lie dreaming. It demands something more than mere overcoming of contrast and conflict by nostalgia and emotion. It calls for good Christian virtues, namely sobriety and sincerity. But the realist, too, must have the courage to realize that, if peace is to be ensured, it is not sufficient to leave everything in Europe exactly as it has been for the last forty years.

I live in the Federal Republic of Germany and perform an office within the framework of our Constitution, whose libertarian values I fully profess and refuse to relativize. But this does not exclude objectivity, indeed, it presupposes that on such occasions as negotiations for disarmament and arms control, we do not always attribute absolute good and right to one side, and absolute evil and wrong to the other. Good and evil, justice and self interest, error and guilt can be found everywhere.

It is in the interests of peace that we should not mutually become bogged down in confrontational declarations, for these exist on both sides. It is far better to take one's cue from the positive elements of the other side, for such elements can also be found on both sides. It is by no means a triumph when one succeeds in demonstrating once more that one's opponent is and remains as stubborn as he has always been, and to claim that one has always known this. Hidden behind such an attitude is nothing but the need for always maintaining one's opponent as an opponent, thus ensuring that one will never have correct oneself, not even once. There are times when one can understand this opponent even more positively and better than he himself can at that moment. In that case, one will also succeed more readily in correcting oneself.

Time and time again, we come back to talking about deterrent strategy. It could hardly be otherwise, for rationally we somehow fight shy of it. Indeed, when we talk about forcing arms to remain silent by means of weapons which, if used, would annihilate everyone, our enemy just as ourselves, how can human beings with their reason and emotions comprehend such weapons?

But sincerity also compels us to recognize that in the course of the last few decades it would have been incomparably more difficult to avoid warlike

complications in our regions. This constitutes an *aporia*, a contradiction, a difficult conflict and, what is more, one for which no-one has yet discovered a simple way out. Not to keep silent on this, but rather to admit it frankly, forms part of our responsibility for peace.

The Plenary Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Vancouver went on record as saying that there could never be peace anywhere “unless and until there will be justice for all, everywhere”. Bare, individual survival here in Central Europe is neither the sole nor the supreme good. We in Europe have to and desire to dedicate all our forces to the control and, above all, the reduction of armaments. But we should be very careful to avoid security policy becoming an obsession between East and West. We are not solely concerned with weapons and disarmament, but rather with peaceful relations and co-operation in all fields between East and West. Only when we help to alleviate poverty and hunger in the world, by ensuring justice everywhere, only then will we really help to pave the way to peace. What is needed is a peace that will do justice to all men.

The watchword of the church diet in Wittenberg was “Let us dare be confident”. The watchword of the church diet in Düsseldorf was “The earth is the Lord’s”. Yet whether in Wittenberg or Düsseldorf, we could have said “Let us be confident together”. The earth common to us all is of the one Lord.

What has all this to do with the German identity? What does “being German” really mean? It means that we are human beings like all the others, and like all the others, we love our home country. Our location in Europe and our history, our numerous neighbours and, last but certainly not least, we ourselves, have cast both shining light and dark shadows.

Time and time again, these have wrought changes in our midst. They have often made it difficult for our neighbours to understand us, difficult for us to understand ourselves. Mostly we were not leading a normal life, rarely have we been united, rather have separations been imposed upon us. Ever anew, we have to learn to bear these separations without becoming indifferent. We must and can utilize them and make them bear fruit, not only for ourselves but also for many others.

After the end of World War II, the French poet Paul Claudel wrote about us Germans:

“Germany is not here to split and divide the nations, but rather to gather them together. Its function is to create agreement - to make all the surrounding nations feel that they cannot live without each other.”

That they depend on each other. And that is a great and confident mission for us. Ups and downs in history, as well as our division, also constitute an opportunity. The road that leads into the future is not staked out - it is equally dark and wide open. It is up to us to shape its direction. Man is free. It is up to us to confer a content upon the term “German” which both we and the world will be able to live with willingly and in peace.