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The European miracle

Why Europe's future is built on the ruins of the past — and what is at stake today

As the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War is commemorated, my thoughts turn to the stories of my family, who lived in the border triangle between Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium. In my study, there is a family photo, taken in 1943, showing four serious young adults: my mother, born in 1920, her sister and two of her brothers — both in *Wehrmacht* uniform. Her husband, my father, was a soldier — they had married in 1940 just before his first deployment to the front. At the time of the photo, both the Dutch and Belgian parts of my family, on my grandparents' sides, were living under brutal German occupation.

At 18 years old, the youngest person in this photo is my uncle Josef, who was sent to the Eastern Front shortly after the photo was taken. Miraculously, he returned physically unharmed at the end of the war and promptly volunteered to clear mines with the Belgian armed forces to help clean up at least some of the nasties of war. In the process, he stepped on one of those mines. He was 20 years old and is buried in a military cemetery in Belgium.

Such stories were not uncommon in my parents' generation. Being born in 1955, I considered it practically impossible that those events could occur again in my lifetime. The reports of the war and its horrific consequences marked my entire childhood and youth, and the terrible crimes committed by the Germans played a major role in my politically committed family.

Driven by fantasies of great power and racial ideology, Germany had instigated the war, a rupture of civilisation that made millions of people suffer – terrorised, abducted, starved or killed – and that made pure evil an everyday reality for millions. A generation of young men throughout Europe and beyond returned home from the war severely traumatised — if at all.

A bold and courageous act

The history of the Europe we know today is based on rubble and ashes, hatred, dehumanisation and the most monstrous escalations of violence, collective hunger and collective fear among the civilian population. Despite this, just five years after these crimes against humanity, the unification of Europe started. It was the hope for a better common future brought about by a gesture of France to Germany: this is nothing short of a miracle.

The longing for a lasting peace was powerful in those years — more powerful than hatred and the desire for retribution. In a major speech on 9 May 1950, French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman laid out the bold idea of jointly managing French and German coal and steel production, both vital to the war effort, and offered other European states the opportunity to join. Only five years after the end of the unprecedented destruction of World War II, this was a bold and courageous act! Instead of humiliating the enemy, as had been the case with the Treaty of Versailles after World War I, the French statesmen took a personal risk by offering Germany a hand of reconciliation and thus making its integration into the European community of states possible. What a gift to the young Federal Republic! And what an obligation!

Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, the only German who knew of Schuman's plan beforehand, saw the historic opportunity for Germany and seized upon it immediately. Schuman and Adenauer made their courageous decision against the mutual, and still existing, resentment of the people of their two countries — and thus against the mood of the majority. For too long, hatred had been fuelled by the decades-old narrative of the alleged hereditary enmity between France and Germany. The hope was that those who worked together closely and transparently would not shoot at each other.

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The men and women who set out to integrate Europe socially, economically and organisationally carried the memories of the two world wars. They had learnt that war and its consequences can only be ended and overcome with pragmatic reason. At the same time, they knew that only those who are prepared to act with vision can secure peace in the long term. They sensed that democracy in Germany, after years of dictatorship, must become strong and attractive to secure lasting peace between the European peoples — also

economically. This was the only way to establish a stable peace between the peoples of Europe. Economic relations became a peace project.

France, in particular, as one of the allied victorious powers, showed very impressively that it is possible to build a future on forgiveness even after the most serious enmity if both sides share the same goal: to ensure peace and security for their populations.

To build mutual trust, the new partners also rely on instruments of soft power: town twinning – the oldest dates back to 1950 – and youth exchanges, for example. This was the spirit of encounter and rapprochement through dialogue, later emphasised in the Elysée Treaty of 1963. Because those who speak to each other as equals understand each other better.

The Schuman Declaration led to the founding of the European Coal and Steel Community within a year. The six founding states – next to France and West Germany also Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg – set aside their nationalism and laid the foundations for European unification through joint cooperation and confidence-building. This gave rise to the EU we know today: a force for peace and a guarantor of prosperity, democracy and freedom. For me, this is the most outstanding civilisational achievement of the last century!

Growing concern

And yet, there is no guarantee that this European project will last forever. Ten years ago, when I was honoured with the Charlemagne Prize of Aachen, for my special commitment to Europe, I made this clear: it is dangerous to regard the EU as having no alternative. Of course, there is one: re-nationalisation. This is why the European states must constantly come to a joint decision: do they want to jeopardise their special alliance of states for short-term national advantages, or do they want to jointly defend the democratic model of society, the rules-based order and competitiveness in globalisation, even if they have to make compromises to do so?

Europe is held in higher esteem by its citizens than it has been for a long time. Seventy-five per cent of Europeans identify themselves as EU citizens; more than half of young people in Europe rate their respective country's EU membership as positive. And for a good reason: despite all the crises and criticism, the 450 million EU citizens have built the richest economic area in the world together. Within the EU, the idea of individual fundamental rights, which the state guarantees its citizens,

applies: social security, freedom of opinion, freedom of research and teaching, freedom of movement of persons, respect for the individual, the prohibition of torture, the prohibition of arbitrariness. This makes the EU a place of longing for many people worldwide.

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Nevertheless, concern is growing in the EU: around a third of young people are pessimistic about their future. The enemies of democracy are on the rise worldwide, including in Europe and especially here in Germany, where misanthropic attitudes are gaining more and more acceptance. The incoming German government has two major tasks: the first is to protect our Constitution against all its enemies. This will only work out if politicians make tackling people's everyday concerns their programmatic guiding principle, set an example of respect and tolerance and at the same time demand it, and declare war on hatred and intolerance, especially online! On the other hand, Germany must do everything in its power to make Europe stronger than ever. At a time of growing global systemic conflicts – with Russia's war of aggression literally on Europe's doorstep in violation of international law, with the US but also with China – Europe must take a clear stance: in favour of a rules-based order, reliability, a democratic constitution, integrity — and the protection of the dignity of each individual. This is the only way to secure prosperity and peace in our region and beyond.

For this, we still need visionaries like Schuman today, who are prepared to risk building almost unthinkable bridges for their idea of a better tomorrow, to secure peace and prosperity in the long term.

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