



10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

6 May 1985

The Prime Minister has asked me to thank you for sending her a copy of Chancellor Kohl's speech at the site of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp on 21 April. She was pleased to have the opportunity to read the full text of this.

Charles Powell

His Excellency Baron Rüdiger von Wechmar

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DER BOTSCHAFTER
DER BUNDESREPUBLIK DEUTSCHLAND
Baron Rüdiger von Wechmar

London, 2 May 1985

CDP *[initials]*

Dear Prime Minister,

I enclose a copy of the English translation of Chancellor Kohl's speech at the site of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp on April 21. I hope you will agree that he spoke most movingly at such a tragic commemoration.

I remain, Prime Minister,

yours sincerely,

[Signature]

The Rt. Hon. Margaret Thatcher, MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London SW1

MERTURM-KLANGHART

REPORT

FROM THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

April 26, 1985.

KOHL REMEMBERS CONCENTRATION CAMP VICTIMS AT BERGEN-BELSEN

Chancellor Helmut Kohl spoke in Bergen-Belsen on April 21 at a ceremony to mark the 40th anniversary of the liberation of the concentration camps. This was the text of his speech:

"O earth, cover not thou their blood". These words, taken from the Book of Job and inscribed on the Jewish memorial over there, have today summoned us here to mourn, to remember, to seek reconciliation. We are gathered here in memory of the many innocent people who were tortured, humiliated and driven to their deaths at Bergen-Belsen, as in other camps.

This site's admonition to us must not go unheard or be forgotten. It must be heeded by us as we define our basic political principles and it requires each of us to examine his own life and way of thinking in the light of the suffering sustained here.

Reconciliation with the survivors and descendants of the victims is only possible if we accept our history as it really was, if we Germans acknowledge our shame and our historical responsibility, and if we perceive the need to act against any efforts aimed at undermining human freedom and dignity.

For 12 years, the light of humanity in Germany and Europe was concealed by ubiquitous violence. Germany under the National Socialist regime filled the world with fear and horror. That era of slaughter, indeed of genocide, is the darkest, most painful chapter in German history.

One of our country's paramount tasks is to inform people of those occurrences and keep alive an awareness of the full extent of this historical burden. We must not - nor shall we - ever forget the atrocities committed under the Hitler regime, the mockery and destruction of all moral precepts, the systematic inhumanity of the Nazi dictatorship. A nation that abandons its history forsakes itself. The presence of history is illustrated in a particularly cogent manner by the survivors of Bergen-Belsen who are here today at the invitation of the Central Jewish Council.

We recall above all the persecution and murder of the Jews, the pitiless war which man, in the final analysis, waged against himself. Bergen-Belsen, a town in the middle of Germany, remains a mark of Cain branded in the minds of

our nation, just like Auschwitz and Treblinka, Belzec and Sobibor, Chelmno and Majdanek, and the many other sites testifying to that mania for destruction. They epitomize what man can do against his fellow-beings out of hatred and blindness.

We do not know exactly how many people perished here at Bergen-Belsen. They numbered more than 50,000. But what does this figure tell us about how death befell every individual, his next of kin, his family? Vicariously, for them all I name Anne Frank. She was 15 years old when she died here a few days before the liberation of the camp. We do not know exactly how her life was extinguished. But we know what awaited people here, how they were maltreated, what pain they suffered. Their lives, their human dignity were wholly at the mercy of their tormentors.

Despite their own great suffering, many inmates found the strength to stand by others, to turn to their fellow-beings and offer them solace and consolation. An old Jewish saying goes: "Whoever saves a human life saves the whole world." A few known and many unknown detainees afforded their fellow-beings strength at that time of great agony. We also recall those courageous people who, in their everyday lives under the Nazi dictatorship, gave the persecuted a refuge at the risk of their own lives. They all helped to save our conception of man as God's image on earth.

Forty years ago, Bergen-Belsen was liberated. But for thousands of people in this camp, salvation came too late: too drained were their bodies, too deeply scarred their souls.

The National-Socialist despol of mankind was demonstrated not only in the concentration camps. It was ubiquitous, just as the dictatorship was totalitarian. Violence prevailed everywhere, and everywhere people were shadowed, persecuted and abducted, they were incarcerated, tortured and murdered. They were people from all walks of life, people of many nationalities, faiths and creeds, and with highly different political convictions.

From the very outset, the terror of the totalitarian regime was directed against the Jews in particular. Envy and crude prejudice, nurtured over the centuries, culminated in an ideology of manic racism. The mass graves here show us where that led to.

Today, 40 years later, it is still our duty to ask ourselves how a culture could disintegrate, to whose development and maturity German Jews in particular

made an outstanding contribution. Many of them clearly professed themselves German patriots. Throughout the world they were representatives and ambassadors of German and Western culture.

When the forces of evil seized power in Germany, the Jews were deprived of their rights and driven out of the country. The regime officially declared them, "subhumans" and condemned them to the "final solution". Those have become Nazi terms in the German language - in the language of Goethe and Lessing, of Immanuel Kant and Edmund Husserl, of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Leo Baeck. That misanthropic regime also violated our language.

Spirit poisoned

But even before that it poisoned the spirit of the nation. The rulers were the henchmen of anarchy. With their arrogant use of power and their unbridled demands, they blinded the nation and then plunged an entire continent into misery. The deepest cause of this destruction was the accelerating disintegration of values and morals. In the final analysis, the totalitarian state was the product of the renegation of God. The Nazi regime's hypocritical invocation of "godly providence" merely served to gloss over their own arbitrariness. That was and remains indeed the gravest perversion of religious faith: contempt for the living God professed by the great religions.

This darkest chapter of our history must always serve as a reminder to us, not because of the question of why those who risked their lives in opposing the terror ultimately failed in their efforts. The decisive question is, instead, why so many people remained apathetic, did not listen properly, closed their eyes to the realities when the despots-to-be solicited support for their inhumane programme, first in back rooms and then openly out in the streets.

The intentions of the National Socialists were apparent well before Nov. 9 1938, when 35,000 Jews were abducted to concentration camps. We ask ourselves today why it was not possible to take action when the signs of National Socialist tyranny could no longer be overlooked - when books regarded as great cultural works of this century were burned, when synagogues were set on fire, when Jewish shops were demolished, when Jewish citizens were denied a seat on park benches.

Those were warnings. Even though Auschwitz was beyond anything that man could imagine, the pitiless brutality of the Nazis had been clearly discernible. At the Barmen Synod in 1934, Hans Asmussen clear-sightedly warned of the designs

of the new rulers: "They claim to be redeemers, but prove to be the tormentors of an unredeemed world."

The truth of this utterance is clear to us today. Millions of Jews fell victim to the National Socialist terror. The horror of this occurrence is still with us today. In view of such depravity, one could use the words of St Augustine who once said: "To myself I have become a land of misery."

Innocent victims

Like the Jews, many other innocent people fell victim to persecution. We cannot separate the ashes of the murdered. Let us here remember those victims, too. The racial hatred of the National Socialists was also directed against gypsies. In the mass graves before our eyes lie countless Sinti and Romany gypsies.

The inscription here at Bergen-Belsen reads: "Their violent death exhorts the living to oppose injustice." We mourn all those who lost their lives under the totalitarian regime because of their unswerving faith - among them many who refused to render military service on religious grounds.

A totalitarian state claims to possess the absolute truth, to be alone in knowing what is good and what is bad. It does not respect the individual's conscience. It seeks to provide its own answers not only to the penultimate questions, those of politics, but also to the final questions, those concerning the meaning and value of our lives. Only in this way could there arise the demonic official dogma that certain lives are not worth living. Only in this way could Mengele and others perform horrifying experiments on living people.

We recall the persecution of the mentally handicapped, of those people who were brandished as social outcasts, and of the many others who, for highly different reasons, were slaughtered - some of them simply because they expressed doubts about the so-called final victory.

When this camp was set up, Russian prisoners-of-war were first brought here. Their accommodation and treatment amounted to no less than torture. Over 58,000 died alone in this region around Bergen. This we must also remember today and in future: Of the almost six million Soviet soldiers who were captured by the Germans as prisoners-of-war, far fewer than half survived. Hence at this hour we also reflect on the suffering inflicted in the name of Germany on the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe.

We commemorate the 20 million people from the Soviet Union who died during the war. We remember the crimes perpetrated against the Polish nation. And we also mourn those people who suffered from Nazi injustice being repaid with new injustice, those Germans who fled their home regions and perished during the flight. But we would not have learned anything from history if we were to set off atrocities against each other.

Germany bears historical responsibility for the crimes of the Nazi tyranny. This responsibility is reflected not least in never-ending shame.

We shall not let anything in this context be falsified or made light of. It is precisely the knowledge of guilty involvement, irresponsibility, cowardice and failure that enables us to perceive depravity and nip it in the bud. The totalitarianism that prevailed in Germany from January 30 1933 onwards is not an unrepeatable deviation from the straight and narrow, not an "accident of history". An alert and sensitive stance is needed above all towards any views and attitudes that can pave the way for totalitarian rule:

Belief in ideologies which claim to know the goals of history and promise paradise on earth;

The failure to exercise freedom responsibly;

Apathy about violations of human dignity, basic rights and the precept of peace.

Peace begins with respect for the unconditional, absolute dignity of the individual in all spheres of life. The suffering and death of people, the victims of inhumanity, urge us to preserve peace and freedom, to promote law and justice, to perceive man's limits and to follow our path in humility before God.

What Konrad Adenauer said here at Bergen-Belsen in February 1960 remains valid: "I believe we could not choose a better place than this one to give a solemn pledge to do our utmost so that every human being - irrespective of the nation or race to which he belongs - enjoys justice, security and freedom on earth in the future."

Day of liberation

The collapse of the Nazi dictatorship on May 8 1945 was a day of liberation for the Germans. It soon became apparent, however, that it did not mean freedom for everyone. We in the free part of our fatherland have, following the experience of Hitler's dictatorship, made it a rule that especially in central political

questions man must decide by and for himself. We have established a free republic, a democracy based on the rule of law. The founders of our democratic country perceived and took advantage of the moment which Werner Nachmann spoke of.

By possessing the strength to face up to the responsibility imposed by history, they restored for us the value and dignity of freedom that is exercised responsibly. For this reason, we have also linked ourselves irrevocably to the community of free Western democracies based on shared values and entered into a permanent alliance with them.

This was only possible because those nations - and not least former concentration camp inmates and the relatives of victims of the Nazi dictatorship - reached out their hands to us in reconciliation. Many of those nations directly experienced Nazi terror in their own country. There was bitter hatred for those who had come to subjugate and maltreat them - hatred which ultimately was directed against the entire German nation.

We in the free part of Germany realize what it means, following Auschwitz and Treblinka, to have been taken back into the free Western community. Those nations did so not least with the justified expectation that we will not disown the crimes perpetrated in the name of Germany against the nations of Europe.

Today, 40 years later, we continue to acknowledge that historical liability. Precisely because we Germans must never dismiss from our minds that dark era of our history, I am today addressing you and our fellow countrymen as Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany. We have learned the lessons of history, especially the history of this century. Human dignity is inviolable. Peace must emanate from German soil.

Friendship with France

Our reconciliation and friendship with France is a boon to the Germans and the French, to Europe and the world as a whole. We also wish to attain such a peaceful achievement in our relations with our Polish neighbours.

We are grateful that reconciliation was possible with the Jewish people and the State of Israel, that friendship is again growing particularly among young people. And we respectfully pay tribute to those men and women who, looking to the future, were prepared to surmount the strength of hatred with the force of humanity. We are especially thankful to eminent representatives of the nation of Israel like Nahum Goldmann and David Ben Gurion. We are also grateful to

Konrad Adenauer. They all sought reconciliation.

Reparations were paid to secure a homeland for the Jews and to assist the survivors of the holocaust. However, today we know just as we did then: suffering and death, pain and tears are not susceptible to reparations. The only answer can be collective commemoration, collective mourning, and a collective resolve to live together in a peaceful world.

In his memorial address at the Cologne Synagogue on November 9 1978, Nahum Goldmann recalled the creative mutual influence of Jews and Germans and spoke of a "unique, historical occurrence". This co-existence of Jews and Germans in particular has a long, eventful history. It has been examined only little until now and is scarcely known to many people. For this reason we intend to promote the establishment of an "Archive for the study of Jewish history in Germany."

We want to trace German-Jewish interaction through history. Over many centuries, Jews made decisive contributions to German culture and history. And it is an accomplishment of historical import that, even after 1945, Jewish compatriots were prepared to assist us in building the Federal Republic of Germany. We wish to preserve this memory, too, in order to strengthen our resolve to live together in a better future.

It is therefore essential to make it clear to the up-and-coming generation that tolerance and an open-minded attitude towards one's fellow-beings are irreplaceable virtues without which a polity cannot survive. Emulating each other in the quest for humanity is the most pertinent answer to the failure of an era marked by intolerance and the abuse of power.

At Yad ya-Shem, the words of a Jewish mystic of the early 18th century became firmly impressed upon my mind: "Seeking to forget makes exile all the longer; the secret of redemption lies in remembrance."

For this reason, the exhortation expressed here at Bergen-Belsen rightly is: "O earth, cover not thou their blood".



3 MAY 1985

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