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‘VE DAY – A GERMAN PERSPECTIVE’

**Address delivered by Claus M. Halle on May 15, 1995
to the Rotary Club of Atlanta, Georgia**

Thank you so much, Collier.

All of us, who were there last June, will never forget the memorable program that Frank Skinner and you arranged for the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day. You may recall that prior to the D-Day anniversary the Rotary office sent us all a card with three questions:

Are you a veteran of World War II?
If so, what was your rank?
and your military unit?

I wasn't sure - as a German - whether I should respond. But I did. Yes, I was in the War, and I was an NCO. As to "military unit" I decided to also be truthful - no matter the consequences - and wrote "the enemy". Little did I know nor expect that Frank Skinner, in his most gracious way, would dignify my somewhat flippant reply by using my presence that day as an example for the great uniting power of Rotary. His remarks touched me deeply. I wrote him a note to thank him. Also, I pointed out to Frank, that D-Day was not a day that Germans remembered. It had been brought to our attention only by its anniversary celebrations.

In 1944 it was not until weeks after the successful landing of allied forces, when the facts no longer could be denied, that the German public learned about the invasion. By that time your troops were well into France.

In contrast, VE-Day was experienced and is remembered by everyone in Germany who was alive and old enough. It was Frank who suggested that I should share my perspective of the events of that time.

And here I am. But what looked like an easy task, namely to tell my story, has become more difficult than I thought. In recent weeks a heated debate has evolved in Germany as to what the 8th of May was at the time - and what it means today - and how its fiftieth anniversary should be observed. It was Victory in Europe -- for the Allies. It marked the unconditional surrender of the German Army. It was the end of the war for Germans but not the end of their suffering. It meant freedom for many and the beginning of captivity and new oppression for countless others. It was the beginning of peace, but it was also the commencement of the Cold War. Whatever it meant for this or that individual, for Germany as a nation and people it marked the total collapse militarily, economically, morally and spiritually and, yet, it was also - liberation. Theodor Heuss, the Federal Republic's first President, said in 1949:

"This 8th of May 1945 will remain the most tragic and the most questionable paradox in history for each of us ... because we were redeemed and annihilated in one."

How should one observe such an anniversary then? It is not surprising there is a debate. Chancellor Kohl – in this debate – recently stated that everyone is entitled to one's own memories.

Here's how I remember that time.

I was twelve years old when the war started in 1939. We lived in Silesia, the most south-eastern province of Germany. The Polish border was less than fifty miles away.

Those were exciting days for me and my brother. We went to the railroad tracks and waved to the trains passing by with soldiers, horses, trucks and tanks. They would win this war, quickly and nothing would stop them.

Our parents did not share our enthusiasm. On the contrary, they were deeply concerned, worried. War was something terrible, they had been through it in 1914-18. My mother had lost both her brothers and a brother-in-law, and my father had also lost one of his brothers. On the fourteenth day of the Poland campaign we received word that my cousin Hans, a cavalry lieutenant, had been killed in action. His body was brought home and buried at our town's churchyard. For the first time I realized how cruel war could be. But it did not change my attitude. If anything, it made me more determined to do my part in supporting the war effort. We were all part of the national youth organization. The ten to fourteen year olds were the so called Young Folks. After that one advanced to the Hitler Youth, and at age eighteen was expected to join the Party, the National Socialists, the only one there was. Young Folks service was great fun. We got together twice a week to play soccer or some other sports; or attended concerts or a theater performance. On other occasions we would collect recyclable materials and pick up used clothing and blankets for the needy or participate in collecting money for one or the other cause. And there were - of course - summer camps with hiking and swimming and games and singing by a nightly fire. All the things boys love to do. As we grew older, play and games turned into training and drill and finally into pre-military bootcamp like exercises. Looking back, it was a diabolically clever system to get the youth of Germany prepared for war.

In 1940 Hitler turned north and west. Denmark and Norway fell. Then Holland and Belgium, and by June most of France was occupied by German troops.

The non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union, which Hitler and Stalin had concluded in 1939, just before the invasion of Poland, not only covered the back of the German army during their western campaign, but had allowed the Soviets to occupy and annex the eastern part of Poland and also to move into the Baltics and engage Finland in a war.

In 1941 German and Soviet interests had begun to clash in south-eastern Europe, and Hitler, with the west front quiet, decided to attack the Soviet Union. Russia's preparations were still incomplete and the German army again went from victory to victory. -- Until 1943, when the tide turned. The land was too vast, the supply lines too long, the winters too cold and the Red Army too strong and resilient.

On February 18, 1943, after the German Sixth Army had been defeated at Stalingrad, losing 330,000 men, the Nazi government in Berlin proclaimed TOTAL WAR. A short while thereafter the 16 and 17 year olds were called up to serve in anti-aircraft units on the home front to free up - as they said - 100,000 soldiers. I was about to turn sixteen, when I and all the boys in my class, accompanied by a teacher, were sent to Stettin, a port city on the Baltic Sea. We received the necessary training and manned a battery of three anti-aircraft guns. We were supposed to attend class right there in our quarters, but only, if there had been no alarm or attack the night before. We averaged about two or three days a week with some classroom activity.

The exciting part - of course - was the action at night, when Allied aircraft often flew over Stettin on their way to Berlin. Our only complaint was, that our 4 cm cannons did not have the range to hit the mostly high flying enemy planes.

In early 1944 a major air raid on Stettin destroyed most of the port and industrial facilities and half of the residential areas. We finally had our opportunity and saw plenty of action and our first casualties. Soon thereafter, still sixteen, I was drafted into the Labour Service in Hamburg. We built and rebuilt anti aircraft gun emplacements as the city was a more frequent target for Allied bombings.

Three months later I was called up for military duty, back to Silesia.

My basic training took three months and was not nearly as tough as I had been told to expect. In fact, the pre-military camp I was sent to as a fifteen year old had been much more gruesome. I ascribe this to the fact, that our drill sergeant was a humane person - although that sounds like a contradiction in terms. He had been in the western campaign and for two years and two winters on the Russian front before being wounded. Now his goal in life was to prepare us, in the best way he knew how, for combat and survival. My first - rather short assignment - was with a special unit on skis in the mountains of what is now Slovakia. After that I was enrolled in an officer training course in Goerlitz, an old garrison town which today is on the border with Poland. At the time, however, it was almost Middle Germany. Meanwhile the Red Army had launched its counter offensive and was steadily moving westward. The Soviets had finally gotten relief, when the Allies landed in Normandy and drew Germany into a two front war. On the German home front the Allied air raids had taken their toll. Much of the German industrial potential had been destroyed and vital supply lines were interrupted. Gasoline and diesel oil became the most scarce commodities, and if there were some fuel stocks left, they weren't where they were needed. Most aircraft therefore were grounded and large numbers of tanks and trucks became useless. Despite this, the fighting and defense efforts remained fierce. All remaining men from 16 to 60 were pulled together to form the Volkssturm, a home defense unit under the command of party functionaries, not the military. During all this time the government's propagand machine would feed Germans only information that would either boost morale or stir up rage and indignation over enemy action. Communications-wise we were totally isolated. Allied planes continued to drop their fiery and explosive loads on cities and towns. With the Luftwaffe more or less out of commission they enjoyed total air superiority and now could fly during daylight hours using also fighter planes to strafe anything that moved on the ground. In the summer of 1944 Hitler launched his "secret weapon", the V1, later to be followed by the V2. Germans had been made to believe that these flying bombs - once deployed would quickly decide the war in our favor. That was not to be. The two frontlines moved ever closer to the borders of the Reich, and in October the Soviets overran several German towns and villages in East-Prussia. The territory was recaptured two weeks later but very few civilian survivors of the Russian occupation were found. A massacre had occurred and the news evoked unspeakable fear among all Germans. The atrocities of East-Prussia caused the flight of millions of Germans not only from that region, but also from Pommerania and Silesia. My parents, well into their sixties then, left their home in January 1945 in snow and ice with only what they could carry. On foot and occasionally on horse drawn wagons they moved north-west always fearing that the Russians might catch up with their trek of thousands. Weeks later they ended up in Leipzig, where relatives took them in. I found them there, almost by coincidence, two months later, when my unit had been moved - had marched, I should say - in the same direction. We had jokingly concluded that women and children and officer cadets were being evacuated.

Our destination was to be further north, though, somewhere south-west of Berlin. There, our entire class was hastily promoted to non-commissioned officers and sent into combat. We were part of a newly assembled army corps named after General Wenck, whose assignment was to prevent the Soviets from encircling Berlin. My platoon was equipped with handheld anti-tank weapons and bicycles, normal requisitioned civilian bicycles. Needless to say, we did not get very far in rough terrain, but the bikes were helpful in moving us from the east front to the west front and back. By then the lines were only 30 to 50 miles apart. I happened to be on the west front, facing what I believe was the American 9th Army, when their expected attack one morning did not come about. They had dug in and were not even returning our fire. They had probably reached their predetermined position, but we assumed that an armistice had been reached and rejoiced. Those of you, who have been in a war, know how rumors thrive in the trenches. We heard, that the Americans would not advance any further, but would provide us with fuel and supplies to enable us to beat the Russians back into their borders. Hitler was dead and this had changed the Americans' attitude toward us. We were ready to go again. A few days later, back at the east front, one evening it became suspiciously quiet just after dark. No more shooting. Then we heard the Russians singing and shouting, it appeared as if they were getting drunk. They were. We sent a small commando unit and captured one of their guards to find out what they were celebrating. He was surprised we did not know: Effective 1 AM tomorrow, May 9, the German army had unconditionally capitulated. The war was over.

This was good news -- and it was terrible. We would be taken prisoner by the Soviets in a few hours and transported deep into Russia probably Siberia, a predictable fate of forced labour in the poorest of conditions with little hope for survival. After some deliberation we decided to head back west and try to reach the Elbe river which was only a few miles away. The Americans were on the other side and we just had to get there.

I don't remember how long it took us. I know we had to cross several smaller bodies of water, but finally we got to the river. While we had stayed together so long, there were about twenty of us, from now on each one was on his own. Some decided to walk along the shore hoping to find something floatable to help them across. Others - I was one of them - thought it better to get away from the Russian side immediately.

The water was cold and the current strong. So we swam and drifted a long way downstream in the dark. When I thought I had finally reached the other side it turned out to be an island; a good place to catch one's breath, though.

Three others had come ashore at the same point. While walking around we found an old metal skiff. It was too small to carry us, but very suitable for all four of us to hang on to while drifting downstream and pushing toward the Western shore. When we climbed out of the water we were dead exhausted but happy. We looked for a barn, crawled into the hay and fell asleep instantly. Three months earlier, at Yalta on the Crimea peninsula, President Roosevelt, Prime Minister Churchill and Marshal Stalin had come together, mainly to talk about anticipated post-war issues.

They agreed that Germany should be disarmed, demilitarized, de-Nazified; and that German industry was to be decentralized. Also, democratic political institutions were to be established by the occupation forces in their respective zones. Most other matters concerning Germany were left for future meetings. The question of territorial amputation of parts of Germany had been discussed on previous occasions. The initial reasoning was of a strategic nature. By cutting off East Prussia, for instance, German borders would be made shorter, reducing friction with Poland and making it strategically more difficult to invade the neighboring territory.

Later the element of punishment and retribution entered the deliberations.

In 1944 Henry Morgenthau, secretary of the treasury, had submitted a plan to President Roosevelt that foresaw Germany being stripped of heavy industry and returned to an agricultural society. Some of her territory was to be given to Russia, Poland and France. Others dissuaded the President from adopting the proposal.

Nevertheless, much of the plan reappeared in the results of the Potsdam Conference in 1945. Germany was to lose approximately one fourth of her territory to Poland and the Soviet Union.

The magnitude of the redistribution was initially opposed by the Western Allies. Stalin, however, refused to give up the eastern half of Poland, which the Soviets had annexed earlier and Poland had to be compensated with German territory to her west. The German population living there and in other eastern regions was to be resettled which would solve any future minority problems. Programs for reparations were also agreed upon at Potsdam and subsequently led to massive dismantling of German industry. The dismantled plants were shipped mainly to the Soviet Union. On May 9 of 1945, however nothing of that was known to us.

I woke up that morning from the nudge of a beautifully polished brown army boot belonging to an American GI. He took the handguns we had carried in our pockets across the river and encouraged us to get something to eat at the farm where we were. Apparently his unit had withdrawn to the nearest town and he and two others were left behind pending repair of their truck. One of my comrades was a mechanic. He fixed the engine problem and an hour later we were on our way to the nearest POW camp. The one we were brought to was an open gathering area where some 70,000 German soldiers had come together within days. It was just impossible to get sufficient food and water there over night. So for a few days we were pretty hungry and I was grateful for the last meal I had had at the farm compliments of our first American friends.

After a week or so we were distributed to other, more organized camps with registration and interrogation. When my turn came I was told that I would be released because I was only seventeen. Upon further examination of my German army ID the officer in charge saw that I was an NCO. He would have to check with headquarters whether the discharge orders for under eighteens also applied to NCOs. I understood.

It took a little over two weeks for the answer to come down through channels and it was positive, I would be released. My army ID was checked again and it was noted that I was now eighteen, three days after my birthday. The discharge order did not apply to eighteen year olds. I understood. It was my first brush with American bureaucracy.

We were moved two more times to other camps and then put under British control when the occupation forces exchanged territories.

During these first weeks in POW camps we were made aware of what really had happened in Germany and in the territories under German occupation. We heard and saw pictures of what the Allied troops had found when they reached the concentration camps. We learned - when the world did - that millions of Jews were starved and killed in gas chambers.

We realized that these were not isolated atrocities committed by some irresponsible individuals but were ordered and organized and supervised by the very leaders that we had looked up to. By our oath of allegiance, had we all become criminals ourselves? We wondered - and we were ashamed.

The relief of having survived the war was being overshadowed by fear of the future. Would we ever be able to raise our heads again and say with pride that we are German? I had hoped one day to go into the diplomatic service of my country. No longer.

These revelations of Nazi crimes had a profound impact on the German people. An impact that is still being felt today. It is also at the root of the debate over the observance of the anniversary of VE-Day.

Yet, the immense suffering - after the war - caused by the expulsion and flight of fifteen million Germans from eastern territories, of whom, it is estimated, more than two million perished, and the starvation that followed in the remaining Germany, due to the devastation of the land and the influx of refugees and expellees, were perceived by Germans as unjust and inhumane nemesis.

Looking back, though, we Germans must keep in mind not to confuse cause and effect.

In these dreadful early years Americans were the first to reach out to Germans. Your CARE packages became a symbol of hope and saved many from starvation. European recovery lagged way behind expectations, causing America concern. At the same time relations with the Soviet union had deteriorated and a starving and desolate Europe could become vulnerable to the communist ideology.

The Marshall Plan was born. It was a self-help program based on American financial assistance and European cooperation. Germany was included and although she received less than half the amounts allocated to England or France, the biggest results were to be seen in Germany. During the Berlin blockade in '48 and '49, Americans again came to the rescue. And Germans have not forgotten. John McCloy, the first American High Commissioner in Germany, is fondly remembered to this day for his leadership in laying the political and economic foundations for reconstruction and democracy.

The latest proof of American support for Germany was delivered by President Bush in 1990, when he unhesitatingly endorsed Chancellor Kohl's plan to reunite Germany.

With the unification of Germany and the freeing of Central and Eastern Europe, forty five years after the war, new relevance has been given to "Victory in Europe" Day.

I see it as a day to celebrate, - to celebrate the victory of democracy over tyranny, - the victory of freedom over oppression - all that America fought for - all that America stands for.

One final look back to 1945: I managed to get away from the Brits and made my way to a little town in Westfalia, where I had attended elementary school and had relatives. I was able to reunite the family there, enrolled in a special course for veterans to get my baccalaureate, survived the bleak years that followed and in 1950 joined the German subsidiary of the Coca-Cola Company as a trainee. The rest is Coca-Cola history.

Now, that I am retired and less busy, ... I am devoting more ... time and resources to the promotion of American-German relations. Our two countries have so much more to learn about each other and from each other.

And let me say in conclusion – I feel very strongly – taking history into account and everything I have experienced in my life on both sides of the Atlantic -- that there is nothing more important for peace and prosperity in our hemisphere than the friendship between America and Germany.

Thank you so much for letting me share my views with you.