

**Opening Remarks for the Exhibition
“Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg and the attempted coup of July 20, 1944”
at the Goethe Institute Los Angeles on January 15, 2009**

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Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me start by expressing my thanks to the Goethe Institute of Los Angeles, and Mr. Bernd Desinger and Ms. Margit Kleinman, for showing this exhibition about the German Resistance against Hitler [1]. I also want to acknowledge the patronage of the Honorable Dr. Christian Stocks, the Consul General of Germany. The exhibition describes the failed coup against Hitler on July 20, 1944 and the life of its main protagonist, Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg. The exhibition has been assembled by the German Resistance Memorial Center in Berlin [2], and I am addressing you here representing the “Memorial Foundation July 20 1944” [3], both of which I will introduce later in my talk.

The Exhibition “Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg and the attempted coup of July 20, 1944” and the movie “Valkyrie”

This exhibition coincides within 3 weeks of the opening of the film “Valkyrie” [4], in which Tom Cruise portrays Count Stauffenberg, a colonel in the general staff of the German army. I hope that you have been able to see “Valkyrie” since it follows closely the historical facts of the planning, carrying out, failure and aftermath of the attempts of German officers to kill Hitler. The aim of the coup was not only to end the dictatorship by the Nazi Party and restore freedom and the rule of law in Germany, but also to bring the Second World War to a negotiated end, after 5 years of terrible destruction.

Tom Cruise in the starring role guarantees that the heroic aspect of this courageous act receives the proper emphasis in the movie, since von Stauffenberg was not only one of the driving forces of the plot, but also volunteered to carry out the bombing of Hitler in his army headquarters “Wolf’s Lair”[5].

As the title “Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg and the attempted coup of July 20, 1944” indicates, the exhibition covers much more than just the dramatic events culminating in East Prussia with the explosion of a bomb hidden in a briefcase, followed by a long afternoon and evening of futile action in Berlin during which the coup failed. The exhibition describes first the development of the young von Stauffenberg from a sheltered and privileged youth to a German patriot, with close connections to the idealistic circle of the writer Stefan George [6]. Next follows his stellar career as an officer in the German general staff and his conversion to an enemy of the “Fuehrer”, when he learned of the atrocities committed by German forces in the occupied countries, mainly Russia. Von Stauffenberg joined with fellow officers and men and women opposing Hitler in the conspiracy to end the Nazi’s grip on power in Germany. The decision to kill Hitler was taken as a last resort since it contradicted both the religious

conviction and the military oath of the conspirators. Many documents in this exhibition trace the see-saw battle for control of the German Reich in the dramatic hours of July 20, 1944, and contain many military orders issued during operation “Valkyrie”, the code name for the plan to wrestle power from the Nazi party, SS and GeStaPo [7].

When viewing the exhibition, you will be able to get your own impression of the remarkable historical events. So I will not dwell further on its content and messages, but rather I would like to frame the exhibition with additional background on the German Resistance in the 3rd Reich, and its relevance to our times.

Testimonials to the German resistance

There are many testimonials to the German resistance, in forms of movies, books and scholarly articles. Many are in English, fortunately (although I could assume that we all as guests of the Goethe Institute are fluent in German). The link to the website of the German Resistance Memorial Center in your invitation will lead you to a nearly complete book list [8].

I want to mention the work by Prof. Peter Hoffmann from McGill University in Toronto, who has researched the German Resistance for many decades, and who has written a seminal von Stauffenberg biography [9].

Many books emphasize the fact that resistance in the 3rd Reich was driven by conscience and the cry for freedom. This is expressed already in the titles of the very early books I want to mention here: “Das Gewissen steht auf”, translated into English as “Conscience in Revolt” [10] written by Annedore Leber, the widow of the murdered socialist politician Julius Leber, and Eberhard Zeller’s “Geist der Freiheit” translated as “Flame of Freedom, The German Struggle against Hitler” [11].

The German resistance had to overcome many obstacles. One was the fact that unlike the resistance in the occupied countries which battled a foreign enemy, the German resistance was directed against the government of their own country. This branded the conspirators as traitors, even though they fought a law-less regime. Another obstacle was the failure of the allied governments to take the conspirators seriously, and their refusal to offer encouragement for German freedom fighters to go through with the plot and to plan for a Germany as part of the free world. This has been described by Prof. Klemens von Klemperer of Smith College in his book: “German resistance against Hitler: The search for Allies abroad” [12].

The fact that several attempts on Hitler’s life failed, and that the chances of ultimate success of the revolution slowly diminished, weighed heavily on the conspirators. The potential futility of another attempt did not discourage the plotters from proceeding with the plan, since they wanted to set a beacon for Germany and the world to prove that “The other Germany” existed, a Germany where law, freedom, and humanity reigned. Colonel Henning von Tresckow, one of the leaders of the conspiracy, expressed this conviction shortly before his death in the following way: “The assassination of Hitler must be attempted at all costs. Even if it should not succeed, an attempt to seize power in Berlin must be made. What matters now is no longer the practical purpose of the coup, but to prove to the world and before history that the men of the resistance dared to take the decisive step. Compared to this objective, nothing else is of consequence” [13]. The

conspirators were thrown into conflicts between loyalty to their country (and I might add also to their families) and upholding humanity. This conflict was ultimately resolved by death. This dilemma reminds us of the hero of Greek tragedy, whom the gods confront with a decision between different actions: although free to decide which one to take, the hero will become guilty through any of them. Last year, Prof. von Klemperer [14] choose the word “absurd” to characterize this situation, not in the daily use of the word (nonsensical, disturbed, crazy), but in the meaning of the philosophy of the Absurd of Albert Camus and the “Myth of Sisyphus”. When asked: “does the realization of the absurd require suicide?” Camus answers: “No. It requires revolt.” [16]

The Coup of July 20, 1944 and post-war Germany

The importance and the potential ramifications of the attempt to kill Hitler and to end the war can be judged by the fact that in the last year of World War II, i.e. after the failed coup of July 20, 1944 and before the German capitulation on May 7, 1945, about 5 million people died in Germany, many more than in the preceding five war years together [17]. Their lives would have been spared if the coup had succeeded. An early end of the Second World War in 1944 would also have avoided the destruction of many German cities, for example the firebombing of Dresden, immortalized by Kurt Vonnegut’s “Slaughterhouse 5” [18].

The German resistance represents a shining beacon within recent German history. In 2004 at the memorial for the 60th anniversary of July 20 1944, the German President Köhler coined the phrase: “Widerstand ist Anstand”. The translation into English is not unique (and none of them rhyme!), but the many possible translations describe the understanding of today’s German public towards the German Resistance. “Resistance is Propriety”, “Resistance is Civility”, “Resistance is Decency”, all emphasize that resistance against dictatorship has to be part of the political conduct of all citizens in a democracy, and can’t be just the exception as it was during the 3rd Reich. Another possible translation, “Resistance is Policy”, describes the commitment of the German government to weave the memory of the German Resistance into the fabric of the new German armed forces.

To promote this right, or one might even say the duty of every citizen to resist an unlawful ruler, the German government and the City of Berlin have established the German Resistance Memorial Center [2] to document the resistance and opposition to the Hitler dictatorship. The material collected in the exhibition in Berlin proves that the German resistance against Hitler was wide-spread, from communist and social-democratic workers to students and professors (for example in the Munich group “White Rose” [19]), to diplomats and politicians, officers, conservative landowners, the clergy, and to those persecuted because of their race, religion or nationality. This work of publicizing the wide participation in the German resistance is especially important since resistance in the later years of the 3rd Reich was effective only from established groups like the military, while all others had little chance of success or of being known, since the regime had a tight rein on the general population and all planning had to be carried out in total secrecy. Prof. Hans Mommsen from Bochum University deals with issues of the participation of

different groups and the secrecy surrounding them in his book “Germans against Hitler. The Stauffenberg Plot and Resistance under the Third Reich” [20].

Symbolically, the permanent collection of the German Resistance Memorial Center is housed in the former offices of the Supreme Headquarters of the Home Army which was the center of the revolt in Berlin. Here on July 20, 1944 my father, Lt. Colonel Joachim Sadrozinski [21], worked side by side with von Stauffenberg to wrestle the political power in Germany from the Nazi party and the SS, even when it had become clear that the attempt to kill Hitler had failed. Some scenes of the movie “Valkyrie” were filmed in this building, and Tom Cruise is shown dramatically to die in a hail of bullets in the same courtyard where Stauffenberg and 3 of his co-conspirators were killed in the evening of July 20, 1944. This courtyard is the place, where every year since 1955 on July 20 the governments of Germany and Berlin hold a commemoration to honor the men and women who resisted the Hitler dictatorship. Another part of the German Resistance Memorial Center is the shack within the walls of the Ploetzensee prison where over 200 participants in the July 20 plot were executed after being condemned to death. Many of the testimonials in the Ploetzensee Memorial Center are to the thousands of persecuted persons from Germany and other European countries who were executed there during the Nazi terror.

In between the failed actions on July 20, 1944 and the executions in Ploetzensee were the investigations by the secret police into the extent of the conspiracy, and the arrest of the participants. Then came the public show trials in front of the “Volksgerichtshof” i.e. the “Peoples court” and its notorious president Freisler. Hitler was mesmerized by the heroic attempt to end his dictatorship and he requested daily updates of the investigations by the secret police from his principal aide Kaltenbrunner, and these reports are now public record [22]. He even ordered to have the proceedings before Freisler’s kangaroo court secretly filmed. The films of the sessions of the “Peoples Court” have survived [23], and it was some form of solace for the families of the executed that they were able to see and hear their loved ones one last time, after the reels were discovered after the end of the Second World War.

With the failure of the plot and the execution of the participants, their surviving families were subjected to persecution as part of the “Sippenhaft” program, the reprisals of kith-and-kin, including separation of children from their mothers and siblings, ending only with the capitulation of the German Reich. It then took about 10 years before the German public and the German government started to recognize the symbolic and moral value of the German resistance, and the need to support the surviving families. Before that time, the non-governmental organization “Hilfswerk 20. Juli 1944”. i.e. “Relief Organization 20 July 1944” was actively providing material and spiritual aid for the surviving families of the resistance fighters. Today, the need for material aid has diminished, and the “Relief Organization” has changed its name to reflect a new focus in its mission. The emerged “Memorial Foundation 20 July 1944” [3] is dedicated to education and public outreach related to the German Resistance. Today, the mission of Memorial Foundation is to preserve the legacy of the German resistance by keeping the memory to it alive. The activities target principally the young people with no direct connection to the time of the 3rd Reich, the soldiers in the German armed forces and the public in foreign countries. To reach the general public, the Memorial Foundation organizes and supports exhibitions like the one we are opening today, symposia and

meetings with students and local organizations, lectures, and tours for students and adults to the memorial centers. The planning and organization of the yearly commemoration in Berlin on the anniversary of the July 20 attempted coup is a major responsibility.

In addition, the Foundation supports academic studies and projects related to the July 20 coup at schools, universities and institutes. This is done often in collaboration with the "Forschungsgemeinschaft 20. Juli 1944" [24] i.e. "Study Group 20. July 1944" which has been active in promoting the accounting of the Nazi Germany past and research into topics related to the German Resistance. In annual workshops, (some of them restricted to young people only) representatives of different academic disciplines discuss aspects of the German resistance and add to the list of scholarly publications shedding light on the circumstances, motives and actions of the German resistance. To name just a few workshop themes [25]:

"Christianity and German Resistance"

"Universities and Students in the 3rd Reich"

"The role of the Press in the 3rd Reich"

"The relevance of the German resistance for post-war Germany"

"Finances in the German Resistance"

"Resistance und collaboration in Europe"

"Women in the German Resistance".

It should be mentioned that one of the recent workshop topics has been the somewhat controversial subject of the relationship of the military resistance fighters to the holocaust and how much and when they knew of the German atrocities committed in Russia [26].

Outlook

As you will see, the material exhibited here allows you a look into the events and persons connected with the German resistance against Hitler, and the dramatic actions on July 20, 1944. The sphere of the German Resistance spans 100 years in German history, from the youth of the resistance fighters to their untimely death and up to today's public exhibitions, the academic debate and popular movies. I hope that this exhibition and watching Tom Cruise in the movie "Valkyrie" will be motivation for you to learn more about the German Resistance, one of the few events during the Hitler regime that we can be proud of.

We have to be grateful to Tom Cruise and Bryan Singer for bringing this very personal yet very public historical event to a broad audience. Again, many thanks to the Goethe Institute for hosting this unique exhibition at just the right time!

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