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Fifty Years of the Rome Treaties and Europe from Below (March 19, 2007)

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Rome Treaties, three foreign journalists living in Berlin were asked to give their impressions of Europe. Recalling a past trip to Verdun, American journalist William Boston reflects on the positive aspects of European integration and poses a question about Europe from below. He concludes his essay with a reference to Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. After the American Civil War, he notes, Americans were forced to renew their union. He urges European citizens to follow suit and find a new vision for the EU.

If Europe Were Only on the Margins

Who on earth is José Manuel Barroso? He is something like the CEO, the chief executive officer, the business manager of Europe, but no one knows him if he doesn't have to, that is, if he isn't a politician, a journalist, an officer of an organization, or the head of Microsoft. To be honest, I'd also have to admit that most Americans won't even notice that Europe is turning 50. I'm not revealing any big secret here. And it's pure speculation, but I'm confident in saying that many Europeans won't either. Try it yourself. Go to the baker's shop and ask: "Who is José Manuel Barroso?"

Along the Road of Freedom

When asked if I'd write about my impressions, that is the impressions of an American, of Europe on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Rome Treaties, I thought at first: is that a trick question? Should I rehash the old discussion of the famous telephone number for "Europe" that Kissinger wanted to have, should I criticize the Common Foreign and Security Policy or suffer for old prejudices? Preferably not. I'd rather talk about the achievements of the European Union – and I say that without being ironic.

Heading towards Normandy

Two years ago, my son and I rode our bicycles from the Rhine to Paris. We rode up the Mosel to Metz, and then biked along what the French call "the road of freedom." That is also the route that the Americans took, in the opposite direction, when they went from Normandy to the Rhine in the Second World War. There's even a small sign showing where the Americans crossed the Mosel for the first time. At first, our goal was to visit Verdun and the battlefields of the First

World War. But as you know only too well these places were the scene of more than one war. There was a sign in one place along the “holy road” – this is how the French christened the supply route for their soldiers in Verdun back then – it read: Cemetery of the Franco-German War 1870-71. And time and again we saw American cemeteries from both World Wars.

The Old Ghosts of War

As a child, I went with my family to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, during one summer vacation. We looked at the battlefield, which has become the symbol of the American Civil War and the renewal of American democracy. A battle that claimed more than 50,000 lives in three days. After twenty years in Europe, I was traveling to Verdun with my son for the first time. Verdun reminded me a lot of Gettysburg, where brother fought against brother. Like in Alsace-Lorraine, where the gravestones show a mixture of German and French names. One senses the old ghosts of war, and from today’s perspective, one simply cannot understand it.

Lincoln’s Starting Signal for Europe

After the Battle of Gettysburg, President Lincoln gave his famous address – only 285 words, almost unimaginable when one considers how many words will be devoted to the subject of Europe in the coming days. He commemorated the victims on both sides in a succinct fashion and swore that the Union would be renewed. And Americans won’t do anything unless they’re given some sort of high cause [to work toward]. So it seems appropriate to me that the people in Gettysburg think that it was Honest Abe Lincoln, and not Charlemagne, who gave the starting signal for Europe. On the website www.gettysburg.com, they write: “Lincoln’s words have sowed the seeds of democracy anew; they are words that, 127 years later, led to the fall of the Berlin Wall, and to democratic elections in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and even Russia.” So there. In any case, when Helmut Kohl and François Mitterand were in Verdun, they also tried to convey a political vision of Europe to us. What came out of it was the Euro. That’s fine, too. And more responsibilities for Mr. Barroso, whom no one knows. Not so good. But I think that a union exists through the people who fill it with life. Citizens who passionately believe in the idea of a union. Who today will renew the European idea and fill it with life? People have to have a reason to want to know Mr. Barroso.

William Boston (48) lives in Berlin and writes as a freelance journalist for magazines and newspapers in the U.S.

Source: William Boston, “Wenn Europa nur am Rande liegt” [“If Europe Were Only on the Margins”], *Das Parlament*, no. 12, March 19, 2007.

Translation: Kelly McCullough