

A 30-year Perspective on the Deutsch-Englische Gesellschaft

Many of our members did not experience the beginnings of the Deutsch-Englische Gesellschaft and the circumstances under which it came into being.

One must switch one's mind back to the 12 years of Hitlerian domination and the war, a situation of isolation in which we were completely cut off from the outside world, with the stigma of the crimes committed in our name. How would it be possible to re-establish contact with other countries? How could one prove that there had been many Germans who had to live through all these years inwardly resisting Hitler, and who desired after the complete collapse in 1945 to devote their entire energy to the building of a new state.

In the British Zone, Professor Sir Robert Birley, educational advisor to the military government, knew Germany from the 1920's and 1930's. He gathered around him those wishing to work for reconstruction in order to discuss with them the process of development of a democracy. He invited these people to his home for weekend talks, and in the name of the British government also to long visits to Great Britain so that they could learn how a democracy is structured and how it functions.

During these visits, an unexpected degree of understanding was shown for us. It was not an easy situation, either for us Germans with our burden of guilt or for our English hosts, many of whom were still under the influence of the war and the "Hitler syndrome".

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As a result of these encounters with British families, there also arose a spontaneous need to make a contribution to political understanding on our part. Our generation had experienced two wars which could not be prevented by the Germans' belief that they knew Shakespeare better than the British, while the British considered Goethe as one of their own. Our generation became aware that understanding among individuals and between peoples could develop only through personal contact.

This was the background against which a group of seven individuals in Düsseldorf founded the Deutsch-Englische Gesellschaft in 1949 as a private institution for responsible and committed citizens.

We were aware of the differences in the mentality of the two peoples which had arisen from their different history. First of all, we considered it important that an attempt should be made to reduce this ignorance of the mentality of the other nation. By means of lectures given by British public figures, we wished to familiarize the German public with the political and social conditions in Great Britain. By conversations and encounters with Germans of all social levels, we wished to enable the British guests to form their own picture of conditions here.

It was clear to us from the beginning that our objective could only be realized if we retained complete independence of all official agencies: government, opposition, political parties and state institutions. We have maintained this principle throughout the years. Our objective was to win members who shared this concern and who were prepared to work towards our goals.

As we made the beginning in 1949 in Düsseldorf, we did not dare hope that vigorously developing study groups would soon arise in ten other cities distributed over the Federal Republic.

The Gesellschaft succeeded in holding ^{spring} a first conference in Königswinter in 1950. This was a meeting of 40 British and German people working in the social field. They exchanged their experience and discussed their very different problems. Afterwards the English participants had an opportunity to get to know the practical work of their German partners in the Ruhr area.

The conference in 1951 already comprised a larger circle of participants and discussed the topic "The Responsibility of the Press". After this meeting, the desire for political discussions in future was expressed by both sides.

Since that time, the Anglo-German discussions have taken place each year in Königswinter (since 1975 alternately in Great Britain and the Federal Republic); the British call them simply: "The Königswinter Conference".

In the independent forum of the society, politicians, parliamentarians, economists, trade unionists, academics and journalists meet together for an open exchange of opinions on current political, economic and social policy questions. Here politicians from the two countries who later come into crucial

governmental and party positions, often meet for the first time (this applies both to politicians of the past and of the present). The discussion of the Königswinter Conferences always reflect the major world policy situations and current developments.

The Conferences in the 1950s served to clear up misunderstandings of the past. This was an arduous and protracted process. However, over the years the mutual understanding and trust grew in consequence of the open exchange of views.

In the 1960s, we were concerned to win English support for the European Idea despite French reservations. After the internal political obstacles in Great Britain had been overcome, we attempted in the 1970s to find a common concept for the future of Europe. This is a task on which we will have to continue to work for a long time.

We have repeatedly asked the question as to whether binational conferences still have a value in a time in which multinational conferences are the order of the day. The response of politicians of both countries was and remains: binational talks are a prerequisite and a preparation for multinational meetings.

In the meantime, "Königswinter" has become a model. Attempts are repeatedly being made to organize similar meetings, e.g. between the Germans and the French, the French and the British and recently between the Germans and the Poles.

It is not ^{Gesellschaft} to the credit of the Deutsch-Englische/^{Gesellschaft} that "Königswinter" has become a model. We were able to step into a vacuum which in the course of time we were able to fill.

We are grateful to all our British speakers who give up a week of their time ^{are responsible for the activities in our branches.} for us, and to all those who ^{lecture in the study groups.} become in the study groups. Thanks are also due to my staff, our members, friends and patrons who have supported and sustained the Deutsch-Englische ^{Gesellschaft} and kept it alive over 30 years.

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(Frau Lilo Milchsack presented this review of 30 years' work of the Deutsch-Englische Gesellschaft e.V. in the annual general meeting on November 6, 1979 in Düsseldorf.)