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ATLANTIK-BRÜCKE E.V.

Remarks on the Occasion of the XIII Vernon A. Walters Award

By Jay Blavatt, Newport High School, Newport, Kentucky

The Metropolitan Club, New York, June 5, 2007

As Prepared For Delivery

Dr. Lindemann,
Dr. Kiep,
Dr. Großmann,
Esteemed guests and audience members,

Thank you for the opportunity to share some of my experiences that your generosity has supported.

My name is Jay Blavatt. I am a social studies teacher in Newport, Kentucky, at an inner city school just across the river from Cincinnati.

I have to say I am a bit nervous. As you can imagine, addressing thirty inner city teenagers is not as frightening as addressing an audience who is awake and interested in what I am saying. Although I must say, I could get used to the idea of teaching in black-tie attire!

All kidding aside, I am here to demonstrate my sincere appreciation for the opportunity to travel to Germany with the Atlantik-Brücke program. I would also like to share with you the ways your stewardship has enhanced my professional and personal growth.

Last October, I, along with 11 teachers and State Department of Education administrators had the opportunity to explore Germany over a two-week span. We were treated to discussions on education, culture, economics, history, and government.

Looking back at my journey, I am truly thankful for the opportunity. All of the meetings, exhibits, and discussions were so well planned and engaging – I cannot even begin to express how relevant each of the activities were.

My colleagues and I were moved by each speaker's unique messages and varied perspectives. While I would love to spend this time sharing stories with you about all our experiences, time simply would not permit.

And so I rest assured that each of you does fully appreciate the value we derived from these well-coordinated activities; kudos to all of you for having a hand in crafting such influential and important coursework for us.

It has been said that you "cannot ask for the hand until you are willing to give the heart." It is clear that Atlantik-Brücke invests time in the identification of representatives that share their vision of connecting the global society.

As I mentioned earlier, I would like to discuss with you the ways this trip has affected me personally.

I should start by telling you that the decision to go on this journey to Germany was not an easy one. I must say that had it not been for Atlantik-Brücke, I would not have been inclined to visit Germany at all.

As an American Jew, Germany has always been so closely allied with the anguish of those who share my heritage that I have only associated it with the negative stigma of the Holocaust.

When I discussed this opportunity with my family, they responded in a fashion consistent with many Jews: "Be careful."

Now, this was not a "Be careful" in my mother's tone, like "Bring a coat, it is cold," but rather like my Grandfather would say, "Don't be a muschugina," meaning keep quiet and pay attention to your surroundings.

My point is that there was a real fear of being targeted as an outsider – as if the ideals of Germany herself had not progressed beyond the 1940s. I know this seems paranoid or unfounded, since everybody knows that Jews are welcome in Germany.

But this fear, a fear of being branded and unaccepted, was a real fear for my family. And it probably will remain a real fear for others who do not have the opportunity to experience Germany as I did.

To my delight, and to my surprise, my family's warnings and stereotypes were turned upside down.

Immediately upon arrival in Germany, I was welcomed. Not as a tourist or as an outsider, but as an old friend.

This, and the trip as a whole, led me to the realization that the Germany which my family conceived and the one often portrayed in our American classrooms is simply inaccurate!

Aldus Huxley, the author of A Brave New World, explains that, "Experience is not what happens to a man; it is what a man does with what happens to him."

While there are too few positive life-altering experiences, I am fortunate that I recognized I was in the midst of one during this Atlantik-Brücke trip.

One of my most memorable moments occurred in Freiburg.

After arriving a few minutes late to dinner, I was "stuck" at the small table with Jürgen (our guide), Robin (a fellow Kentucky fellow), and Dr. Kohlstock (one of our many hosts, whom I referred to as "Professor")

After listening to Jürgen and the Professor banter in German, I jumped at the chance to share a quick moment with the Professor. Now, if you have met the Professor, you understand that he downplays his ability to speak English – but it was clear that while he spoke very little, he understood quite a bit.

Over two glasses of local Grappa, I asked him for his honest opinion of Americans.

"(America) saved us."

At first I thought he was being patronizing, but then he explained that 1) his father had been a prisoner of war in Russia during the Second World War, and 2) East Germany had been, in fact, Russia.

It began to click. The old communal farms we saw when we entered Saxony. Freiberg's varied architecture, from thatched roofs to rebuilt flats.

Living in and touring around the country made the Professor's words resonate with me. He was not being patronizing, he was proud of the strides his country had made, and he had seen that the vision had been furthered with the assistance of the U.S.

This was so humbling for me.

The Professor went on to explain that America had been instrumental in the liberation of Germany twice, once during World War II and once at the conclusion of the Cold War.

I began to realize that the Professor was not commenting from the perspective of some trained historian, but rather, he was a man who had actually seen and experienced these events that had shaped the future of Germany, his homeland.

One of my favorite things about the Professor was that he reminds me of my grandfather (a D-Day survivor who passed away a few years ago).

Neither the Professor nor my Grandpa ever led on about the ills of a time that had passed.

They lived it, learned from it, and took the experiences with them, always looking ahead to times defined by personal freedoms while recognizing the sacrifice of achieving such democratic ideals.

It is this forward thinking and civic pride, rarely seen in contemporary America, that we should strive to instill in our students.

It struck me as funny that earlier in the week, in Kiel, a great exhibit of this civic pride was on display. Our group had just finished lunch and a brief walkabout when we noticed the filming of a local TV commercial.

Unknowingly, our group was so loud we caught the attention of the director, who proceeded to quiet us.

As if on cue, our guide, Karl, puffed out his chest and boasted, "Germany is now free and I will speak as loudly as I choose!"

Who would not be proud of, and inspired by, that moment?

The opportunity to forge these relationships and view the extreme satisfaction in being part of a democracy are experiences that have become the centerpiece of discussion when I am asked about my trip since returning.

I am often asked about Germany as the apex of anti-Semitism. I knew that a part of this trip, a powerful part, would be tracing our steps back to the Holocaust. This was something that had to be done.

Again, prior to participating in this experience, I had shared my parents' 'be careful' mantra.

True to the program mission of "increasing awareness of how Germany has changed and developed since the end of World War II," the need to visit Buchenwald would test the boundaries of my willingness to acknowledge Germany's change.

Upon entering, I was amazed by the eerie quiet and the dense fog that surrounded us. It was almost as if God was telling me just to take one step at a time. We entered as a group, but I felt that this was something I needed to experience alone.

As I moved beyond the rubble of former barracks, I came to a wooded area near the rear of the camp. I saw former wooden beds (like risers on a stage) and remnants of barbed wire. It was here that I wept.

After gathering myself, I recited the Mourner's Kaddish (a prayer for the dead) and I began to feel at peace. Along with a few stones I collected from the barracks area, I left Buchenwald with a stronger appreciation for the survivors and, with both the Professor and my Grandpa in mind, I prepared to move forward. I would remember the past in order to build the future.

While on the trip, I noticed that many presenters and hosts displayed a similarly humble disposition around us. It was as though everyone was trying to balance the remorse of such terrible events with the desire to move forward.

There was, and continues to be, a commitment to accept what cannot be changed (by creating memorials and other dedications) in order to mend the country – creating a bridge from the past to encourage positive changes in the future.

This bridge of change was evident in the people we encountered, from regular citizens to progressive politicians, and even in the architecture we observed.

The name Atlantik-Brücke is particularly germane; the concept of building bridges implies creating a means to overcome an obstacle. It asserts the importance of joining two sides. Atlantik-Brücke meets the challenges of this assignment:

William Allen Dromgoole wrote a poem that encapsulates the reason why Atlantik-Brücke is a success:

An old man, going a lone highway,
Came, at the evening, cold and gray,
To a chasm, vast, and deep, and wide,

The old man crossed in the twilight dim;
The sullen stream had no fears for him;
But he turned, when safe on the other side,
And built a bridge to span the tide.

"Old man," said a fellow pilgrim, near,
"You are wasting strength with building here;
Your journey will end with the ending day;
You never again must pass this way;
You have crossed the chasm, deep and wide-
Why build you a bridge at the eventide?"

The builder lifted his old gray head:
"Good friend, in the path I have come," he said,
"There followeth after me today,
A youth, whose feet must pass this way.

This chasm, that has been naught to me,
To that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be.
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;
Good friend, I am building the bridge for him."

Atlantik-Brücke has built the bridge for future generations to cross. I have crossed and I too will propagate the vision of Atlantik-Brücke, by sharing my experiences with renewed vigor in the classroom, in the synagogue, and in the community.

As each new day passes, I look back with fond admiration on the personal growth that resulted from these experiences. I have the members of this panel and in the audience to thank.

With sincere appreciation and admiration,

Thank You.