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WELCOME REMARKS TO THE SPRING FELLOWS 2022

25. Januar 2022, American Academy

This evening is dedicated to the presentation of the Spring Fellows. As President of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, what topic could I choose at the home of our sister academy for welcoming those Fellows? I could try to present at least a little bit of the city of Berlin to those who are being presented here in Berlin today. Presentation for presentation, so to speak, a gift for those who will be a gift for the city of Berlin with their presence in the upcoming weeks and months (my puns work better in German, because presentation, Präsent and Geschenk are more closely related in German than in English).

How do I present the city of Berlin in a short period of time? The best way is to present it by means of a characteristic example and thus to stimulate the Fellows' appetite for the city, their curiosity to stroll through the metropolis and explore it. It makes sense to choose the district in which the American Academy is located and in which we are right now – Wannsee – as a characteristic example. To start with this district is also obvious because a few days ago (more precisely: last Thursday) we had to remember the event that made the name “Wannsee” known in a terrible way all over the world. Last Thursday was the eightieth anniversary of the so-called Wannsee Conference, which took place in a guesthouse of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt across the lake. There at the lakeshore, the Reichssicherheitshauptamt, the terror headquarters of the SS, housed in a baroque palace in the center of the city, used to accommodate guests and hold meetings in an idyllic setting. A meeting of various governmental departments and security police officers with the aim of enabling the Reichssicherheitshauptamt to organize the mass murder of the European Jews even better, a “meeting followed by breakfast” (“Besprechung mit anschließendem Frühstück”).¹ We will return to the absurd fact that in the middle of a world war, a meeting followed by breakfast is scheduled for noon, i. e. a breakfast at lunchtime. However, I will begin in other places.

While I went to school in West Berlin until 1980, in a time when the city was surrounded by the Berlin Wall, Wannsee was familiar to me. Wannsee was familiar to me, because my parents made it possible for me to become a member of a sailing club nearby and to spend all weekends on a boat on the water. The places of remembrance of the glory and catastrophe of Berlin and of European Jewry opposite the American Academy were not yet museums at that time. In Max Liebermann's former summerhouse, a diving club had set up its training center, and the enchanting garden with its flowers, which Liebermann painted so masterfully time and again, was the repository of diving equipment and oxygen bottles. The Villa of the Wannsee Conference was used as a school hostel for a Berlin district and at the site of the former Reichssicherheitshauptamt in the city center, one could drive a car without a license and thus practice for the driving test. For us students, who sailed on the Wannsee, the buildings on the shore were simply the houses of other clubs devoted to sailing, rowing and diving. Today, I am ashamed of how little my generation knew at this time about the other shore of Wannsee, and how little we asked during those days, why the sports clubs owned or could rent such elegant villas.

¹ The invitation and further documents are accessible online: <https://www.ghwk.de/de/konferenz/protokoll-und-dokumente>, last checked 27.01.2022.

In the meantime, there museums have been established in both the House of the Wannsee Conference and Max Liebermann's villa, and there are road signs on the way to Potsdam, pointing to these museums.² Yet, how many people know that these two houses stand in an extremely exciting memorial landscape, which can serve as a paradigm for the high points as well as the catastrophes of German history? Practically right next to the House of the Wannsee Conference stands a large sculpture of a lion looking upright across the lake toward the American Academy. It is a copy of a sculpture that a Danish merchant had designed in 1853 by the most prominent contemporary Danish sculptor of the time, and which was erected in the then Danish port city of Flensburg. Through it, a group of Danes wanted to commemorate a great Danish victory: Above all, the great powers England and Russia had prevented Prussia in 1848 from simply conquering large parts of Denmark and annexing all German settlement areas in the Danish kingdom for the Prussian state. The lion, the Danish heraldic animal, was a reminder of this Danish victory. However, Denmark's victory did not last long in this century's Europe of nation states, and this had consequences for the Victory Monument: In 1864, Otto von Bismarck succeeded in doing what had been impossible in 1848. Prussia conquered practically all German settlement areas, including Flensburg. Thus, the sculpture of the Flensburg lion was brought to Berlin as spoils of victory and placed in the courtyard of the Prussian Main Cadet Institution (Kadettenanstalt). Over at Wannsee in Heckeshorn, not only was a copy of the former Flensburg and now Berlin lion erected, but the entire villa colony was named after the Danish island of Alsen, and other places in the vicinity were also named after other important places in the Danish-Prussian War. What is today called Wannsee was then called Alsen, and so the whole area here was a victory memorial for the Danish-Prussian war, or more precisely: a memorial landscape for remembrance of the Prussian victory.

In our day's Wannsee district, there is hardly anything left of this former memorial landscape. Most people know as little about it as I knew as a West Berlin schoolchild about the House of the Wannsee Conference and the Liebermann Villa. Since the recent election of the German Bundestag, a representative of the Danish minority, which to this day lives around the city of Flensburg, has been serving as a member of our parliament. For the first time in over seventy years, he has won a direct mandate for the minority. Thus, the district of Wannsee has the chance to transfer the hardly understood memories of the Prussian-Danish war into a common European commemoration of the problems of the national and nationalistic phase of history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In such a process, of course, the lion should not disappear. It is not about overthrowing monuments, as is the case elsewhere, but about contextualization of monuments.

Most people who go for a walk over there enjoy the naturalistic sculpture of a mighty lion and have no background knowledge on this heraldic animal and its history. At least as important as the more or less problematic images we have in front of our eyes, are the more or less problematic images of the past that we create in our minds. Yesterday, Monday, a film was aired on television, reconstructing the Wannsee Conference, realized by the director Matti Geschonneck. Contrasting with the two previous attempts at reconstruction, Geschonneck, son of a famous actor from Bertolt Brecht's ensemble, was keen to show not sinister Nazi henchmen, but bureaucrats who were both assiduous and unscrupulous. The head of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt, Reinhard Heydrich, who had invited to the conference and wanted to secure his influence at it, is not presented as evil incarnate, but as an affable fellow with a pleasant voice. Contemporary witnesses report that he was an extraordinarily unpleasant person speaking in a high falsetto, but such recollections are, of course, just as much interest-driven images as are

² House of the Wannsee Conference: <https://www.ghwk.de/de/ueber-das-haus>; Liebermann Villa at Wannsee: <https://liebermann-villa.de/museum/ueber-uns/>, last checked 27.01.2022.

those resulting from a casting for a film of the year 2022. The images of Geschonneck's television documentary show "brutally distanced objectivity" (Herfried Münkler),³ the debates among bureaucrats, over cognac and canapés, about the most efficient organization of a complex process. However, this increase of efficiency was not about better study conditions for foreign students, but about the most efficient way to commit a gigantic mass murder of whole peoples. Are the images in yesterday's film correct? Are the images in the mind correct? Andreas Kilb asked in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*: "Should we actually believe what we have seen? Or do we have to relearn to distrust the images in order to grasp the truth of the story?"⁴ A rhetorical question, of course, that Kilb is asking us there. It really struck me for the first time these days that – in the middle of a world war – a meeting followed by breakfast was scheduled for noon, that is, a breakfast was held at lunchtime. I promised at the beginning to revisit this at the end. In the research one finds, it appears, nothing on this topic. So questions remain: Did the daily routine of bureaucrats on duty shift because they had to stay awake at night in the bunker to protect themselves from bomb attacks? Did Hitler's state copy the Führer and Reich Chancellor, who also did not start his day until midday? A healthy distrust of what we think we know stands at the beginning of any serious study of the past.

Perhaps you are wondering why I am talking about war and mass murder, an ancient monument to a Prussian victory, and mistrust of images, when I am supposed to be welcoming Spring Fellows to Berlin? Of course, I could also have talked about the cheerful life at Wannsee, the life in the villa colony Alsen. About the great physicist Hermann von Helmholtz and the famous physician Ferdinand Sauerbruch, in whose garden at Wannsee the Wednesday Society meets and holds witty conversations. At least until hairdressers burst out of the undergrowth and cut the hair of the surprised discussants. Yet, dear Spring Fellows, even if I had only dealt with the cheerful side of life in the Wannsee villas this evening, I would still have had to call for mistrust concerning the images I had been evoking. We historians owe our readers and listeners the disclaimer "distrust my images and texts". However, we can only call upon the curious to distrust. The people who are always looking for new images. For new images of the Wannsee and its villas, for new images of the city of Berlin and of Germany and the Germans. For if you are always sitting on the sofa in Villa Arnhold, you do not need to be warned about problematic and false images of the world outside. Go outside! Do not be afraid that the planned book will not be finished. That's the way it is in such Institutes for Advanced Studies. The books are written later. Be curious about new images of Berlin, of Berliners, of Germany, of Germans, but distrust the images you see and that are created in your head. The search for appropriate images will never be finished. Still, I hope that your stay in Berlin will give rise to a wealth of unforgettable images, the appropriateness of which you will reflect on for a long time to come. Have a good time at the Wannsee and in Berlin!

³ Cf. the interview with Herfried Münkler for "heute journal", 23.1.2022, accessible online: <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/heute-journal/muenkler-gigantischer-voelkermord-100.html>, last checked 27.01.2022.

⁴ Andreas Kilb, *Ein Ausbund an Verbindlichkeit*, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 22.01.2022, p. 16.