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VIRCHOW PRIZE FOR GLOBAL HEALTH

10th of October 2022, Französische Friedrichstadtkirche

Welcome Note

We are here in a French church, dear guests – more precisely, we are in the French church of the baroque Friedrichstadt, built in the years 1701 to 1705 for French religious refugees, for the Huguenots, who had been taken in and settled in towns and villages in Prussia since the end of the seventeenth century. As president of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, I particularly enjoy being in this church, because few people know that this Academy is actually also a French foundation. In this respect, it is also quite appropriate that our Academy is located directly opposite this church, behind me to be precise. Our Academy of Sciences goes back to French ideas; the ancient idea of an Academy was revived in Paris in the seventeenth century, and Plato's ancient Athenian Academy was, as it were, refounded, sustainably refounded. Our academy was indeed founded here in Berlin in 1700 by the famous philosopher Leibniz – but Leibniz did not come to Berlin at all to head the Academy he founded. Huguenots took care of that instead – and so, the first century of the Academy is a French one: French was spoken, people thought as they used to think in Paris, and one of my predecessors as president even donated to the Academy an astronomical instrument, which was built in Paris and can still be seen today in Potsdam.

Quite a few members of the Academy were also involved in the French church here, and one of my predecessors as president was even the pastor of this church at the same time – about two years ago, we discovered that Jean Henri Samuel Formey, president from 1788, is even distantly related to my wife. The music that Kilian Neuhaus just played on the organ with the historic, original baroque prospect of this church, fits exquisitely: François Couperin was the court composer of the French kings and the French living in Berlin must have appreciated him as much as anything that came from Paris. What can we learn from the history of this church, which was rebuilt after the destruction of World War II, some forty years ago, roughly, as it looked before its destruction after nineteenth-century renovations? We can learn that there were precursors of globality long before our time as well: The people who visited this church and shaped our Academy thought and spoke French, and, with their hearts, not only lived in Berlin but also in Paris.

Yet Berlin not only was a cosmopolitan city that welcomed migrants such as the French Huguenots; Berlin still is a cosmopolitan city today, a hospitable home to many migrants and a vibrant place of a global society. How much the sciences kept shaping this city after the French Huguenots can be seen when looking at Rudolf Virchow, the namesake of our award, but also in the following piece of music. It comes from the Humboldt Cantata, a secular choral work by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy for choir and orchestra. The work was commissioned by Alexander von Humboldt in 1828 for the Naturalist Congress in Berlin and premiered at its opening under the composer's direction. Alexander von Humboldt, too, not only left his mark on our Academy, but also lived with his heart in Paris, when he lived here in Berlin. He once called himself an "old, Frenchized rag" towards the end of his life. And yet, he was a splendid cloth in many bright colors. Be welcome to us all, from wherever you come, in this place with such an international history, truly befitting our International Prize for Global Health.