

Universal Challenges

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In October 1985 Most Worshipful Brother Jurgen Holtrof completed his ninth and final year as Grand Master of The United Grand Lodges of Germany, Brotherhood of German Freemasons. From his Grand Master's Report we have extracted portions of particular interest for use in this SHORT TALK BULLETIN. (The English translation was made by K.W. Bro. Jess Minlon PGM Grand Secretary of the American Canadian Grand Lodge.)

Before we devote ourselves to the problem of the present and view the future, let us look to the past: It is exactly a half century ago this year that the Light of Masonry in our Fatherland was forcibly extinguished. In 1935, under pressure of the Nazi power clique, one Lodge after another was forced to close. Freemasonry was banned. I know that many Lodges have brought this event to the attention of their brethren and to the general public. I regard this as especially important, in particular because it occurs in conjunction with the current commemoration of the German capitulation 40 years ago this year, and to some extent there have been wholly inadequate analyses undertaken regarding those years of oppression, and the actual situation of the German people.

On November 30th, 1984 in Wiesbaden I gave a public address at a jointly sponsored commemoration ceremony hosted by Lodges "Plato zur beständigen Einigkeit", "Mozart zur Liebe und zur Pflicht", "Luftbrücke", and "Humanitas zu den drei Lilien". The commemorative ceremony received heavy press coverage and was attended by some 200 guests; among them the president of the Hessen State Parliament and ex-Lord Mayor, Georg Buch; Bundestag member and ex-Lord Mayor Rudi Schmitt; representatives of the three political parties composing the city council; representatives of the Protestant and Catholic Churches; the Grand Master of the ACGL, Brother Marlon Westenburg; and the District Master of Hessen (GL AF&AM vD), Horst Vettters. In my address I traced the curve beginning with the original bans against Masonry shortly after the establishment of the first Lodges, through the excesses of the persecution of Freemasonry by the Third Reich, down to the contemporary journalistic attacks and (so-called) 'declarations of incompatibility'. I clearly pointed out that the current trend to less tolerance within our contemporary society will, if the forces of freedom fail to take the offensive and aggressively defend those free areas of self-expression and self-development, in

the final analysis constitute a threat to the freedom, integrity, and right of choice for humans. I also stressed that we ourselves must express our goals much more clearly and explicitly, as we have nothing to hide; we are a society which actively promotes interpersonal understanding, compromise, and peace within society. I am convinced that other Lodges will also pursue the events of fifty years ago in their own areas, to ensure that a conscious awareness is ever-present that where the Light of Masonry is forcibly extinguished, civil freedom becomes a thing of the past. At a joint communication of the five Lodges in Hamburg on June 6th this year, hosted by the Lodge "Ferdinand zum Felsen", in my talk I again referred to the minutes of the "Dissolution Konvent" of July 30, 1935. With three Gestapo agents present, the brethren in Hamburg, presided over by Richard Brose, the last Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Hamburg, enacted their own orderly dissolution with pride and dignity. They recounted the history of Freemasonry and they extinguished the Lights true to custom, closing with a prayer which included the following words: "We now return the working, tools to Your hands, those tools we and our predecessors used for almost two-hundred years in working on our spiritual edifice in Your honor; not because we have become weary of our service around the pillars of Wisdom, strength and Beauty, but because of the demands of our government. With full hearts we thank you for the endless consecrated and elevating hours we were privileged to experience in this place, and the Light which continued to illuminate there from into our family and professional lives, and also brought comfort, joy, and blessing to those outside our circle. A deep and painful sadness now descends upon us. Give us the strength to carry on with dignity and perseverance." In recent times, more often than not one could read something contemptible on the subject of Freemasonry and National Socialism. Certainly, in the elaboration of the past, there remains also for us much to be done. In my own study of the events of fifty years ago it became quite clear to me that while many became unfaithful, a multitude of brethren accepted the inevitable with courage, bearing, and unbroken pride. Let us honor their memory now with a moment of silence. We remember those Brethren who, fifty years ago, because of their loyalty to our fraternity, suffered difficulties and persecution, those who emigrated, either domestically or to foreign shores, or later joined the forces of resistance to the regime of terror. We remember the many silent ones throughout the land who remained faithful to themselves and to their good cause. We remember those whose vocations or professions were denied them, whose possessions, and even their very lives were sacrificed. As a representative of the many, let us honor the name of Wilhelm Leuschner... the Man of the Resistance, a member of the Lodge "Johannes der Evangelist zur Eintracht" in Darmstadt, who was murdered by the National Socialists on September 29th, 1944.

Great tasks that demand our utmost efforts lie before us. As an example, the solicitation for members. I know that many of you shy away at the very mention of this term; Freemasons don't solicit!

There are simply too few Masons in the Federal Republic of Germany, and I believe we can no longer permit that attitude to prevail. And it is a fact, as our American Brethren stated at the Grand Masters' Conference this past February, "That which stops growing, begins to die!" I want to instill in you, my Brethren, the courage to tread new paths, and to mobilize your Lodge Brothers for the monumental task of achieving a genuine and decisive increase in membership in the future. I would like to remind you of a survey made some twenty years ago which revealed that in the age bracket of greatest interest to us, men 25 to 40 years old, only 6% admitted having a "definite, positive opinion of Freemasonry". Only 6% viewed positively... that meant a potential of 250,000 men!

As a result, also twenty years ago, in the "Bruderschaft" magazine, one of our younger Brethren called for us to "grasp that information as a mandate." The significance and importance of an association is, after all, determined by the number of supporting members. We love to use the phrase, "Quality is more important than quantity." If we are capable of honest self-criticism, we can only arrive at the conclusion that we are not blessed with any great amount of either; quality or quantity! Of course we have Brethren of superb quality in our ranks! But there's too few of them. How else can we explain that over the last few years so many of just average leadership capability have come along. We must exert every effort in the future to attract a greater number of men to our ranks who possess those qualities we desire for ourselves. However, this is no easy task. It requires fortitude, and the ability to conquer our own comfortable indolence.

Naturally, membership increase as all end in-itself cannot be fulfilling; it must be paced by a process of greatly increased education and training of our members. For Brothers prepared to undertake this responsibility - and not just for them alone - Masonic tutoring holds no taboos.

We must also intensify our capacity and readiness to effect internal reforms. A dedication to traditional form and the courage to tackle reform are not mutually excluding; each is dependent upon the other. For a Mason, prescribed, or due form as the vessel containing our intellectual heritage, is something indispensable. In its 250-year history, our Brotherhood has repeatedly demonstrated its capacity to rediscover and define the original essence, the truth and purity of its rituals and symbols; even then when the specter of past hypertrophy, that deeply ingrained overgrowth of false, misunderstood concepts as to what constituted tradition, was carried along as ballast. An overly uncritical retention of long-obsolete portions of our usage, those which are no longer believable and have long since been devoid of real meaning - as an example, the rather bombastically formulated, horrifying penalties, constitute a considerable hindrance in respect of our attempts to defend ourselves from critical attacks. Custom and ritual are matters of exclusive concern to our partner Grand Lodges. However, as Grand Master representing our entire jurisdiction I want to provide the impulse; in view of the urgency of the questions we are increasingly being confronted with, we ourselves must be confident of our subject matter, that we may represent our precious customs with inner conviction.

Great challenges lie before us. Our most important mission in the future as far as our intellectual work is concerned, I envision in the form of a "New Enlightenment". Here too, as part of this 'Outlook' I want to provide a final impulse:

Humanity at present finds itself in the midst of a tremendous transition. The belief in progress (for its own sake) has widely yielded to considerable doubt. New anxieties have elicited new intolerance. Man is uncertain of himself. In the media we can read the question: "Is Homo sapiens faced with extinction due to the excesses of his brain, just as the saber-toothed tiger once arrived at an evolutionary dead end?" In the commentary columns of leading weekly papers we run into such headlines as: "The Enlightenment Dismisses Its Children," or "Intellect is the Real Insanity." The menace of atomic destruction is whip-lashed as being a direct result of the enlightenment. Man mistrusts his own intellectual faculties. He would (see to) prefer to begin a retract back to the Middle Ages. Drop-out movements and sects of types have been multiplying. Man (seems to) want to divest himself of himself. He seeks total surrender and subservience.

In one of our magazines this 'new wave' was characterized thusly: "It involves renunciation of personal intellect, personal opinion, of everything which constitutes the foundation of human freedom. It involves a voluntary retreat to that human condition referred to by Immanuel Kant a.s 'self-inflicted dependency'; a retreat to that magical-religious, befuddled idolatry which the best minds of our Western civilization have resisted for the past 30 years." Hermann Hesse, who, in contrast to the contemporary 'Baghwan pilgrims' was always aware of the drawbacks of his own personal Far East yearnings - referred to this widespread trend as an "escape from the agony of adulthood", and "an infantile flight back to Paradise, an unwillingness to abandon childhood or accept the riddles of the universe and master them."

We, as Freemasons, must regard these challenges - characterized here only in a few glaring phrases - not only with concern, but also as a great new task to which we should devote ourselves with determination. Masonic Lodges were the breeding grounds and also the refuge of the monumental movements of "The Enlightenment", that human bursting of intellectual bonds, and for all that we possess today in intellectual freedom and progress, we owe a debt of thanks to the 18th Century awakening, with all its risks and dangers. None of the spiritual fathers of that human release from intellectual bondage ever promised an awakening in Paradise. On the contrary; as the result of that "Enlightenment" man first became fully aware of the burden and responsibility imposed upon him by Clod's admonition to go out and "subdue" the Earth. But the true meaning of "subdue" in that sense is: you have the responsibility, and are appointed as the guardian and protector of your own destiny, as well as that of the Earth.

The light of pure reason illuminates our temples. We want the man who can perceive; who can grasp and accept the universal order; one who responsibly structures his life with rational humanitarianism. As Thomas Dehler aptly stated at the Konvent of the United Grand Lodges of Germany two decades ago, in Hamburg, we want "the person who embodies human dignity,

who is ever mindful of his development and his responsibilities toward himself, his family, and the community; who at no time attempts to rid himself of this responsibility, but bears it with full awareness; who does not act out of hollow instinct; one who does not sanction cheap incantations or succumb to untruths; who does not hope for a miracle, but believes that God helps those who help themselves"; one who knows that freedom exists only when defended with determination, courage, honesty, and the power of deeds."

Lodges are places of self-discovery. Freemasonry enables one to face up to himself and his capabilities with courage, and enhances self-confidence. Lodges of the future will be much more, as fellowship associations with customs and some intellectual demands. With the fascination and convincing power of the old rituals, which they will inherit as the result of reforms, they will grow and become stronger; and with the desire for common-sense, will develop whole new areas in which to confirm their intentions. They will devote themselves to promoting a new human understanding notable for its commitment to self-determination and responsibility. We are not concerned with the limits of growth, but rather with new horizons. As a counter-force to contemporary destructive ideologies we patiently and persistently offer our age-old concept of building; stone by stone. Together with all people of good will, we will resist giving up hope for a more human world. Exactly because progress has raised so many new questions, we require new forces with faith in the triumph of Reason.

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