

ambassadors without diplomatic passport

Tomáš Jelínek

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For a long time I've wanted to write about current Czech-German relations from an informed point of view by the experts involved, rather than their political perspective. It becomes clear that even excellent relations can be improved in many aspects when examined further, despite Czechs regular assurance by politicians that Czech-German relations are excellent.

Tomáš Jelínek is Executive Director of the Czech-German Fund for the Future. This fund helps build bridges between Czechs and Germans. It supports projects that bring people together from both countries, allowing a deeper insight into their common culture and history. The Czech-German Fund for the Future was founded by the Czech-German Declaration, signed on January 21, 1997. Since 1998 that fund has provided approximately 45 million EUR to more than 7500 projects.

Tomáš happens to be my classmate from the Faculty of Social Sciences, but he also studied in Düsseldorf and Erlangen. During his studies, he was a member of the negotiating team in international negotiations on compensating victims during the Nazi era. He is a member of several international bodies and a founder of the Living Memory non-profit organization in Prague.

The first traditional question – how do you perceive today's world?

What fascinates me about today's world is its openness and access. I belong to a generation that still perceived the bipolar division of the world and what limitations life with a lack of freedom brings. That is why, today I see an increase in the number of offers and options for what and where to study, how and where to live, what to pursue professionally, what to get involved in or simply where to go. At the same time, I also realize that this is a privilege that billions of people in the world do not have. The world, of course, remains a place where contradictory values and principles often clash and where they are often enforced by force or manipulation and not by free and responsible acceptance.

And how do you perceive the position of the Czech Republic in the world?

I think we're extremely lucky. Just look at Ukraine. That is why we need to nurture our affiliation with the West. By this I don't mean only those relationship with the EU and NATO, but especially the active development of the values that serve as the foundation of Western community. These certainly include a mature political culture and a strong civil society, dialog with our neighbors and knowledge of them which, by the way, is exactly what the Czech-German Fund for the Future strives for. We cannot afford to declare our experience from the last century as having been overcome. That would be a sign of intellectual laziness, which I somewhat fear. Searching for shortcuts at any price and emphasizing entertainment and personal comfort is a breeding ground for the spread of corruption and growth of populism.

Czech-German Relations in 2014 – are they still an issue or not? Czech journalist Bára Procházková, in her critical article from 2012, mentioned that “the development of cooperation between the Czech Republic and Germany can be observed on economic, political and socio-cultural levels. The biggest boom came in the economic sphere as, on the contrary, political contacts in the long-term perspective lagged behind. This

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cultural sphere carries engaged civil society on its shoulders, particularly in the border regions, where hundreds of bilateral projects are carried out annually. The further we move inland, the less interest exists concerning neighbors. And this is true of both sides.

Fortunately, Czech-German relations still remain an important issue. Having a good relationship and, above all, being on familiar terms with the key player of European and to a certain extent global politics and economics is definitely beneficial to the Czechs. It is no longer so painful and delicate. On the contrary, for more and more people it's a place of mutual inspiration, for holding up a mirror, as well as enrichment and shared profit. Over the last fifteen or twenty years, Czech-German relations have undergone tremendous and positive growth and which continues.

Today, almost two years after Bára Procházková's article was published, we have unprecedented dynamics in Czech-Bavarian relations in the political sphere, which has finally caught up with business and civil society. Moreover, both sides' plans are a promise that this was not just a temporary configuration. The high relevance of mutual relations, even at the federal level, is also confirmed by the policy statements of the new governments in both countries. The Czech Government considers the development of a strategic dialog with Germany as its priority and the German Government sent a clear signal to the Czech Republic when, in the coalition agreement, it made a commitment to ensure the future extension of the Czech-German Fund for the Future beyond 2017.

But what I would not agree with is the assertion that our interest in cooperation with the Germans is strongest in the border region. At the Czech-German Fund for the Future, we are most often approached by people from both capital cities who come to us with their ideas, yet there are also large numbers of people from Brno and Hamburg. Of course a dense network of contacts works primarily between border federal states and Czech regions, but the inhabitants, for example, of North Rhine Westphalia, the South Moravian and Central Bohemian regions and Hessen also have considerable at stake in cooperation.

To what extent does the lack of interest and decline in knowledge of German in the Czech Republic influence our largest neighbor? When I attended the Czech-German educational program, Czech German Young Professional Leaders, I was surprised that the program was in English.

We have not noticed a decline of interest in cooperation with the Germans. On the contrary, last year a record number of citizens from both countries in the past fifteen years approached us with projects. But I do think the decreasing number of children learning German is a problem, although it seems there are better days ahead. Two years ago we declared our support of German language as our topic of the year. In

parallel, the German and Austrian embassies and both cultural institutes initiated a campaign called "Šprechtíme" (We speak German), and last year a second foreign language was made compulsory in Czech schools, which certainly works in favor of German. This is not about competing against English, but rather about what other foreign language to learn. In this respect, the largest argument supports German.

In terms of our programs focused on young Czech and German leaders from business, NGOs, government, politics and media, we planned it from the beginning in English, not because we could not get enough candidates, but because we wanted to pull a new and important target group into Czech-German exchange. Usually, young German speaking professionals already have a deep knowledge of the neighboring country and they are also networked well with their German counterparts. It's not that they are disinterested in the program, but from our perspective it doesn't make much sense. We're mainly interested in people without a clear Czech-German background, who will find significant added value from our program and, thanks to whom, Czech-German relations will gain advocates within important positions.

You were appointed at the age of thirty as the director of the Czech-German Fund for the Future. Have you ever seen your youth as a disadvantage?

Youth may be a disadvantage if it's combined with low self-reflection and an unwillingness to work harder on certain things. But because I believe that neither of these was a problem to me, I never complained about my age. On the contrary, my affiliation with the young generation was more of an advantage in my work, focusing on overcoming the tragic historic chapters of Czech-German relations, as well as the development of cooperation oriented towards the future.

You were involved since 2000 at the Czech-German Fund for the Future. How do you reflect upon your fifteen years of involvement?

This work still has a huge allure for me. In the early years it was a great opportunity to capitalize on my focus on German speaking countries.

As a member of the negotiating team, I had the opportunity to participate in the last major international negotiations on the consequences of World War II and then do everything possible to ensure that as many of the nearly 90,000 Czech victims of Nazi persecution and forced labor lived to see their compensation. The fact that this compensation was carried out successfully strengthened the confidence in the Fund's work, as well as in the fact that both sides took reconciliation seriously.

Then, when I moved to the Fund's management, the focus of my work shifted and I was able to primarily work on the development of relations between Czechs and Germans in the areas of youth and education, culture and science, cooperation of non-profit organizations and the restoration of landmarks and monuments in the Czech borderland. This is work that remains extremely fulfilling.

Feeling so much positive energy from thousands of Czechs and Germans investing in joint projects and observing the result of that work is truly encouraging. On the other hand, I also believe that our effort for a friendly approach to everyone who approaches us with an idea for an interesting project is encouraging for them. Work in the Fund is never routine for me, even after so many years. Our annual topic of the year, which impacts dozens of projects and motivates people on both sides of the border to work together on current problems, further contributes to this. This year it will concern our joint engagement in drug prevention.

We are also preparing, along with our German partners, a large international exhibition on forced labor under the Nazis. It will be presented in the Belvedere at Prague Castle this summer. I am also looking forward to this year's anniversary conference of the Czech-German Discussion Forum in Litoměřice, as well as the fact that the entire application submission process will be made more accessible, thanks to its move to an online system.

Linda Štucbartová ■



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Linda Štucbartová graduated from the Institute of International Territorial Studies. After a one year scholarship at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, she obtained a Diplôme d'études supérieures from the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva. Between the years 2002 and 2006, she worked in senior positions at the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Since 2006 she has functioned in the private sphere, and lectures at the Anglo-American University, where she was named the Chair of the Department of Diplomacy.

In addition to training in negotiation and communication of clients from the private, public and non-profit sector, she regularly collaborates with NGOs in the projects of the International Global Young Leaders Conference and the Women and Leadership Programme. Linda Štucbartová is a member of the Rotary Club Prague International. **Articles are extracts from her book *Velvyslanci i bez diplomatického pasu* (Eng. "Ambassadors without a Diplomatic Passport").**



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