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Peace of Westphalia Award 2014

Laudatory speech by Dr. Frank-Walter Steinmeier

Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs

Mr. Lord Mayor,
Dear Minister Löhrmann,
Dear Minister President Tillich,
Dear Mr. Zinkann
dear Markus Meckel,
Ladies and gentlemen,
and above all: dear prizewinners!

If I wanted to boil down the everyday life of our Youth Award winners to a single list, it would sound like this:

Erich Fischer. Born in 1922, killed in action in 1942.

Matthias Lieber. Born 1923, killed in action 1942.

Kurt Tellmann. Born 1926, killed in action 1944.

Anyone who has ever been to a military cemetery knows that this list goes on a thousand times over.

Ladies and gentlemen,

What do I think? What do I feel? ...when I stand as a young person in front of endless rows of silent graves - graves of people who were as young as I was when they lost their lives in the war.

"It hurts my soul," says Ismeth, a young Bosnian whom you will see in the movie in a moment. Anyone who stands in front of war graves for the first time - including me when I was 20 years old, including you, Ms. Kraske, Ms. Nitsche, Mr. Hellwig, who are accepting the award today: It hurts my soul!

But what do I do with it?

What do I do with these silent graves when wonderful times lie ahead of me?
Training, studies - when literally the whole world is open to me - all opportunities that those in the graves never had...

Or to put it more directly:

Why am I doing this to myself at all? We are at peace!

We're better off than we've ever been!

No, ladies and gentlemen:

Our award winners know that peace cannot be taken for granted. No, even here in Europe, peace is not guaranteed forever - we are experiencing this all too clearly in the Ukraine crisis.

And that is why, for sixty years, the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge's youth work has been guided by a motto that sounds simple but could hardly be more powerful: "Working for peace"!

Peace is work, infinitely hard work. It must be cared for and looked after, just as you do with the graves of the fallen - and with you thousands of other young people from all over the world every year; in work camps, in the Volksbund's meeting places and educational trips.

As German Foreign Minister at a truly turbulent time, a time when it almost seems as if the world has come apart at the seams, I would like to assure you: We need your 'work for peace' more than ever!

Not only I, but many people think so, and that is why the Volksbund's youth work is still financed by private donations - for which I would also like to express my thanks!

The writer Robert Menasse once suggested an experiment: take a map of Europe and mark every battle, every front line of the last centuries with a red pen - then the map of Europe will sink into a single blood-red spot.

And today?

Seven decades of peace in Europe! And not only that: freedom, prosperity, open borders.

So are these war cemeteries just the last scars of history?

Dark spots that don't quite fit into the landscape? Not fitting into the beautiful Normandy with its long beaches, where you, Ms. Kraske, visited the cemetery of La

Cambe for the first time as an exchange student - or the rolling hills of the Vosges, where I myself walked through the long rows of white crosses for the first time as a high school graduate?

No, these cemeteries are not the scars, on the contrary: they are the nucleus of a united Europe! Because it was over these graves that Europe's young people joined hands - just a few years after the war!

Right in the movie you will see a clip from the 70s and a young German with rather long hair - just like people had back then; me too, by the way, probably your fathers too... This young man says: "Today, many Germans and French are good friends - and good friends can't shoot at each other."

As naturally as we say "good friends" today, the fathers and grandfathers of my generation still said "hereditary enemies" to the French - therein lies the miracle of Europe's reconciliation!

That is why Jean-Claude Juncker, the new President of the European Commission, said: "If you want to understand Europe, you should visit a military cemetery."

And that is why, especially in this year in which we remember the outbreak of the First World War 100 years ago and the Second World War 75 years ago, I can think of no more worthy recipient of this Peace Prize than the youth work of the German War Graves Commission!

It is very, very quiet at military cemeteries. Perhaps it is particularly quiet at German military cemeteries. Because proud speeches about fallen heroes who defended their fatherland and liberated Europe - speeches that you can hear in Allied cemeteries certainly don't fit in there.

But we must not remain silent! Erich Fischer, Matthias Lieber and Kurt Tellmann are silent. But their graves silently remind us of peace.

And you, dear prizewinners, lend a voice to their admonition!

We realize how urgently we need your voices when young people today are drawn into the spell of hatred and fanaticism and go to Syria or Iraq to take part in barbaric terror, including young people who have grown up in the midst of our own societies!

You, dear prizewinners, are the dissenting voices of the preachers of hate: because you speak, listen and discuss with young people from all over the world. And you will experience that cultures of remembrance are different - between Poles and Germans, between Russians and Ukrainians, or between locals and immigrants.

And you will learn that if you want to communicate, you first have to understand the other person.

And so you build bridges - not only between peoples, but also between the generations whose memories you keep alive.

Dear prizewinners,

Your 'work for peace' is never over! The bridges you have built in the Volksbund will last a lifetime. And no matter what becomes of you: whether teachers, craftsmen, pilots or doctors - everything that Erich Fischer and Mattias Lieber and Kurt Tellmann were never granted the chance to become: you will continue to raise your voices for peace.

One day, you will take over the baton of our society from white-haired politicians like me and bear responsibility. And if I may be completely honest: as conflict-ridden as the world may still be today, when I think of the thousands of young prizewinners today, I am full of hope that the work will continue: the work for peace!

Thank you very much.