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Peace of Westphalia Award 2014

Speech by Stanislaw Tillich

Prime Minister of the State of Saxony

Dear Dr. Zinkann
dear Federal Minister Dr. Steinmeier,
dear Minister Löhrmann,
Ladies and Gentlemen, Members of Parliament,
dear Lord Mayor Lewe,
dear Mr. Buhrow,
dear Members of the jury,
Ladies and gentlemen,
but above all: dear award winners!

What impresses me most about these two award winners is that they overcome borders: National borders, the border between earth and space, as well as borders in people's minds! And as a Saxon, that reminds me of the fall of 1989, when borders were first crossed by embassy refugees, by demonstrators, by peaceful revolutionaries; and then overcome, like the Wall and the Iron Curtain, the division of Germany, the division of Europe. The fact that it remained peaceful back then, that it was a peaceful revolution, remains a miracle even 25 years later. A miracle in which many people played a part. And when I watch the news on the daily news, the peace that we have enjoyed in Europe for decades also seems like a miracle to me. Because the situation in Ukraine shows us just how fragile peace can be.

Today, Europe is a continent of peace, freedom and prosperity. Many have contributed to this. And we need new comrades-in-arms every day. Like today's award winners. The two laudators have given us a good impression of what distinguishes them. I am interested in something else, namely the question: "What connects the award winners with us?" Or to put it another way: "What does the award mean to us?" Two answers came to mind.

When you look at the earth from space, you see no boundaries. That was also the case during the Cold War. But if you asked a child during the Cold War what they wanted to be when they grew up, you got two different answers: Cosmonaut in the East, astronaut in the West. And this despite the fact that both Germans in space, who were the "first" for both East and West - Sigmund Jähn and Ulf Merbold - come from the Vogtland region. Today, they are all one thing above all: space travelers!

With the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Iron Curtain, a new phase of cooperation also began in space. There was a new way of looking at things, and this opened new perspectives.

This is the first part of my answer: I would like to combine my congratulations to the crew of the ISS with the hope that we will always be prepared to adopt a different perspective. And that we make bold use of the opportunities that arise from this. Because that is always necessary. It requires openness - and the willingness to change perspective. This is also what the name of the prize stands for: the Peace of Westphalia required the realization that people were tired after three decades of war. And a European peace solution required the willingness to see things from a different perspective. This political message still applies today: taking a different perspective is what politics needs in order to find good solutions. This also requires small and large changes of perspective on all sides. But in the end it works, and that's what our democracy needs, because: Those who pursue politics with walls in their heads will build new ones and not tear any down.

And that brings me to my second answer to the question posed at the beginning, what this award can tell us. I combine my congratulations to the youth work of the War Graves Commission with the hope that each new generation will continue to demand and help shape peace. And for me, this is precisely the core and the important thing about the work of the War Graves Commission's young people: their work overcomes trenches that they themselves have not torn open. By tending the graves of the fallen and murdered, they commemorate their fates and thus pay tribute to them. It is a special experience that springs from deep humanity and builds a bridge between the minds and hearts of today and the darkest chapters of our history.

One such chapter is the former Zeithain prisoner-of-war camp in Saxony. 30,000 Soviet prisoners of war died there - as well as Italian, Serbian, British, French and Polish prisoners. They lie in four cemeteries and remained nameless for decades. For years, a documentation center has been looking into their fates and trying to give the victims a name again. The War Graves Commission is also involved in maintaining the cemetery.

Burying the dead of war, whether friend or former enemy, is an act of Christian charity and an expression of humanity. For the living, the work of the War Graves Commission is doubly important: as a reminder of peace and as an opportunity to give relatives a place of remembrance and mourning. They respond to this work with great gratitude.

Ladies and gentlemen! The films about the award winners earlier gave us an indication of what it takes to overcome rifts that we have not opened ourselves and to adopt a perspective that we are not used to: less prejudice and more friendship! Let's live this together. For me, that is the mission we take away from this wonderful ceremony.

Thank you very much.