

Pugwash in Berlin

Miguel Marin-Bosch

July 14, de 2011

This article appeared in Spanish in Mexico City's *La Jornada*.

<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2011/07/14/opinion/023a1pol>

Earlier this month I was in Berlin to attend the annual conference of Pugwash, a movement founded soon after the manifesto against nuclear weapons which Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell signed in 1955. In Berlin Einstein lived until, with the arrival of Hitler, he fled to the United States. In Berlin, during WWII, the decision was taken to build an atomic bomb. And in Berlin the European phase of that conflict ended.

This Pugwash conference was the most attended in recent years. Some 350 representatives from 43 countries participated. One tenth were young people who are beginning their professional lives. The rest of us were quite older.

The conference allowed me to confirm an impression that I have been forming on Germany, the Germans and their role in the history of the 20th century. Let me explain.

As an adolescent I was sort of allergic to anything German. Around 1960 I met some students from Hamburg and they seemed rather normal, except for one of their names (Adolf). He had been baptized during the war.

Over the years my antipathy began to fade. For over 40 years I have been visiting Germany with different hats: tourist, diplomatic envoy and participant in meetings on disarmament, most of the latter in the erstwhile German Democratic Republic. With time I began to understand things that only time can make clear. It is a matter of generational changes and I realized that I could not ask those students from Hamburg to explain the sins of their parents.

Today my impression of Germany is that of a highly responsible society interested in the solution of the world's big problems. They are concerned with poverty, hunger, all kinds of violence, the environment, and disarmament. Quite obviously my German colleagues at the conference were more interested in these issues than the rest of the population

The fact is that I felt quite comfortable in Berlin and, as on previous visits, I was very much impressed by what that country has achieved. After reunification in 1990 Germans were very much inclined to help the inhabitants of the eastern part to attain the standard of life of the western part. That solidarity was soon translated into a temporary tax (*Solidaritätszuschlag*). To this day the federal government continues to collect this tax which entails adding over five per cent to the taxes that Germans pay on all kind of income.

German solidarity is today evident (not without many complaints) on a European scale, especially in the case of Greece.

During the week-long conference I had the opportunity to speak with many Germans, almost all with Pugwash links, beginning with members of the Federation of German Scientists (VDW). The VDW has its roots in a manifesto signed in 1957 by a group of scientists, including the Nobel laureates Werner Heisenberg, Otto Hahn and Max Born. Following the example set by Einstein and Russell, the group declared its opposition to the development of nuclear weapons in general and in particular to the stationing on German soil of United States' nuclear weapons. Ironically, some of them had participated in Hitler's atomic project. And today Germany and some other NATO members are still debating the continued presence of tactical (short-range) nuclear weapons on their territory.

The German scientists and delegates I talked to are committed to a world free of nuclear weapons and a peaceful and pacifist Germany anchored in the European Union. But they also feel something which Germany's Foreign Minister, Guido Westerwelle, outlined in his welcoming speech to the conference: one should find a way to give Germany its place in the world.

For decades that complaint has translated into Germany's request for a permanent seat in the UN's Security Council. And they base their demand on their economic power. They argue that the Security Council's composition, with its five permanent members (China, France, Russia, United Kingdom and United States), no longer reflects the real world and new permanent seats should be added.

It is obvious that Germany's weight in Europe and the world is not reflected in the power structure of international organizations. Take the International Monetary Fund. Since its founding in 1946 it has been headed only four years by a German national. In contrast, when Christine Lagarde ends her present term, French nationals will have been at the IMF helm for 40 years.

Many older people in Germany ask why their two main European partners (France and UK) continue to have a permanent seat in the Security Council. Strip them of their nuclear weapons –they argue– and their place in the concert of nations would be below that of Germany. Thus their insistence on an international recognition for a people that has achieved so much since 1945.

Among the young German participants in the conference I detected a very healthy attitude toward nuclear disarmament and the just solution to the most complicated regional problems (Middle East and South Asia). They do not seem to share their elders' complaints about recognition of their economic strength. Many think that Germany should keep a low military profile and contribute to the construction of a Europe that is economically solid and socially fair.

Those young people supported the German position on Libya. They do not have much sympathy for NATO and even less for the militaristic attitude of London and Paris. They are the children of the generation of Germans from Hamburg that I met 50 years ago. It was a pleasure to listen to them.