



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at the ceremony awarding the International Charlemagne  
Prize of Aachen to Timothy Garton Ash  
in Aachen on 25 May 2017**

Almost 40 years ago, a small blue Alfa Romeo drove along the transit route through the GDR from the Helmstedt border crossing towards Berlin. At the wheel was a British student who was strictly obeying the speed limit. Not everyone is so careful on the A2 today, as we well know. But while we take it for granted there today that we can zoom down to the Magdeburg Börde from Lappwald, back then our country was divided. The student driving the Alfa Romeo was nervous. As he drove, he hummed Wolf Biermann songs to himself – and wondered whether the Stasi was able to bug his car. As it turned out, he wasn't completely wrong about that. In fact, he proved almost clairvoyant, as a short time later the Stasi set up a file on him called "Romeo". The name reflected the Stasi officers' envy of this small blue Alfa Romeo.

Ladies and gentlemen, this car journey led straight into the whirlwind of contemporary European history, and the driver let himself be caught up in the storm and carried along on its winds. He became a witness to Europe, a chronicler of Europe and a companion to Europe. In the last four decades he has experienced, probed and described Europe's growth and development as nobody else has. He is a scholar – with a truly meticulous mind and unparalleled, often astounding, powers of observation. At the same time, he is also a passionate commentator who ventures out into the political reality and takes part in it himself. It is a great pleasure to me to have the opportunity to trace some of the singular path that has led him to Aachen today in this speech. But first of all, my dear Timothy Garton Ash, I extend my warmest congratulations on the International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen.

However, we need to return once more to that Alfa Romeo and note how remarkable what transpired then actually is. A 23 year old PhD student wanted to hole up in archives in Berlin for his historical

research. Now everyone here in this room who has ever sat down to write a dissertation knows how many good reasons to leave the library turn up in this situation: an attractive fellow student, perhaps, an important demonstration or your flatmates' next party. I remember it well. But here was a 23 year old who snapped his books shut because he sensed the winds of history blowing straight in his direction.

Experiencing world history in the present tense has always been a great source of happiness for you. As you once put it in a nutshell, "There is nothing to compare with being there."

As a student of history, you knew that no empire in history has lasted forever, and this one wouldn't either. As a historian, you sensed sooner than others that the Soviet dictatorship was beginning to crumble – and as a Briton, you were closer to the spirit of resistance in Berlin, Prague, Warsaw and Budapest than most people in West Germany, including those of us who were following the events on the streets of Leipzig, East Berlin and other places with bated breath and feared that intervention by the National People's Army would put a swift and possibly violent end to the whole affair. In 1989, I was in my attic in Giessen putting the finishing touches on my thesis – on the subject of law in my case – when my flatmates excitedly called me downstairs to the television. The unbelievable had happened – the Wall had fallen in Berlin.

While most of us experience history as *chronos*, that is, we understand and sort through it only retrospectively, you seized your moment, your *kairos*, long before 1989. In 1980, two years after the crossing to Berlin, you sat in a tiny kitchen in Warsaw – Helena Łuczywo's kitchen. Dissidents and members of *Solidarność* met there, organising the resistance and publishing an underground newspaper. Years later, when Poland was finally a free country, Helena, your companion from those days, became the deputy editor in chief of the famous "Gazeta Wyborcza". You experienced all of this up close. When we read your writing, we can almost smell the smoke from the Roth Händle cigarettes smuggled in by friends from the West and hear the constantly ringing telephone. Mr Garton Ash, you very literally sat at the kitchen table of world history, and thanks to your wonderful writing we too can take part in it.

This sense of closeness is what gives your writing an authenticity and authority that is seen only rarely in political analyses. The fact that you have abandoned any strict divisions between history, literature and journalism means that your work has developed its own particular political efficacy. What I can say for Germany, and what surely also holds true for Poland and our other Eastern neighbours, as well as for your own country, is that to this day there is a large part of Garton Ash in our thinking about Europe.

In Berlin – as you wrote in your book “The File” – your favourite refuge was a vicarage in Pankow. The poet Reiner Kunze had told you about it at a reading in London. Members of the opposition –artists and intellectuals such as Reiner Kunze and Adolf Dresen and church members such as Ruth and Hans Misselwitz – met in this vicarage and sought paths towards freedom. Even at midnight they were still carrying on their discussions, while swimming in Lake Wandlitz. It was your friend Werner Krätschell’s vicarage. Mr Krätschell, it is wonderful that you are here with us in Aachen today. A very warm welcome to you!

You told me that when this young man turned up in your garden one sunny afternoon, you didn’t quite know what to make of him, as his clothes were rather unusual in East Berlin at the time. He was wearing cord trousers, a tweed jacket and a cravat. However, my dear Timothy Garton Ash, these encounters in the vicarage would have an impact on the further course of your life and your work. But perhaps these meetings also represent an example of an East West encounter of the longing for freedom, which was finally to come together years later in a united Europe. We have to imagine a young man standing there in Pankow, a son of the English elite, educated at Sherborne School and Oxford, well read in everything from John Stuart Mill to Isaiah Berlin. He hails from a place of freedom, but there in East Berlin, in a system lacking freedom he meets people in a vicarage who love freedom at least as much as he himself does. Perhaps it was in this moment – as your friend recounted to me – that you turned from a Briton into a European.

You brought this experience and the experience of countless other meetings in Eastern Europe with you to the West and for many of us, you opened our eyes. You unceremoniously set aside your dissertation about the Nazi era, instead writing a book about the GDR in which you told us in the West, “Hey, behind what you call the ‘Iron Curtain’, there’s a vibrant and wonderful piece of Europe over there, too.” Of course, this book did not suit Erich Mielke, who responded to it by personally banning you from the GDR. But perhaps it also did not fit into the picture of many of those in the West, who believed that society could only be changed from above and who lost sight of the longing for freedom and the potential for change from below in their focus on talks with Eastern bloc rulers.

Timothy Garton Ash, in the closing remarks of your latest book you write: “We need realistic idealism and idealistic realism.”

I believe this holds especially true for Europe. For as long as you and I have been alive, a united Europe has always been both – a reality, but also an ideal.

And you, my dear Timothy Garton Ash, stand for both of these things. You are a chronicler of Europe’s reality, growth and

development, as well as its contradictions. And at the same time, you are also an ardent supporter of the idea of Europe, of freedom and enlightenment and democracy.

And the fact that so much of the ideal of Europe has become the reality of Europe since those days in the vicarage garden is something we should not forget just because day to day life in Europe can be hard work. Instead, it is something we should celebrate together here in Aachen today!

“Who would have thought in 1989”, you said much later, “that Eastern and Central Europe, including the Baltic states, would become more or less liberal democracies, members of NATO and the EU? This is a political miracle.”

I think you’re right – and so I wonder why we so often lack the courage to believe in such miracles today and, above all, I wonder why we lack the courage to work to make these miracles come true. The life experience of Timothy Garton Ash and his courageous friends in Central and Eastern Europe shows us, however, that while the path of European unification, the path that leads it from an idea to a reality, is not a linear path, but it is one that stands open; it is possible!

Perhaps it is in the nature of things that as we travel along this path, the more the idea becomes reality, the more this reality dominates our field of vision. Today, of course, the concrete realities of the European Union are the focus of our perception – the institutions, the processes, the onerous search for compromises. What must not happen to us, however, is for the big idea to disappear behind the crisis – for the crisis to blind us so much that the enormously long distance we have travelled since the days when Europe was nothing more than a bold idea atop the ruins of war fades into the distance. Reminding us to take heart from history and at the same time to look at the present with a mercilessly clear vision – this is the special trademark of Timothy Garton Ash. And that is not only an historical analysis, but also an appeal to the governments of Europe to look at the wonderful things Europe has achieved, not to squander them, and to overcome the crisis. It is in this spirit that Timothy Garton Ash joins the illustrious ranks of Charlemagne laureates. The former President of the European Parliament also stands for this spirit. My dear Martin Schulz, I am delighted that you are also here with us today!

One can sense much of Garton Ash’s “idealistic realism” when he describes in his columns the developments in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, to which he is connected so deeply in his heart. Mr Garton Ash, when you write critically today about the political reality in Hungary, or recently also in Poland, when you touch on sore points about freedom and the rule of law, you do so because you know the tremendous force of attraction that the idea of Europe has exerted and continues to exert there. “In Europe’s Name” – as your wonderful

book is titled – in Europe's name, brave people in Gdańsk, Leipzig, Budapest, Warsaw and Prague took to the streets. In Europe's name they raised their voices and risked their lives.

And this force of attraction remains. We feel it to this day on the squares of Europe's cities. We see people wrap themselves in EU flags when they protest on the streets in Bucharest against corruption, in Budapest for academic freedom, in Warsaw for the separation of powers or in Germany against populism. And we experience it when people like you, György Konrád, an esteemed recipient of the International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen, do not allow yourselves to be silenced today just as you did not back then, but rather take Europe's side loudly and clearly. My dear Mr Konrád, I am delighted that you are here today!

Mr Garton Ash, another reality that you had a lot to write about recently is the wish of the majority of the British people to leave the EU. I would like to start by saying that I marvel at the way you yourself display the same intellectual virtues that you impart to your students as an Oxford don, that is, clear and unsparing criticism, also towards oneself. You called Brexit "the biggest defeat of my political life" and you did not beat about the bush regarding the personal pain you felt after the referendum.

Mr Garton Ash, we say to you today that you will remain with us, regardless of what UK referendums decide. And because I have spoken of the reality and the ideal, this should not be an either/or for you or for us. In any event, to me it is certain that if the United Kingdom should one day no longer be a part of the EU's reality, it will always remain a part of the European idea. The British legacy of liberalism and democracy and enlightenment is indispensable to Europe's understanding of itself – and few people represent this as paradigmatically as Timothy with his love of debate and his belief in the better argument, his humour and his fascinating intellect – and, yes, his wonderful hand made leather shoes. You stand for all the best things about the United Kingdom, which we will miss in the EU, but which will always be a part of Europe. And that is why we say today, Timothy Garton Ash, that we hope you will remain at Europe's disposal. Europe needs your wise and liberal mind.

Is it not telling that it was a Briton who formulated the idea of a united Europe for the first time, only a year after the end of the war? It was an early Charlemagne Prize of Aachen laureate, Winston Churchill, in his Zurich speech to the youth of Europe. And part of the whole story is that he for one never saw the United Kingdom as part of the institutional framework, the institutional reality of Europe.

Today, 70 years later, the United Kingdom faces exactly this prospect of retreating from the reality of a united Europe, if not into "splendid isolation", then into "splendid distance". But we will remain

neighbours and we will always remain closely interconnected. For this reason, the United Kingdom must ask itself what role it wants to play in the future. Will it return to the old game of the balance of power – to a mistrustful balancing out between forces that are to be held in equilibrium? To looking suspiciously at the major powers on the continent and relations between them?

Ladies and gentlemen, I want something different – a United Kingdom that looks beyond the old Realpolitik, remains a part of the European idea and asserts this idea in the world. For the idea of Europe, the rule of law above arbitrary power, of freedom above totalitarian ideology, also remains a British concern – as well as a task for world politics. But I am sure that we can only endow this idea with strength in the world if we do so together – the nation alone, in which Churchill doubtless still believed, can no longer do so. We need you, Timothy – let us mobilise joint efforts.

Timothy Garton Ash, as an academic and an intellectual, you have never been satisfied with only speaking to your peers about your ideas. On the contrary, from the youthful days when you wrote under the pseudonym Edward Marston in the "Spectator" to your world-renowned column in the "Guardian", you have always been concerned with reaching – and persuading – a wide audience.

Brexit was also an alarm signal that something is drifting apart in our societies – and by no means only in the United Kingdom. I fear that if democracy were a train, this train would have ever fewer open plan carriages and ever more classes and compartments. This entails a great danger – especially from an intellectual's perspective. We no longer speak with each other, and there is even a risk that we are losing our shared language. You have just waded into this debate, Mr Garton Ash, with a brilliant book called "Free Speech".

In my opinion, we need more such meddling in this debate. Especially at a time when the freedom and value of science are being called into question, intellectuals, scholars and universities should raise their voices and defend their most important freedom, freedom of speech, against those who want to curtail it. This is why I appeal to them to do things like the young Garton Ash, and not to stay sitting at their desks. The Ivory Tower can be an echo chamber.

I know that this takes courage. Timothy, you dedicated the last chapter of your new book to courage. We need this courage today, in all of Europe, and nowhere have I seen it described as splendidly as in your wonderful text "As If". At some point in the 1980s you were talking with your friends in the Polish opposition and asked them with concern if their lives wouldn't be more tolerable if they were to fall into line a bit more. And your friend Adam Michnik took a drag on his Roth Händle cigarette and said, "I live every day as if I lived in democracy. This is the only way I can keep my integrity."

Today we live in democracies throughout Europe, and nonetheless the "as if" serves as a reminder to us to take action. Affording democracy and freedom their rights – in my opinion, this is a strong, encouraging and necessary message to all the people in Europe today who must live with changes, crises and repression. As if! Never and nowhere in Europe can we become accustomed to freedom, the core idea of Europe, being destroyed again by power struggles.

You, Mr Garton Ash, will be watching over this with your pen in hand. We are very grateful for your 40 years of work on Europe and it is with profound conviction that we express our heartfelt congratulations to you on the 2017 International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen!