

**Memorial Address**

**for**

**Dr Heinrich Pfeiffer**

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**Bonn, 6 January 2017**

Dear Edith,

Dear members of the Pfeiffer family,

Friends and associates of Heinrich Pfeiffer,

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Probably everyone who had the privilege of knowing Mr Pfeiffer well feels impoverished by his death. But the mourners here in Bad Godesberg and in many other places around the world were richly rewarded by their encounters with Heinrich Pfeiffer.

Without indulging in pathos or exaggeration, it can be claimed that, during the almost 40 years of his “reign” as Secretary General of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, the global citizen Pfeiffer always saw himself as a servant of science and research, and an intermediary in the field of understanding between people.

In the decades following the war, Heinrich Pfeiffer created something that, even today, is still quite untypical, at least by German standards: he moulded a corporate identity, a unique, in the words of Dieter Simon, an “intellectual, ideal world community”, namely, the Humboldt Family which now embraces more than 27,000 members in almost 140 countries across the globe.

Under Heinrich Pfeiffer’s leadership, the Humboldt Foundation became the flagship of Germany’s foreign science and cultural policy. For all his rigour, Heinrich Pfeiffer was a captain, a general with a heart.

The recipe for his unequalled activities, the motivation for his efforts to reintegrate a physically destroyed, morally bankrupt and intellectually desolate Germany into the world community once again, after the horrors of the Third Reich and the break with civilisation that was the Shoah, as well as his thoughts on how this could be achieved were fairly simple: take the greatest care to choose the best researchers, use their research stay to also familiarise them with German history, the language and culture of the country and, above all: treat these people, who often come to us from far-flung foreign regions we know little about, with respect and on an equal footing – and put your trust in them. These were the principles on which he built the foundations of what often became life-long friendships. Pfeiffer’s belief that with patience and genuine interest, with arguments and understanding, every important goal can be achieved was unshakable.

Heinrich Pfeiffer, who recognised at a fairly early stage that collaboration between researchers was an effective tool of diplomacy, was – as everyone could see – already breathing life into the Foundation’s motto, “Once a Humboldtian, always a Humboldtian”, even before it had been

adopted. Under Pfeiffer's aegis, individual sponsorship, personal mentoring and the creation of a sustainable network became the lasting hallmarks of the Foundation and made it into an institution without equal worldwide.

In letters to my great predecessors in the role of President, to all of whom Mr Pfeiffer was always a loyal Secretary General, an advisor and mentor, a trusted acquaintance, and even a friend, Humboldtians describe in their words of thanks what Mr Pfeiffer's friendship meant to them. Some years ago, the Japanese alumnus Takashi Oshio, for instance, reported with great relief that he had survived a life-threatening cancer at the age of 80 and been released from hospital. Professor Oshio was convinced that this happy turn of events was not just as result of his medical treatment but of the patient and loving support he had received from his friends. I quote: "During the entire time I spent in hospital, many friends from the Humboldt Foundation, and especially Dr Heinrich Pfeiffer, touchingly encouraged, comforted and saved me from despair. For this I should like to express my heartfelt thanks in the name of my family."

Is there a more beautiful and moving way of describing friendship?

The friendship and affection Heinrich Pfeiffer showed towards the alumni, but also to the Foundation itself, grew deeper and closer as the years went by. In his era, which was also the era of a Werner Heisenberg, Feodor Lynen, Wolfgang Paul, Reimar Lüst and Wolfgang Frühwald, Heinrich Pfeiffer managed to continuously enrich the Foundation with new ideas, encourage it to tread new paths and not to flinch from shedding its skin – without, however, ever deviating from its working principle and its statutory mission, namely, to be there for people. For him, the Foundation was never an end in itself.

Even after he had retired, the ever-curious senior regularly visited his office in Jean-Paul-Straße. He never forced his opinions on people or interfered in discussions if he was not consulted. His guiding principle was much like that of a good New York taxi driver: "I only come when I'm called." And whenever I asked him for advice, friend Heinrich Pfeiffer knew how to help – what a godsend!

For this man, whom one might refer to as a friendship genius, loyalty and friendship were the most precious assets, and for a Neville Alexander, an associate of Nelson Mandela, Mr Pfeiffer would probably have risked his life to stand by him during the apartheid regime and his incarceration on Robben Island.

Heinrich Pfeiffer's countless acts of support and friendship are legendary; they were founded on a cosmopolitan attitude that has become rare, on respect for foreign cultures, for an almost insatiable curiosity about people, that is, on all the virtues that the young Alexander von Humboldt described in

the words: "Friendship is a language spoken by the heart."

A brief example illustrates how Mr Pfeiffer managed to act spontaneously, but also strategically. The Department of German at the distinguished Tongji University in China was planning to establish a specialist library for German literature, but they were short of the necessary financial means. Heinrich Pfeiffer found a solution by convincing Mr Regge of the Thyssen Foundation to donate books to the value of €50,000. With that, the foundations for the library that now carries the name of Heinrich Pfeiffer were laid. So, in this case, as in countless other situations, Heinrich Pfeiffer simply followed Goethe's maxim: "Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Willing is not enough; we must do."

The "bridge-builder" Heinrich Pfeiffer, whom Walter Scheel liked to refer to as "Mr Humboldt", was awarded the highest accolades at home and abroad. Whilst Heinrich was pleased about these insignias, which he might mockingly describe as "state tinsel" over a glass of red wine, he was never overly proud of them. He was a great deal prouder of the life histories of his Humboldtians, not least because these personal testimonies made eloquently clear to him how meaningful his work really was.

And just as Mr Pfeiffer cultivated his relations with people, he devoted at least as much, if not more love and passion to his garden on the Elliger Höhe. Had Heinrich not become an eminent science promoter, he would have been sure of a place amongst the most respected landscape gardeners, not least perhaps because he espoused the Chinese proverb: "If you want to be happy for a lifetime, plant a garden." Heinrich Pfeiffer must have been a happy man.

We all owe a huge debt of thanks to Heinrich Pfeiffer, this great but also deeply modest, totally unpretentious man who dedicated his long life to promoting science and research, and understanding between people. Dr Pfeiffer rendered outstanding services to Germany – and beyond.

In the Jewish tradition, the Kaddish that is recited in memory of the dead opens with the call: "Listen Israel: glorified and sanctified be His great name throughout the world ..."

Heinrich Pfeiffer's greatness resided in his unique way of impartially approaching people of all cultures and political systems, encountering them with empathy, indeed with love. And his Humboldt Family thanked him for this attitude, not only admiring and revering him, no: he was sincerely loved. And for that reason, I could imagine that Heinrich would concur with the five lines Bertolt Brecht wrote during hard times spent in exile:

“I want to go with the one I love.

I do not want to calculate the cost.

I do not want to think about whether it's good.

I do not want to know whether he loves me.

I want to go with whom I love.”

Helmut Schwarz