

Address by Georg Friedrich Prinz von Preussen

Oxford Union Society – June 13, 2023

Mr. President,

Officers and Members of the Standing Committee,

Your Excellency Ambassador Gamarra of Peru,

Dear family members and friends,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I cannot express how delighted I am for the invitation to speak here at Oxford. It is a great honour indeed to address this distinguished audience, particularly in a year where the Oxford Union Society celebrates its bicentenary. During my school years at Glenalmond College in Scotland, I saw how hard many of my classmates struggled to get to Oxford University. I must confess: Witnessing the beauty of Oxford in summer, it has now become clear to me that, in addition to the undisputed academic level, there are many other good reasons for wanting to study in this place.

Celebrating a 200th anniversary is truly a tremendous achievement, and I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations on your jubilee. Yet the span of your existence is at least as impressive as the long list of your most distinguished guest speakers. And, interestingly, it is almost

200 years since the first links were established between Oxford and my family:

It was here in Oxford where King Friedrich Wilhelm III received an honorary doctorate after the celebrations of victory over Napoleon in 1815.

His grandson Crown Prince Friedrich, who would later accede to the German and Prussian thrones as Emperor Friedrich III, visited England as a student in 1851, and his travels brought him to this university town where he was accompanied by the renowned Professor Max Müller, founder of the Comparative Philology department. Crown Prince Friedrich's brief stay left a lasting impression on him, probably not only because of Oxford and the World Exhibition that was taking place at that time, but also because during his visit he was introduced to his future wife: The Princess Victoria, The Princess Royal, the eldest daughter of Queen Victoria.

In 1907, the eldest son of Emperor Friedrich III and Empress Victoria, Emperor Wilhelm II, my great-great-grandfather, was another one of my direct ancestors to receive an honorary doctorate from Oxford University.

But it took another century until a member of our family would finally receive a proper PhD, my cousin Brigid! Dear Brigid, I am equally happy and proud that you as a fellow of Christ Church College and a cousin of mine are here with us tonight – together with quite a few further members of the British-Prussian branch of our family.

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A grand jubilee is always a reason to look back, to celebrate what has been achieved in great days and to solemnly reflect on some of the darker moments. Looking back at the British-German history of the past two centuries, one must confess that the first half of the last century was undoubtedly the low-point in the relationship of our countries.

For me it is still hard to imagine how in 1914 two countries, whose sovereigns King George V and Kaiser Wilhelm II were even first cousins, could slip into one of the deadliest wars the world had hitherto seen. This Great War would cast a long shadow over the relationship between Britain and Germany.

In 1913, the year of the Silver Jubilee of Kaiser Wilhelm II, just a few months before the start of the war, the European monarchs had met in Berlin for the wedding of Princess Victoria Louise, the only daughter of Kaiser Wilhelm II, and Prince Ernest August of Hanover. Princess Victoria Louise, Aunt Sissy as we used to call her, would later become my godmother. Among the guests of her wedding were also Kaiser Wilhelm's first cousins King George V, Tsar Nicholas II, all grandchildren of Queen Victoria, the grandmother of Europe. My late grandfather who attended the wedding as a child always spoke about "Großpapa" – his grandfather Kaiser Wilhelm II – and about "Uncle Georgie" and "Uncle Nicky" in that context. This happy family occasion of Aunt Sissy's wedding would be the last time the cousins would meet. Only five years later, the Tsar and his family were murdered by Lenin's Bolsheviks. My great-great-grandfather Kaiser Wilhelm II was forced to abdicate in November 1918 and went into exile in the Netherlands which had remained neutral during the war. The Emperor would never set a foot on German soil. He repeatedly declined offers by the Weimar Republic to return to Germany as an ordinary citizen. He died in exile in 1941.

After the abdication of my great-great-grandfather my family was initially struggling greatly with their new role in society. The new Free State of Prussia, now a state within the Weimar Republic, had actually granted my family a very generous compensation, and we were allowed to retain many palaces and estates, as well as the vast Royal Collection of thousands of pieces of art. But despite the respectful treatment of our family by the republic, many of my family members started sympathizing with Hitler and the emerging Nazi movement, among them the former Crown Prince Wilhelm, my great-grandfather. He openly supported Hitler in the 1932 presidential elections. A brother of the Crown Prince, Prince August Wilhelm, had even become a member of the Nazi party and was giving speeches at Nazi rallies.

My great-grandfather had probably expected that Hitler would eventually restore the monarchy which had actually never been intended by the Nazi movement. And soon after Hitler had been appointed chancellor, the former Crown Prince was quickly sidelined.

I have publicly stated that the 1930s was the absolute moral low point in the almost 1000 years of our family's history. And over the past years, I have intensely reflected on this period. In particular, I have met with Holocaust survivors and their descendants, and I have been greatly inspired by these important conversations.

Among them is Berlin's honorary citizen Margot Friedländer, now aged 101. Born in Berlin in 1921 she was deported to Theresienstadt concentration camp in 1944 after hiding in the Berlin underground. Her parents and her brother had already been murdered at Auschwitz in 1943. Mrs. Friedländer survived the horrors of the concentration camp and, after her liberation in May 1945, emigrated to the United States. At the age of 88, she decided to permanently return to her place of birth and

has since become one of the most prominent voices in Germany in defence of our liberal democracy. I call myself fortunate that we still frequently see each other.

Another person who supported me in my reflection process was Tali Nates, the founder of the Holocaust and Genocide Centre in Johannesburg, South Africa. Tali Nates is the daughter of a holocaust survivor. Her father had survived because he was one of the lucky who were on the famous list of Oscar Schindler. The Holocaust and Genocide Center Johannesburg is a great example how the lessons learned from the horrors of the holocaust can also help to deal with some of the more recent atrocities and to support the painful process of reconciliation.

As Head of the Family I have consequently made it clear and will continue to reiterate: No one who pandered to Nazis, modern antisemitisms or other forms of extremism can be considered a source of tradition for the House of Hohenzollern.

Families are not homogeneous. The youngest son of the former crown prince, Prince Friedrich, a godson of Queen Mary, left Nazi Germany in 1937 and emigrated to Britain. Here he would later get married to Lady Brigid Guinness. And today this new British-Prussian branch of my family has actually almost as many members as the branch in Germany.

My grandfather Prince Louis Ferdinand also did not follow his father's paths. He spent quite a few years in the 1930's working in the United States of America which greatly influenced his thinking. My grandfather told me how his encounters with extraordinary leaders like President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his wife Eleanor strongly influenced him to fully embrace the idea of liberal democracy. When in 1951, shortly after the second world war, my grandfather Prince Louis Ferdinand

succeeded his late father as Head of the Family, he became a strong advocate of a new, liberal and democratic Germany. Yet he never accepted the division of Germany, nor the division of Europe into a free and a communist part. Prince Louis Ferdinand firmly believed in the idea of a united Europe.

Reconciliation between our two countries was not an easy task after two dreadful world wars. Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II played a hugely important role in building the strong British-German friendship we cherish so much in our days.

In May 1965, Queen Elizabeth paid her first State Visit to post-war Germany, the first official visit of a British Sovereign since 1913. Described by Her Late Majesty as a 'deeply moving experience', her State Visit to Germany was hailed for its enormous diplomatic and cultural impact.

The 11-day tour was the first of 15 official visits to my country. The last of which – in 2015 – proved to be Queen Elizabeth's final major overseas tour.

The State Visit in 1965 was also the occasion of the first encounter of Queen Elizabeth and my late grandfather Prince Louis Ferdinand, who was Head of my family from 1951 until his death in 1994. My last encounter with Her Late Majesty was in fact at her last State Visit in June 2015. After her death, I wrote in my condolence letter to His Majesty King Charles III that "with her unique personality, her warmth and sincere dedication to duty and the common good, Queen Elizabeth had always been a remarkable example to me and our entire family had particularly admired her for her dedication to British-German reconciliation after the Second World War".

In November 2018, President Frank-Walter Steinmeier became the first German Head of State to take part in the Remembrance Day ceremonies in London – exactly 100 years after the end of the Great War. The President joined Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in laying a wreath at the London Cenotaph and accompanied her to the Armistice centenary service at Westminster Abbey. In November 2020, King Charles took part in the German Remembrance Day ceremonies.

In March this year, His Majesty also chose Germany for first ever State Visit as King. He became the first Monarch to be given the honour of addressing Germany's Parliament. In his speech at the Reichstag building that I also attended, King Charles said that his participation the German Remembrance Day ceremonies had shown how far the United Kingdom and Germany have travelled together in friendship and in peace – just as it was demonstrated so powerfully two years before by President Steinmeier's participation at the centenary events marking the end of the First World War.

In my role as Member of the Board of Trustees of the German War Graves Commission, I frequently participate in commemorative ceremonies at war cemeteries, and it always brings tears to my eyes when I read the age of the fallen in the inscriptions of the tomb stones – many of them younger than 20 years of age. That's why it makes me truly sad all the more that there is a terrible war raging in Eastern Europe again today, in which dozens of young people fall victim to the fighting every day. A reality I refuse to accept as the new normal!

Germany and the United Kingdom continue to be strong partners in NATO – and we firmly stand together in defence of freedom and democracy in Europe. And while I was personally disappointed when the British people voted to leave the European Union, I have no doubts that

the strong bonds of friendship between our two countries will prevail – since neither the Wembley Goal of 1966, the Golden Goal of the Euro 1996 (I was here finishing my A-Levels at that time) nor – most recently – the victory of the Lionesses against Germany in the Euro 2022 final have managed to shake the unbreakable bond of British-German friendship.

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Mr. President,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends,

Britain is known for being the oldest democracy in the world. In 2023, we see the concept of democracy once more being challenged in many parts of the world, even in Europe. With its commitment to freedom of speech, the Oxford Union Society remains a beacon of one of the core principles of liberal democracy. I would therefore like to congratulate you once more on your bicentenary jubilee. And I would like to encourage each and every one of you to play an active role in protecting freedom and democracy.

Thank you very much!