

Public Engagement: Hans Graf von Sponeck

Eulogy by Reinhard Jung



Dear Mr. von Sponeck, dear Mrs. von Sponeck, dear ladies and gentlemen and my dear friends!

We now come to the nomination for outstanding public Engagement for justice, peace and integrity of creation.

Mr. Hans Graf von Sponeck, you have worked in the field of Development and Conflict Management for 30 years – without us, or the German public knowing about your work. You served as a top diplomat in the United Nations for 30 years, from 1968 till 1998 and were, if I see it correctly, a successful “manager” for development co-operation and of the different UN-programmes. Your path through life began, to our surprise, in Bremen in 1939. Your career as a diplomat started in 1968 in Ghana and brought you and your family to different countries in Africa and especially to the Middle East.

Insofar, one may see your entire career path as outstanding public activity for development of peace and justice worldwide – without the public actually knowing about this – with the exception of experts of the German Foreign Ministry, of international organizations and so on. In a way, even you are one of the “unknown peace workers” that our Foundation focuses on – although you do not work for a grassroots movement or a NGO, but rather with the most important international alliance since 1945, the United Nations. And it is good to focus upon those professionals who, while working for the UNO, UNICEF, WHO etc. with strong

personal commitment and without making headlines, make important steps towards peace and development possible.

Dear Mr. von Sponeck. You might have remained such an unknown peace worker, if the UN-Secretary General Kofie Annan had not appointed you as Assistant Secretary General and Coordinator of the Humanitarian Program of the UNO in Baghdad in 1998. This sounds very honourable and sounds like the culmination of a long career as a diplomat.

Two years later, however, in spring 2000, you stepped down from this post and resigned from the UN out of protest against the sanctions policy of the UN-Security Council, that was mainly dominated by the interests of the USA and Great Britain. You realized that this type of sanctions policy would not weaken the cruel dictator Saddam Hussein, but would punish the Iraqi people instead. You had to see yourself, the consequences these sanctions had on Iraqi children. Altogether, more than 500 000 Iraqi children died because of the sanctions. You had to witness the reality behind statistics and estimations of the UNICEF and other humanitarian organizations, which stated that in the 12-year period after the first Gulf War in 1991, around 1.5 million Iraqis had to die due to lack of food and medical care – because of sanctions. There was only one x-ray device functioning in the whole of Iraq. Spare parts or new devices could not be imported. You wrote reports and like “tilting at windmills”, you fought against false claims in the western media that only Saddam and his clique was responsible for all the misery. You tried to change the policy of the Security Council, but you could not succeed. You yourself were declared the “Persona non grata” by the US-administration and the British Government. Against this resistance, the UN-General Secretary Annan did extend your contract in 1999, but in spring 2000 you yourself took the necessary steps and handed in your resignation. You were not alone with this decision. Two years earlier, your predecessor, Denis Halliday took the same decision and Jutta Burghardt, the head of the World Nutrition Program in Baghdad also did the same. We therefore think of both, Denis Halliday and Jutta Burghardt today as well.

Andreas Zumach, the co-author of your book, “Irak- Chronik eines gewollten Krieges“ (“Iraq, Chronicles of a Wanted War – How the World at Large is Manipulated and International Law is Broken), states in the introduction that “The withdrawal of the 3 UN-officials was the greatest revolt in the history of the world organization till date”. This revolt was definitely not an easy step for you. For a diplomat like you, it is surely the utmost what you felt compelled to do, it was certainly a decision taken out of deepest moral dilemma.

If I understand it right, you have devoted your entire life to the idea of the United Nations and therefore, also to the principles of international law and human development worldwide. If the Security Council of this organization, however, carries out a policy that is contrary to these principles, then you had to take this step if you wanted to remain true to your convictions.

Today, we should remind ourselves that your criticism then, does not go back to the time of the Bush-Administration. It was the Clinton-Era, Bush had not yet taken up office. Retrospectively, the Clinton Era might seem, to many of us, as the bright past before the dark present of the US Foreign Affairs. It was, however, Madeleine Albright, Secretary of State under Clinton, who publicly said in 1996 that the deaths of half a million children in Iraq – if it was the case – is a “reasonable price” for the maintenance of economic sanctions. Nothing in your book shocked me more deeply than this quotation.

Your resignation in 2000 could have been the guiding light for a different policy. It also received a great public response. You received the Peace Award of the Church of England among others. The British Policy, however, has not been influenced by this, as we know. What happened after that was even worse. The 12-year lingering war against Iraq turned into an active war in which thousands of Iraqi civilians lost their lives and the infrastructure of the country was completely destroyed.

I do not know how many children are still dying due to the consequences of war. What we know is: everyday, numerous American soldiers in Iraq are dying. There is a huge amount of hatred. Even the international aid organizations are being attacked. Those who have read or heard about your reports, know exactly why this is happening. It is the result of a fundamentally wrong, cruel and futile policy which already started in 1991.

Even after your resignation in the year 2000, you Mr. von Sponeck, did not simply withdraw to your private life. You raised public awareness about the consequences of this sanction policy in speeches and articles prior to summer 2002. Thereafter, as it became obvious that the Bush-Administration, no matter what, is going to start a second war on Iraq, you did your utmost to prevent the breach of international law. Neither did you – nor did we – succeed.

You, however, encouraged us to say NO to this infringement. Your strengthened us with your expertise and have helped thousands of people to understand better the situation in Iraq. You showed us through your publications, the fundamentals of a policy that could strip a cruel dictator like Saddam Hussein of his power without using inhuman means themselves.

You continue to be obliged to the human development of the international community and showed us that one can remain true to one's convictions, even if it leads to an abrupt end of one's career. Your consistent conduct out of your great expertise has given us important guidance.

Therefore, the Threshold Foundation, presents you with its 1st Bremen Peace Award for outstanding public Engagement for peace and justice.