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## **Sudeten German Homeland Association: „change through closeness”**

The Sudeten German Homeland Association (*Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft*) is one of the best organized and most aggressive organizations of this sort in the Federal Republic of Germany. Its political foundations are located in Bavaria, where the expellees from the Czech Republic, particularly numerous in this area, form a very dynamic pressure group. It is very well established in the local environment and sometimes functions as the “fourth Bavarian tribe”. Within *Bund der Vertriebenen*, the Sudeten German Homeland Association has been characterized by radical demands towards Czechoslovakia and then the Czech Republic. They were strongly against the Eastern policy initiated in the 1960s by the governmental coalition of social democrats and liberals, then they criticized Helmut Kohl for his allegedly submissive stance towards the Eastern neighbors during the negotiations concerning the reunification of Germany, while at the end of the 1990s they very vigorously demanded that the accession of the Eastern countries to the European Union depended on the fulfillment of the conditions set out by *Bund der Vertriebenen*. One of the favorite targets of the Association were, and still are, the so called Benes decrees (1945), which deprived German people of their citizenship and wealth; in the Association’s propaganda, Benes is considered to be one of the greatest criminals of the past century. The Sudeten Germans greatly contributed to the deterioration of the relations between West Germany and Czechoslovakia and, later on, between Germany and the Czech Republic, receiving the constant support of the Christian democratic Bavarian governments.

When the aggressive stance towards the Czech Republic turned out to be ineffective, the Homeland Association decided to change its tactics: they were willing to put aside the contentious issues, leave them for the future, while striving to develop a contact network and gain trust on the Czech side.

The Sudeten-German rally in Nuremberg (27-28 May 2012), funded by the Bavarian government, pointed to the interpenetration of the old and the new issues within the policy of the Homeland Association. It is estimated that about 20 thousand people gathered there, which is incomparably less than in the past, when the expellees used every occasion to renew personal contacts, recollect the moments spent together and manifest the political will to “return home”. The hall where the plenary meetings took place could accommodate much more people than was present (about one thousand). They were mainly elderly people, which is understandable, some middle aged and a few adolescents. The generation exchange is accompanied by the deterioration of the social background of individual homeland associations and the whole *Bund der Vertriebenen*, which is considered to have 1.3 million members, not 2 million as it has been claimed until recently. The children and grandchildren of the actual expellees are gaining voice and are now faced with the challenge of maintaining the tradition of the group and developing new methods of action. The motto of the rally was to preserve the memory of the homeland and ensure a safe future (*Herkunft pflegen, Zukunft sichern*). The logo of the rally depicted a signpost with arms pointing in opposite directions: „Heimat – Jugend”, „Spurensuche – Zukunft”, „Europa – Geschichte”, „Erlebnis – Nürnberg”, „Wiedersehen – Kultur”. This can be understood as an appeal to go in two directions: left, towards “the homeland”, “traces of the past”, “Europe”, “experience”, “reunion” and right, towards “the youth”, “future”, “history”, “Nuremberg” (which is the “new homeland”), “culture”. It is a bit ambiguous, but the message was clear: shape the future with the past in mind.

An adequately interpreted past appeared in the program speeches of the Association’s chairman, Franz Pany, and its spokesman, Bernd Posselt, who was a Christian democratic MEP. Pany recalled German input into the cultural development of the Czech Republic and the crime of “expulsion”, demanding from the Czech government to condemn the expulsion of the German population. Posselt said the same asking for, as always, the invalidation and condemnation of the Benes decrees. The Association’s spokesman was not very fond of the current president Vaclav Klaus. In the name of the *Sudeten Volksgruppe*, he said that he wished the Czech president would retire after the end of his tenure next year (which was applauded by the audience) and expressed his conviction that his successor will have a more open, European position. One can only imagine how the guests from the Czech



Republic invited to the meeting of the Association must have felt. Moreover, Posselt presented the well-known parallel between Lidice (the murder of the town's inhabitants by the Germans in return for the assassination of Heydrich), Terezin (German concentration camp for Jewish people) and Aussig-Ústí (the murder of at least 43 Germans). There is no excuse for what happened in Aussig, but a comparison with Lidice and Terezin is clear historical and moral abuse, done on purpose. In this context, the awarding of the Charlemagne Prize, funded by the Association, to a Jewish activist and former prisoner of Auschwitz, Max Manneiheimer, gained a slightly suspicious overtone.

The speech of the Prime Minister of Bavaria, Horst Seehofer (CSU), who is considered to be a tireless ally of the "expellees", met with approval. He made three important promises. Firstly, he announced direct financial support of the Bavarian government for the construction of a museum of Sudeten Germans in Munich (20 million euros, the remaining part from the federal fund, the opening of the museum is scheduled for 2015). Secondly, he promised that during the meeting of the governing Liberal Christian Democratic coalition leaders on 4 June 2012, he will call for a Bundestag resolution to make August 5 a national holiday to commemorate the date on which an "expellee" charter was passed in 1950. Even though the idea to commemorate this date, for which *Bund der Vertriebenen* has been striving for years, passed in the Bundestag thanks to the votes of Christian democrats and liberals, its implementation is clearly being delayed. Some statements contained in the charter were and still are openly provocative and honoring it with a holiday raises justified reservation not only in Germany, but also in Poland and the Czech Republic. Thirdly, Seehofer informed that during the meeting on June 4 he would firmly appeal for compensation for the German forced workers who were taken to work mainly in the Soviet Union, but also in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania. The chairperson of *Bund der Vertriebenen*, Erika Steinbach, also vouched: „I will be unyielding in this matter. This is a question of political credibility“ (Schmerzgeld für Lagerhaft, „Süddeutsche Zeitung“ 29 May 2012). It is estimated that the compensation will be paid to 40 thousand people and will amount to 5 thousand euros per person, which is 200 thousand euros in total. Last year, the Minister of Internal Affairs, Hans-Peter Friedrich (CSU), rejected the claims for compensation for German forced workers.

The program of the Sudeten German Homeland Association is directed at developing relations with different Czech organizations and institutions and especially at establishing direct contact with the Czech government. Posselt talked with great recognition and gratitude about the fact that the Prime Minister Seehofer took representatives of the Association with him for his visits to Prague twice. Thanks to that, the repeatedly renewed the demand of *Bund der Vertriebenen* to include the "expellees" in the formation process of the relations



between Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic was finally fulfilled, even if only at the level of the Bavarian government. The Association is clearly posing as a great “mediator” in the relations with the Czech Republic, an active advocate of the German-Czech “dialogue” and of course a “common” guardian of cultural legacy. In his article in the right-wing daily “Die Welt”, Gernot Facius stressed that the tone of the Bavarian Prime Minister and the leaders of the Association was “moderate” this time, the issue of the Benes decrees was not overly emphasized and the cooperation with the Czech Republic became the main point (G. Facius, Seehofer fordert einen Gedenktag für die Vertriebenen, „Die Welt” 29 April 2012). Corinna Nohn also noted in the liberal „Süddeutsche Zeitung” that the tone of the official speeches became softer, but she also pointed out that some notions from the old political language are still present in their propaganda. Expressions such as the “Sudeten-German issue”, “right to homeland” and “ethnic group” are still used (the notion of *Volksgruppe* was thoroughly discredited during the Nazi period). Some of the younger people do not seem to care, but in the statute of *Sudetendeutsche Jugend* claims for lost property and compensation, “expellee” charter and “right to homeland” are still mentioned (C. Nohn, Die Unbefangenen. Die Enkelgeneration der Sudetendeutschen will Brücken bauen, hält aber an Begriffen wie dem Recht auf Heimat fest, „Süddeutsche Zeitung” 29. May 2012).

It is still an open issue whether the trite phraseology is used to sweeten the changes in the Association’s policy for the “eternally yesterday’s” or, on the contrary – constitutes a real, long-term directive towards “dialogue” with the Czech Republic. If the words of Posselt and Pany are to be taken seriously, their main goal is to first gain the trust of the Czechs, especially establishing direct contact with the Czech government. Only in the second phase will discussions concerning the “hot topics” be undertaken, first of all, to revoke the so called Benes decrees and condemn the expulsion of the German population by the Czechs. It seems that a new edition of the “change through closeness” policy is in the making.

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