

STANISŁAW RABIEJ
Opole

LAUDATIO. HONORARY DOCTORATE FOR PROF. DR. HANS-GERT PÖTTERING

Your Excellency and Magnificent, Mr the President of European Parliament, distinguished Rector, honoured members of the University Senate, dear guests, ladies and gentlemen. Today, our academic community is celebrating a highly significant moment. Our University is paying homage to the outstanding personality of the Catholic Church and the Europe united by authentic long-lasting principles and values. This is the Europe of which Poland will become a full member, on May 1st, 2004. On this special occasion, we have the particular honour and pleasure to present the personality of a great friend of our country and of our university who is awarded the title of doctor *honoris causa* by the Opole University Senate.

This title signifies the acknowledgment of His Excellency's work value, of his personal contribution and, above all, it is a token of esteem for having guided us along the way to the European Union integration, which also stands for both science and experience, theory and practical discipline, without disregarding methodological rigour in applying the European acquis. Today's celebration gives us great pleasure to mention some of the key moments in his biography.

1. Portrait of Doctor Honoris Causa

Hans-Gert Pöttering was born on September 15, 1945, in Bersenbrück/Bad Iburg, in the southern part of Lower Saxony. His early childhood was marked by the absence of his father, whom he never knew. Pöttering's father visited his family house for the last time during Christmas 1944. For many years he was deemed missing. Adolescent Hans-Gert, along with his mother and elder brother, persistently waited for his father to come back from the World War II front. After the visit of Konrad Adenauer, the Chancellor of Germany, in Moscow in

1955, several thousand prisoners of war returned to their homes. The Pöttering family hoped that their missing father was among them. Unfortunately, he was not. Finally, they had to acknowledge the worst. Pöttering's father probably died early in April 1945 in the territory of the present-day Poland.

When speaking about his parents, the President of the European Parliament emphasises: „My father was an ordinary land forces soldier. His family was very religious and had never subscribed to the Nazi ideology. They lived in Münster Catholic enclave, whose bishop – Clemens August Graf von Galen – very early started to protest against the Nazi racist excesses” From his earliest childhood, Hans-Gert Pöttering has greatly admired his mother, looking on her as one of those widows who restored Germany and became the heroines of hard times. He deeply appreciates the fact that his mother, not having any professional experience, took over her husband's textile shop to support her family. At that time Hans-Gert was receiving a bereavement allowance. When he was 10 – 14, he was earning his living by selling Sunday newspapers.

These early experiences of H.G. Pöttering were instrumental in shaping his later commitment to reconciliation in post-war Europe. He seems to have been an advocate of this idea since he was 19. At this age he becomes involved in the activity of the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands – CDU), a Christian-based party serving to unite Catholics and Protestants, Conservatives and Liberals, proponents of Christian social ideas and men and women from various regions, social classes and democratic traditions. He becomes one of those, who believe that they have a responsibility to God in upholding the Christian ideals and caring for the environment. He also supports the freedom and dignity of all persons including equal rights among women, men and the disabled. As far as economic issues are concerned, he opts for maintaining progressive income taxes, the state subsidies to culture, education, etc. However, he wants some changes in the pension and allowance system. Along with many others, he supports a free movement of people, goods and ideas within Europe. He was actively involved in the political activity of his party which was focused on unification of Germany and improvement of relationships with neighbouring countries, particularly with France and Poland. From the very beginning he has been supporting European integration, including the process of integrating the former communist countries. He sees this process as the most effective way of cooperation and reconciliation between the Europeans. However, he strongly opposes the membership of Turkey in the EU. He feels that Turkey would not be able to guarantee human rights for its Christian minority.

Effective involvement in political life is possible only with a sound intellectual formation. Hans-Gert Pöttering's intellectual capacities were developed during law, political sciences and history studies in Bonn, Geneva (Institut des Hautes

Études Internationales: 1968-1973) and New York (Columbia University: 1971). Having obtained his law doctorate (1974), he was an academic employee of the University of Osnabrück (1976-1979). In 1995, he was conferred a title of honorary professor by this University. At the beginning, he tries to combine his academic work and political commitment with citizen initiatives. His independent publication, *Adenauers Sicherheitspolitik 1955-1963. Ein Beitrag zum deutsch-amerikanischen Verhältnis*, Düsseldorf 1975, comes from this period.

In 1979, Pöttering decides to become committed only to political activity. At the age of 33, he becomes a member the European Parliament (EP). He is one of only a few members of the EP who have served continuously since the first elections. As a lawyer and MP, he has vast knowledge about divided European structures and institutions. Taking the floor during parliament debates, he gains more and more recognition. Thanks to his skills and diligence, he occupies more and more responsible positions: in the period between 1984 and 1994, he was a chairman of the Subcommittee on Security and Disarmament; from 1996 to 1999, he chaired the Enlargement of the European Union working group; in 1994, he became a vice-chairman, and in 1999, a chairman of the European People's Party - European Democrats (EVP-ED), a Christian Democrat grouping. Despite his involvement at the European forum, he stayed in touch with his native environment. He constantly travels between his constituency in Osnabrück, Lower Saxony, and Brussels and Strasbourg. Since 1990, he has been a chairman of the Osnabrück district CDU. In the period between 1997 and 1999, he was a chairman of the Europa-Union Deutschland; he is still a member of the Executive Committee of CDU (1999-2007). Finally, as „one of the six survivors” from the first European elections in 1979, at the age of 61, Pöttering was appointed as the President of the European Parliament. On January 16, 2007, with 450 of 689 valid votes, he was elected as a successor of the Spanish socialist Josep Borrell.

2. Main fields of activity

As the 26th President of the European Parliament, Hans-Gert Pöttering, having 28 years of experience in the EP works, is not only a politics veteran but also an embodiment of a persistent Member of the European Parliament who is committed to strengthening the European identity. Since the very beginning of his presence in the EP, he has been a true pioneer of „the European spirit”. In his activity, he feels a heir of such outstanding Europeans as Robert Schuman, Jacques Delors or Władysław Bartoszewski, who all the time remind Europe of its soul and a need to care for the world of values. Such scope of interest was confirmed by our Doctor Honoris Causa in his recent inaugural speech to the European Parliament (February 14, 2007). He fully identified himself with the words of his outstanding EP President predecessor, Louise Weiss: „In any event,

let us never forget that we are heirs and executors at one and the same time – the heirs of an intellectual world and its executors for the benefit of coming generations”.

On this road to responsibility for the intellectual world of values: „We have not got much time. The world we live in is not prepared to wait for us to solve our internal problems (...) failure to act and indifference would be the greatest wrong we could commit” – as Helmut Kohl, honorary citizen of Europe, used to say. We can not suspect Hans-Gert Pöttering of failure to act towards intellectual unification of the Old Continent. He is known for his firm commitment towards enlargement of the European Union to include Member States from the former Soviet block countries. These states could access the EU thanks to overcoming old stereotypes and courage of such people as Pöttering. These are people to whom we owe overcoming of the division of Europe and victory of our shared values. The accession to the European Union of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia and of Malta and Cyprus on May 1, 2004, and of Bulgaria and Romania on January 1 this year, as well as of reunified Germany on October 3, 1990, is the miracle of our generation. We have a just cause to whole-heartedly enjoy this today, here in Opole.

Looking from the point of view of Silesia, we particularly appreciate the eagerness and enthusiasm of the newly elected President of the EP for reconciliation in Europe. We share his hope that it is possible to build a new Europe, free from totalitarianism, chauvinism and attempts to dominate, Europe which „unambiguously guarantees the dignity of each individual and preserves the balance of interests of particular social and ethnic groups”, Europe of „respect and diversity”. We should not overuse here such words as „freedom” and „tolerance” but rather speak of „dignity” and „respect”. It was clearly stated in the inaugural speech to the EP (February 13, 2007): „[...] European values have their fundamental roots in the dignity of the individual. In the dignity of an individual we respect the other, make a commitment and thus build a system based on responsibility and solidarity. In our practical political activities we should always serve the dignity of an individual and encourage all of us to defend human dignity and human rights throughout the world. This is not an abstract motion. Our image of a human being and our values become more convincing to others if we live our own lives with credibility”.

As a politician having wide knowledge, Pöttering notes that „[...] Europe’s future is dependent to a great extent on successful coexistence among cultures and religions within the European Union and between the European Union and our neighbours, first and foremost in the Arab and Islamic world. We must therefore do our part to ensure that dialogue among cultures and religions is the hallmark of Europe. We live in the continent of the three great cultures and religions – the

Christian, the Jewish and the Islamic. And we have fellow citizens who come from one of the world's other great cultures and who are at home in the world's other religions. We must actively support every example of coexistence in the Europe of Christians, Muslims and Jews – and also, of course, of those who do not belong to any of these religions. This is a crucial investment in our intellectual development. At the same time, it is the best contribution we can make to encouraging dialogue between cultures across the Mediterranean and beyond, to the Middle East and North Africa. We do not want the 'clash of civilisations', we want peace in freedom and justice among all nations and beliefs. This means building an intellectual and cultural bridge across the Mediterranean. This dialogue must be grounded in tolerance and truth. Tolerance does not mean accepting anything and everything. Tolerance means respecting the convictions of the other while maintaining one's own, and thus coexisting peacefully" (Inaugural speech to the EP – 13.02.2007).

A new initiative to found a „House of European History” – a museum devoted to the future, where the European idea could be further developed, is very interesting. This should be a place where our memory of European history and the work of European unification will be cultivated and which should be available as a locus for the European identity to go on being shaped by all present and future citizens of the European Union. Figuratively, this „House of European History” is made of diversified regions of Europe. The history of Europe confirms that in this House there is a place for those who want to implement the idea of unity of our continent while at the same time preserving its diversity. Also we, the inhabitants of Silesia, witness this process.

As it was accurately noted by one of reviewers (H. Juros): „Silesia is a cultural territory which is situated between Kraków, Vienna, Prague and Berlin, and further on – Regensburg, Bologna, Rome, Santiago de Compostela, Paris and Osnabrück. This land was unified with the entire Europe not only by trade routes followed by merchants and craftsmen but most of all by routes of intellectual contacts between monasteries, sanctuaries, universities and ruling families. It is the land crossed by Saint Jacob pilgrimage routes, Cistercian routes and paths of students, scholars and artists. Philosophers, thinkers, theologians, scientists, artists, architects, painters, writers and poets – mystics and humanists, were born or stayed here throughout the centuries. In their hearts and minds they were carrying the tracks of long ways having their origins in antiquity, classical Greek philosophy and Roman law, and leading through scholastic philosophy and the Middle Ages theological high masses to the modern rationalism of the Enlightenment and the present-day scientific neopositivism. Many outstanding scholars, the Noble Prize winners, were born in Silesia. Today it is obvious that Silesia belongs to the core of Europe of regions and jointly creates the community of values” As in the past, also today Silesia strives for harmonious

combination of particularistic and universal dimensions of the European culture. This ceremony is a unique opportunity to enter persons, who share similar values and are able to exchange them, to the history and culture of Silesia. Hence we are very grateful to those who accepted our invitation. The acceptance of the title of Doctor Honoris Causa of our Alma Mater distinguishes our House, which in this way even more strongly demonstrates its presence on the map of Europe.