

Sitting held to welcome the Austrian representatives at the Council of Europe (Strasbourg, 16 April 1956)

Caption: On 16 April 1956, during its Eighth Ordinary Session, the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe welcomes the Austrian representatives and invites them to take their seats in the Chamber.

Source: Council of Europe - Consultative Assembly. Official Report of Debates. Eight ordinary session. (First Part) 16th-21 April 1956. Volume I. Sittings 1 to 12. 1956. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

Copyright: (c) Council of Europe

URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/sitting_held_to_welcome_the_austrian_representatives_at_the_council_of_europe_strasbourg_16_april_1956-en-0b0da92c-643a-4c78-b617-220ac283c377.html

Publication date: 06/09/2012

Sitting held to welcome the Austrian representatives at the Council of Europe (Strasbourg, 16 April 1956)

[...]

3. Address by the Provisional President

Ladies and Gentlemen, after reading the controversies in the Press concerning the degree of achievement of the Council of Europe I should be failing in my duty if I opened the Eighth Session of the Assembly without some reference to what the Council has accomplished and how far it has travelled during this past year.

Without undue optimism, but also without that unexpected undercurrent of pessimism which was occasionally discernible at the recent ECSC Assembly in Brussels, we must briefly review the outstanding events of this short period in the life of our institution. Then, in the impartial light of the facts, we must draw our conclusions.

First of all, I would mention an event whose importance will be clear to one and all — a nation which until quite recently was still suffering grievous hardship through the loss of its independence and sovereignty today becomes an official Member of our organisation : I refer, of course, to Austria. (*Applause.*)

Three years have already elapsed since we first expressed the hope that Austria would join us as a Member, a hope which I fervently endorsed in the name of my country. We had been unanimous in voicing the admiration of the whole of Free Europe for a people which — even under foreign oppression — had jealously guarded its sense of independence and its devotion to the principles of freedom and national pride; a people which had suffered much but never wavered; a people which deserved the chance to add its valuable and loyal contribution to an organisation of the most advanced peoples of Europe.

I am happy to be able to tell you that the Foreign Minister of Austria has today deposited his country's official instrument of accession.

In the name of all here present I welcome M. Figl — that illustrious statesman who has come here to represent his country — and with him the seven representatives of Austria who now become full members of our Assembly.

Lastly, on behalf of the whole Assembly, I salute your proud flag, which will henceforth be flown in front of the House of Europe among the flags of all the nations represented here at Strasbourg.

As from today, the Austrian people will again be an intrinsic part of this Europe of ours to which we owe the most glorious period in the history of human civilisation, which is first and foremost a Christian civilisation. Thus, Austria becomes an element in that unity which gains increasing world significance as the bastion of freedom and democracy and will one day be recognised as such by the verdict of history. I would express to our Austrian colleagues our sincerest wishes for the future prosperity of their country.

[...]

5. Welcome to the Austrian Representatives

THE PRESIDENT (Translation). — I invite the Representatives of Austria to be good enough to take their seats in the Assembly Hall.

(The Austrian Representatives then left their places as Observers and took their appointed seats within the circle of Representatives.)

THE PRESIDENT (Translation). — I call M. Wistrand, Chairman of the Special Committee to watch over the interests of European nations not represented in the Council of Europe.

M. WISTRAND (*Sweden*) (Translation). — Mr. President, on behalf of the Special Committee for European non-member nations, of which I have been Chairman for the past two years, I should like to extend a warm welcome to the Austrian Representatives who have just taken their seats among us. (*Applause.*) Many of them, we are glad to see, are old friends of ours who have come here for a good many years in the special position of observers.

It was, of course, a cause of great satisfaction to us that they could be with us here as observers in the sombre days for their country which are now happily over. But let me say how very much better it is to feel that Austria is now fully with us in the task of building up Europe and that her representatives in this Chamber will be working, speaking and voting with us in this great enterprise.

Mr. President, it is to my mind a great and solemn moment when the geographical frontiers of the Council of Europe are extended eastwards to include Vienna and the Austrian people, and it is for me an honour and privilege to greet here the members of the Austrian Parliament, on behalf of the Special Committee for non-member nations, as old friends and new Representatives.

THE PRESIDENT (Translation). — I call Lord Layton.

Lord LAYTON (*United Kingdom*). — I ask for the floor for a few moments in order to offer my personal welcome to the Austrian delegation. I do so as one — probably the only member of this Assembly — who took part in the Peace Conference of 1919, when the present Austrian State was brought into being following the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Though that break-up was political liberation, it produced economic chaos, of which Austria bore the brunt. Within three years the currencies of Central Europe were collapsing — and that of Austria was leading the debacle. It was in Austria in 1922, that the League of Nations first tried to repair the damage by a financial reconstruction scheme.

Three years later, in the summer of 1925, Professor Charles Rist and I were sent to Vienna by the Council of the League to report on the economic state of Austria. Officially, our mandate was to advise the Council whether the time had come to withdraw the League of Nations Controller, but the Press summarised the purpose of our mission in the simple slogan " Can Austria live ? " It was a highly pertinent question. Was it possible for a great capital city with a disproportionately small territory — a large head with a very small body — to survive amid this ganglion of new States excited by the heady wine of national independence ? Was there a place for this great centre of rail and water communication, for its multitude of industries, for its commercial activities and for the metropolitan facilities of all kinds — professions, universities and so forth — which had previously served a population of more than 50 millions ?

Put shortly, the answer which we gave was " yes ", if — but only if — the surrounding nations would trade freely with Austria and permit the revival of something like the economic intercourse that had existed before the war.

But nationalist tendencies proved too strong, and it is not surprising that when the worldwide prosperity of the late 1920's slackened and the tide turned, it was the failure of the important Austrian bank, the *Kreditanstalt*, that precipitated the great economic crisis of 1931. I shall not refer to the subsequent history of Austria's struggle to obtain an independent existence, as the facts are known to everyone here.

In 1925, on my visit to Vienna, I learned something more than economic facts. In conversation with Mgr. Seipel, Dr. Renner, Otto Bauer and many other Austrian leaders of that time, I found there a conviction that, in spite of its economic weakness, their country still had an important political role to play in Europe. Though greatly shrunken in area, it was their hope that Austria would continue as a centre from which a spirit of toleration and an atmosphere of culture and of intellectual and political freedom would permeate central Europe. This conviction undoubtedly remains. We know in this Council that both Austria's constitution and her thinking are in keeping with the terms of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, and I feel confident that she will quickly become a party to that basic Convention of the Council of Europe.

This is a happy occasion for all who love Europe; but it is also an occasion when we should have in mind the sombre background that I have recalled, for today's ceremony is a reminder of three facts: first, that the basic European problem posed in an acute form by the fragmentation of Europe in 1919 has not yet been solved; secondly, that the basic principle of this institution here in Strasbourg — namely the closer integration of Europe — is the only one on which can be built the permanent stability of all the States of Europe, both great and small; thirdly, and lastly, that we need Austria and the qualities of her people and their faith to help us to achieve it. It is for those reasons that we welcome so warmly these new Representatives here today.

THE PRESIDENT (Translation). — I call M. Pittermann.

M. PITTERMANN (*Austria*) (Translation). — Mr. President, may I, first of all, thank you on behalf of my Austrian colleagues for your kind words of welcome. We also wish to thank M. Wistrand and Lord Layton, who so cordially welcomed us on behalf of the other members of this Assembly. We have sat in your midst since 1952 as observers for the Austrian Government, and have never forgotten that both the Committee of Ministers and the Consultative Assembly were thus showing us special consideration, which we counted as valuable support and an encouraging expression of your sympathy for Austria.

When we were first admitted here, a quadripartite occupation of our country, the Austrian Republic, prevented us from exercising its full sovereign powers. Our small country was split up by demarcation lines. But, once free of National Socialist rule, my country deliberately took up the struggle for complete political and economic independence. Although the two major parties, which have constituted the Government and the overwhelming Parliamentary majority since 1945, were, barely eleven years before, antagonists in a most terrible civil war, they have learned by events and have agreed to forget their causes for dissension in giving precedence over all party interests to the common political aim of making Austria once more a free and independent country.

Throughout these difficult years, our presence at the debates of the Strasbourg European Assembly afforded us great moral support. It strengthened in us the conviction that the democratic States of Europe were following and sustaining with the utmost interest the struggle to safeguard human rights in Austria.

That is the reason why the Austrian Parliament wished, upon the conclusion of the State Treaty, to replace the right to send observers to the Assembly, by an assumption of the responsibilities of full membership. In the course of its final session the Austrian Parliament, now dissolved in view of forthcoming elections, decided by 161 votes to 4 Communist votes that the Austrian Republic should accede to the Council of Europe as full Member.

By virtue of this decision, we are no longer mere observers, but are now able to join the ranks of your community on equal terms with other members. Having, throughout centuries of our history, created with other nations a political community in Central Europe extending beyond all political and national frontiers, we still consider these peoples to be related to us in a political sense rather than to be mere neighbours. As we Austrians take our place as a free people in the community of the free peoples of Europe, we call to mind with deep sympathy all those who, by an inhuman system of barbed wire, are divided from them in what amounts to a veritable dungeon. Their fate should constantly remind us that the action of leaving an organised community, whilst certainly affording freedom from responsibilities towards this community, offers no guarantee that such freedom can in the long run be maintained. (*Applause.*)

The fate of these peoples should remind us that the community defends, without resorting to force, the freedom of all its members more effectively than any one of them could possibly do.

As delegates of the Austrian people, we wish to fulfil the mandate with which we have been entrusted and add our modest strength to yours so that, together, we may reach the goal to which we all aspire: to make Europe the continent in which peace is allied to freedom and the home of human rights and contemporary humanism.