Foreign language skills of a German Politician

- Franz Josef Strauß and the use of English

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Introduction:

The following talk will deal with an issue, which has in the field of politics not a first priority status. What matters is the way how someone deals with and acts on political issues or as Franz Josef Strauß put it: "[...] The task of a politician is to elaborate practical and pragmatic solutions to the problems with which he is faced. It is no part of his obligation to be an idealistic world reformer, a concocter of plans, a sort of political engineer. [...]"

However, language skills are part of the biographical background, therefore it seems justified to consider this matter more closely. His skills of Latin and ancient Greek are generally known in public and according to his personal aides there was a basic knowledge of French as well. Regarding his skills in English you can have a look at it from three points of view: the Public Speaker, the author and the sender and addressee of letters.

Before that it might be useful to recall some biographical facts. Franz Josef Strauß was born on 15th September 1915 in Munich and died on 3rd October 1988 in Regensburg. Between 1948/49 he became a member of one of the forerunners of the later federal parliament, the Bi-Zonal Economic Council at Frankfurt. Being a member of the German Federal Parliament 1949/78, he joined several Federal Cabinets as minister without Portfolio (1953/55), minister of Nuclear Energy (1955/56), minister of Defence (1956/62) and finally minister of Finance (1966/69).

In 1978 his main political activities shifted to Bavaria, where he became Prime Minister. A position he kept till his death in 1988. Beside these functions he was the leader of the Bavarian Conservative Party, CSU, for 27 years (1961/88).

The Public Speaker

The first encounter with English dates back to his years at the Maximilians-Gymnasium in Munich, a grammar school with classical bias. The final class report, dated 5th April 1935, describes the skills in English as "outstanding". This judgement probably refers more to skills in reading and writing than to pronunciation, because Franz Josef Strauß had a strong German/Bavarian accent for his entire life.

According to his CV the use of English came into practice at the end of World War II. In 1945 American forces occupied the district of Schongau, a region in the south-west of Bavaria. Nazi party leaders as well as members of the former German army were traced and put into custody. Among them was a young secondary school teacher and 2nd lieutenant: Franz Josef Strauß.

Very soon the local US military administration drew its attention to this English speaking German officer. A recommendation to the Military Government of Bavaria followed and on 1st June 1945 Franz Josef Strauß has been appointed as "Assistant Landrat". One area of responsibility of such Deputy District Commissioner was to act as mediator between the German population and the local military administration. This appointment also kicked off a political career, which should make him an estimated, sometimes controversial figure in German politics.

It is worthy to mention here that the Schongau years had in some way an impact to his judgement of the political party system, too. His later attitudes towards the Liberal

Party, FDP, as a third political force in Germany's political landscape seems to originate from the American party system. There there is no need for a third political force as the two main parties, the Republicans and the Democrats, cover most of social political developments in the American society.

When Franz Josef Strauß joined the Adenauer Cabinet for the first time in autumn 1953, public interest on this young, gifted politician, whose ability of Public Speaking put him in the first row of German politics, home and abroad grew . In his personal papers, stored at the Archive of Christian-Social Politics in Munich, a lot of cuttings are kept including the presumably German weekly "The Bulletin", which introduced the recently appointed Cabinet Minister on 29th October 1953 in a column called "The Weekly Biography" to English readers.

Before this appointment he had taken the opportunity to visit the United States for the first time in spring 1953, after a similar invitation has to be declined due to his candidacy of the political district of Weilheim/Schongau for the German Federal Parliament, the Bundestag. The visit had been organized by US officials as a part of an exchange programme, which should give members of the Bundestag an insight view of democratic proceedings and interplay. Images of the journey were part of a letter of candidacy, which has been published as a report of his activities to his constituencies during the federal election campaign in the same year. Two years later, 1955, the first visit to Britain took place. Franz Josef Strauß was a Cabinet minister at that time and responsible to negotiate with Britain over the purchase of reactors for research projects in Germany.

During his time as a politician Franz Josef Strauß travelled to many foreign countries

to foster existing contacts or to establish new ones. Among them were the United States and the United Kingdom, which he visited 32 and 27 times respectively. The reason for such journeys were either related to his different responsibilities as a member of Parliament, a Cabinet Minister, a Prime Minister of Bavaria and a party Leader or to invitations by debating societies, business clubs or private persons to address them as Public Speaker. It might also be interesting to learn as well that he received his first honorary degree by the faculty of law at the University of Detroit in 1956 and that his second honorary citizenship had been granted by the city of Chicago in 1959.

When in 1954 Franz Josef Strauß has been asked to represent the German government in an American television programme, the reaction of German Newspapers was disparaging. His spelling was described as "friable" and emphasised that the then Cabinet minister was unable to cope with the format. As the programme "See it now", broadcast by CBS and hosted by Ed Murrow, placed the participants in different studios and united them only for the viewer, they were unable to jointly communicate. An opportunity, which would more likely meet the abilities of Franz Josef Strauß.

However, in 1956 he appeared again nationwide on American television screens, which was for a German Cabinet member at that time quite exceptional. Being a minister of nuclear Energy he has been interviewed in the CBS programme " Face the Nation" by a panel of journalists with regard to general German governmental issues, the peaceful use of nuclear energy as well as matters of security and foreign policy. A similar event happened two years later, when in 1958 the other national US network,

ABC, presented in its programme "Meet the Press" the German minister of Defence, Franz Josef Strauß. Beside the issues discussed already in 1956, the journalists this time focused more on ideas of the government as well as his personal views concerning the "German problem".

The author

It has been mentioned before that Franz Josef Strauß had a renowned reputation as Public Speaker. But he was an author as well. He drafted articles for English speaking magazines and wrote books, which were published or later translated and edited in English. One of his most important books was "The grand design. A European solution to German reunification".

The book has been published in London in 1965, while an enlarged and slightly changed German edition followed one year later (*Insert image 5*).It seems strange that a book was published first in a foreign language and then in the mother tongue of the author. One explanation may lie in the biography of Franz Josef Strauß. Three years earlier, 1962, in the wake of the "Spiegel-Affair", in its core a row between the government and the media over leaked documents and the freedom of the press, he had to resign from his post as minister of Defence. The involvement in this affair overshadowed his political image home and abroad for quite a along time.

To encounter that and to raise a conservative voice regarding the "German problem", it was decided to publish a book targeting in particular readers in the United Kingdom and the United States. In this context a British political writer, Brian Cornell, was successfully approached to edit and translate the conceptions of Franz Josef Strauß from transcribed recordings. It is also worthy to mention that this

publication took place one week earlier than a book on nearly the same subject by Fritz Erler, the then opposition leader at the Bundestag, who dealt with it from a social-democratic point of view.

The basic idea expressed in the book of Franz Josef Strauß was that the "German problem" has "[...]to be Europeanized and German policies incorporated in a higher European organization and unity". By the way a vision, which should come true, when in 1990 Germany has been reunified within a European framework. From a publishers point of view this aim has been achieved, because his considerations were widely discussed in British newspapers and political circles alike.

The sender and addressee of letters

In the personal papers of Franz Josef Strauß you not only find clues of his use of English regarding speeches, articles from and about him or interviews given to English speaking newspapers, but also letters sent to heads of states, members of parliament or allied political parties as well as queries from debating societies, business clubs and journalists in English speaking countries and beyond. Although most of these letters are drafted and signed by his aides there is also personal drafting. One example is an exchange of letters between Franz Josef Strauß and the then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. The issue was the political situation in southern Africa and in particular the political developments concerning Zimbabwe/ Rhodesia. Franz Josef Strauß has always taken a special interest in that region. In summer 1979 he wrote a detailed letter to Margaret Thatcher, by analysing the current situation, the results of a conference of the Commonwealth in Lusaka and the impact to Zimbabwe/Rhodesia. In his closing remarks he made use of the means of

understatement, when he referred to his language skills as follows " I apologize for my handwriting and my poor English, but I hope, I could express myself and make myself understood" (*Insert image 6*). The Prime Minister's reply was polite but firm. In a two paged letter she thanks him for his interest in the matter and assured him at the same time that Britain were in full control of the current situation and his worries expressed in his letter were without foundation.

Finally another area for his use of English should be touched upon briefly. Franz Josef Strauß was a passionate pilot. He hold several pilot's licences including a licence for turbo prop air-crafts. Therefore his personal papers contain furthermore training instructions as well as hand written word lists of aeronautical terminology in English.

Conclusion

The political thinking of Franz Josef Strauß has always been associated with global thinking. He had a profound command of written and spoken English, but never made a lot of fuss about it. Earlier than some of his political contemporaries in Germany he was aware that the use of English was an excellent tool to express views on certain political issues, to widen personal horizons and to foster relations to others beyond national boundaries. In this respect Franz Josef Strauß is an obvious example for the rise of English from one among many languages to the "Lingua Franca" of the global village of today.

Quotes:

1) The grand design, London 1965, pg. 102
2) The grand design, London 1965,pg 75
3) Letter to Margaret Thatcher NL Strauß Fam 1082

References:

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- Terence Prittie, Franz Josef Strauß:'Das große Konzept" in: Die Zeit Nr.38 17. September 1965 pg. 7; NL Strauß BPA 1.-30. September 1965: Daily Telegraph 11.9. 1965