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The Freedom to Speak, Create and Dream

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The Freedom to Speak, Create and Dream

A campus symposium examines the Iron Curtain's fall from multiple perspectives.

Story by KIM HILL



HRH Prince Georg von Habsburg-Lothringen speaks at a symposium that inspired the interdisciplinary “Walls and Bridges” theme.

As an example of academic collaboration in action, this October scholars and dignitaries from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines came together for a three-day symposium examining 25 years of human experience after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

“The Freedom to Speak, Create and Dream” was made possible by a Mellon grant for “Re-Centering the Humanities” and sponsored by the Russian and East European Studies team, the Western European Studies team and funds from the Isaac Funk Endowed Professorship at Illinois Wesleyan. Professors Marina Balina and Scott Sheridan, as co-directors of the International Studies program, organized the conference.

Among the speakers was HRH Prince Georg von Habsburg-Lothringen, son of the last Crown Prince of the Austrian Empire, who opened the conference by explaining that, as a child, he recalled standing “on the Iron Curtain looking at my mother’s house on the other side — looking across the minefields, fences, watchtowers, ferociously barking dogs and a very depressing line that went through a continent.”

With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to forget that the events that caused those fences to be opened and the watchtowers to be abandoned were anything but orderly and somehow inevitable.

Several speakers reminded the audience, particularly the students who were not yet born in 1989, that no major political figure predicted that the Soviet Union would cease to exist by the end of 1991 or that Communist governments would collapse in the Eastern Bloc.

“The years of 1989 to roughly 1991 were marked by a high degree of uncertainty and improvisation,” said panel participant Kathleen Montgomery, associate professor of political science at IWU. “American triumphalism aside, the end of the Cold War raised more questions than it answered.”

Amidst many uncertainties in the 1990s were questions of what would happen to the countries that had been drawn into the Cold War as proxies, or what a reunified Germany would mean to the European Union (EU). Indeed, much of the symposium’s second day centered on the EU’s ongoing challenges, including questions of how Europe will develop in the next few years and beyond.

“These questions are deeply connected with the fall of the Iron Curtain,” said von Habsburg-Lothringen.

Even after 25 years, Europe is not able to speak in one voice because the EU is 28 member states, said featured speaker Darina Malová, a political science professor at Comenius University in Slovakia and a previous Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence at IWU.

“When there are problems, especially economic problems, the issues are framed in a nationalist, politically cultured way,” Malová said. “This pits opposing nations against each other, especially when it comes to nationalist parties in Europe.”

Another invited guest, Peter I. Barta, a professor emeritus at the University of Surrey, said nationalist and separatist movements in Europe address those parts of the population that have the least to gain from the EU. Barta is also editor of *The Fall of the Iron Curtain and the Culture of Europe* (Routledge, 2013).

All three speakers met with students in classes. In an interview with *IWU Magazine*, von Habsburg-Lothringen said the Illinois Wesleyan students presented themselves as unafraid of “asking questions, which is good. Students were also *prepared* for asking questions, which is even better.”

Von Habsburg-Lothringen, who is a grandson of Emperor and King Karl, the last monarch of the Hapsburg dual monarchy of Austria and Hungary, regularly speaks at colleges and universities throughout the United States and Europe. He noted the difficulty in making the past come alive

for current students, where, even in his current home of Hungary, young people can't relate to communism.

"It's the past for them," he said. "They've never been to Budapest in a time where they had to show a passport."

For the distinguished guests, however, and others living under communism, the fall of the Iron Curtain meant that the freedom to speak and to dream, so often taken for granted in the West, would be possible.

"After 1989, I had the opportunity to cross the border into Hungary, and the first thing I noticed was the lack of color," the prince recalled. "Everything was a kind of gray. Then, in the years after, it was a kind of spring, as colors began to appear, filling stations opened, shops came to central Europe, and you could see these countries start living again."

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