

“What People Do When Words Fail Them”: Willy Brandt’s Silent Apology

How important is an apology?

In the aftermath of genocide, those victims who have survived are scarred forever. They are left to cope with the loss of loved ones and the painful memories of violence against themselves, their family and their people. In such circumstances, how important is an apology? Is an apology crucial for reconciliation? Or is the act of apologizing after an event as horrible as genocide an empty one that falls short, even to the point of being offensive to former victims?

On December 7, 1970, West German Chancellor¹ Willy Brandt traveled to Warsaw, Poland on a state visit meant to improve relations with Poland and the USSR. On that day, Brandt attended a commemoration of the Jewish victims of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of 1943. Although it had been decades since the historic uprising and the end of the Holocaust, Brandt was aware of the importance of this official state visit. He would later describe his thoughts leading up to the event:

An unusual burden accompanied me on my way to Warsaw. Nowhere else had a people suffered as in Poland. The machine-like annihilation of Polish Jewry represented a heightening of bloodthirstiness that no one had held possible. On my way to Warsaw [I carried with me] the memory of the fight to the death of the Warsaw ghetto.

Filled with emotion on the day of the ceremony, and taken by the enormity of the moment, Brandt spontaneously dropped to his knees before the commemoration monument, a profound act of apology and repentance. Although he spoke no words, the image of this silent apology, seen in the news by so many Poles and Germans, had a powerful effect on both nations. Later, when Brandt described the moment, he wrote that he felt as though he “had to do something to express the particularity of the commemoration at the ghetto monument. On the abyss of German history and carrying the burden of the millions who were murdered, I did what people do when words fail them.”

Done in the name of Germans past and present, the silent act was arguably more powerful than any words Brandt might have uttered. It demonstrates how language sometimes falls short of capturing the overwhelming tragedy of genocide and war—and of human beings’ inhumanity towards one another.

In general, Germans and Poles were touched by Brandt's famous act of penitence. Many in Poland saw it as an important gesture towards peace and reconciliation². Younger Germans were especially moved by the act. But some Germans questioned Brandt's

¹ the person who is head of state (in several countries)

² the ending of conflict or renewing of a friendly relationship between disputing people or groups

actions. An active Social Democrat as a teenager, Brandt had fled Germany in 1933 when the Nazis took power. He lived mostly in exile and was involved in underground work until the end of World War II, before returning to his homeland in 1947. Some older Germans might have questioned Brandt's patriotism and had difficulty with the spontaneous act at the Warsaw monument. The cover of the popular German magazine "Der Spiegel," which came out one week later, posed the question, "Should Brandt have kneeled?"

At the dedication of Willy Brandt Square in Warsaw on December 6, 2000, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder recalled Brandt's heroic act of nearly thirty years before:

Here a German political leader, the head of government representing the Germans in the Federal Republic of Germany, had the sympathy and the courage to express something that words, no matter how carefully phrased, were unable to: we committed crimes and we confess to these crimes.

This image of Willy Brandt kneeling has become a symbol. A symbol of accepting the past and of understanding it as an obligation for reconciliation. As an obligation for a common future. Like so many Germans and Poles I will never forget this image. It has come to be a reminder and a political credo for entire generations.