

A life in politics

Jürgen Chrobog

A life in politics

A diplomat looks back.

B&S SIEBENHAAR VERLAG

INHALT

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FORWARD

Sigmar Gabriel

To understand the contemporary world and what the future may hold, we need to know our own history. Jürgen Chrobog's memoirs provide a very readable roadmap on that journey.

Jürgen Chrobog was born in the early years of World War II and brought up in post-war Germany, which soon became a front-line state in the Cold War. He embarked on a career in the German Foreign Office. His memoirs take us on a journey through the various stages of his career, from his initial training as a diplomat to his appointment as permanent secretary under the then foreign minister, Joschka Fischer.

Jürgen Chrobog rose quickly through the ranks at the German Foreign Office, yet his memoirs do not focus on himself but on his experiences and understanding of crucial turning points in Germany's post-war history. Jürgen Chrobog served four foreign ministers: Walter Scheel, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, Klaus Kinkel and Joschka Fischer and his autobiography reveals a lot about them – how they saw the world as well as the way in which they shaped German foreign policy.

German reunification is a focal point in Jürgen Chrobog's memoirs, as is his close cooperation with Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher. These events have gained importance in current times because the world order established at the end of the Cold War – and the expectations it brought – has been unexpectedly challenged.

At no point does Jürgen Chrobog simply recount the past; he is consistently at pains to discuss events bearing in mind later developments. Not only does this make the memoirs valuable in their own right, but it also highlights the author's great service throughout his time working for the German Foreign Office, a ministry he helped shape in crucial ways over many years. In all that time, he always stayed true to himself and let nothing erode his principles. He had the courage to fight his corner even when it might have been easier to just go along with established views.

Diplomacy was Jürgen Chrobog's vocation and calling. His memoirs show us the most important milestones of foreign affairs through his eyes, helping us understand where we stand today and

why. His life's work provides a benchmark for all those taking on responsibility for the future of the country at both home and abroad. A better future is possible if we believe in it and let nobody wreck that belief.



Sigmar Gabriel headed several German ministries between 2005 und 2017, including the Federal Foreign Office.

PROLOGUE

I thought long and hard about whether I should still write my memoirs, after all I am already over eighty. I did not want to add to the collection of life stories of German diplomats featuring photos of the author between two heads of state. I tend to agree with our long-serving Head Interpreter at the German Foreign Office, Heinz Weber. He had come up with a wonderful title that neatly described both his character and the role of the interpreter: “*Randfigur in der Mitte*” – ‘A peripheral player at center stage.’ Sadly, he died before he could put pen to paper. I also see my role as that of an observer and adviser permitted a certain degree of input.

I write these reminiscences at the urging of my three sons, who have repeatedly asked me to leave something in writing for them – and in turn, for their children, our grandchildren. I hope that those grandchildren, with their German-Libyan-English and German-Brazilian heritage, will still be able to speak German. The pressures of work during our lifetimes have left us little time, as parents, to pass on our experience by talking about them. This was particularly the case while I was working, my professional life involved innumerable trips which took me away from my family. There were no shared evenings around the fire as in days gone by. I am now caught between being a news junkie, Netflix, and my own lethargy. Nonetheless, I shall do my best to recount my observations through my diplomatic career. Let us see how long I can keep the momentum going.

I am bolstered by Mark Twain’s observation: “Writing is easy. All you must do is cross out the wrong words.” This is particularly good advice when you are dealing with political issues or writing about people – and even more so when you are dealing with both at once. You must be very careful how you treat your friends and acquaintances who are still alive, although there are consistently ever fewer of them left. When Margaret Thatcher was publishing her memoirs, Hans-Dietrich Genscher warned her in ominous tones to be careful as her writings would be followed by someone else’s. He brought out his own memoirs, (“*Erinnerungen*” Siedler Verlag 1995) a few years after her. Typically for him, though, all

the juicy stories that he could have told and that would have made for a good read, had been cleansed from the text by the time he was finished. We should not always pull our punches.

In recounting my life's journey, I am less interested in the facts – real or imagined – as they have been adequately described by the players themselves, such as by Genscher or publications of academics, journalists, and other diplomats or described as fake or alternative facts by Kellyanne Conway, senior counsellor to President Trump.

In this personal chronicle I am more interested in the way political events over the past few decades unfolded and the impressions I gained along the way. I will try to put things in context, to report on what happened on the side lines, to consider marginal figures, politicians and their staff, and the international environment – in a nutshell, the inside view of a not-exactly-outside observer.

I.

CHILDHOOD, YOUTH, MILITARY SERVICE, LAW DEGREE

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