

Piotr Sordyl

Fast Friends

‘Travelling is a beautiful thing. I’ve done a lot of it in my life,’ says Barbara. We are sitting in the warm and quiet lounge of the Bristol City Hall on a chilly autumn afternoon. We both enjoy the atmosphere as we converse about the Bristol-Hannover twinning. ‘The more people you meet, the more you realise we are all alike.’

‘I studied German between 1955-58. I got involved in the exchange project through a founder of Hanoverian society. It was the end of January 1956. I went to Hannover, and Almuth came here.’ After World War II ended, Bristolians reached out in friendship to the devastated European cities, resulting in the first twinning relationship forming in 1947 between Bristol and Hannover, along with Bordeaux. It was a significant step towards reconciliation. Now, in 2022, the heart-warming initiative celebrates its 75th Anniversary.

‘My mother was a communist and wanted to help people so, even before I did my exchange, we sheltered Elke at our house. Berlin was desolate and ravaged by extreme hunger. Quakers organised a rescue programme enabling people to house refugee children.’ Rationing was the norm in the years following the war, and even though present in Britain, it never got as dire as in Germany. Early support focused on sending parcels of food, clothing, and shoes.

‘Elke and I were ten years old and made fast friends. That’s why I learnt German. I pestered my Latin teacher (there was no German class) until she gave me a German excerpt from the Bible. She said, “If you learn this by heart, I will teach you.” And so, I did.’

‘Of course, there was hostility towards Germany. Being German must have been hard, the sense of guilt, what Hitler had done; but we can’t forget that the British did dreadful things too.’

The past is riddled with conflicts. World War II was preceded by “the war to end all wars” as World War I was referred to. Many followed since — Vietnam, Kosovo, Iraq, and the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine.

‘I remember seeing a German plane shot down on the opposite field. We cheered as children, but my mother would always make us remember they were people too. “Back at home, he has children and a wife,” she used to say.’

‘Almuth, my Hannover exchange counterpart, and I shared fondness for each other’s families. They were very musical and sang a lot. Her mother and mine both grew vegetables in the garden. Almuth loved visiting the countryside in North England and I loved travelling. My friendship with her lasted our whole life until her passing away five years ago.’

‘I have no idea how it is to be German,’ Barbara says in the quiet of the City Hall. ‘But from all the experiences we shared, we realised we are the same. Recent events, such as Brexit, show how crucial the Bristol-Hannover twinning is. Nurturing friendships between nations brings us together and creates stronger communities on a global scale.’

