Dear Friends,

Twenty years “Bridges of Understanding”, and today for the first time “Candles in the Night” in Wuerzburg. Twenty years filled with historical sad and hopeful events.

Walter Braun and Renate Geiser invited me to recall the beginning of the successful experiment of the Wuerzburg IPPNW group to bring together medical students from different regions of former Yugoslavia, to learn and work together, to remove enemy images and to build and enjoy friendship.

How did this start? With great concern the world observed the political development in Yugoslavia after the first free elections in Slovenia and Croatia in April 1990. Our sorrows became true when the open war broke out, at first between Serbia and Slovenia followed by fighting between the Coalition of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina with Serbia in June 1991. Many people in Yugoslavia, especially Medical Doctors were full of despair. Two of them decided to engage for dialogue, reconciliation and steps for a cease-fire, Dr. Vuk Stambolovic from Belgrade and Dr. Milan Kosuta from Zagreb. They founded the “Peace initiative of Croatian and Serbian Physicians” and organized meetings in both cities. This was a “candle in the night” of chaos. Unfortunately nationalism remained stronger, war continued, the candle was blown out.

At that time I was IPPNW-Vice-President of Europe. IPPNW had received the Peace Nobel Prize about seven years before. I felt it my duty to support peace willing politicians and academicians and medical doctors in Croatia and Serbia and to prove our solidarity with them. In April 1992 I travelled to Zagreb and met with Dr. Milan Kosuta and professor of Cardiology Dzenana Rezakovic. At meetings with several members of the new Croatian government, e.g. the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister for Refugees and the President of the Parliament I was informed about the difficult situation. President Tudjman was not in the country, he sent me a letter. I urged for a cease-fire and steps for solving the problems without war. The President of the Croatian National Academy of Sciences and Arts invited me to explain the activities and philosophy of our international medical peace organisation “International Physicians for Peace and the Prevention of Nuclear War”.

Many of the people I met were afraid of a new large scale “Balkan War”, and especially the Medical Doctors showed willingness to support peace work. They gladly accepted our suggestion to found a doctors organisation cooperating with IPPNW, which they called “Physicians for Peace in Croatia”. They elected the professor of cardiology, Dzenana Rezakovic as the chair. With her we drove in a Red Cross car through destroyed villages and shelled cities and I spoke with Croatian soldiers at the front line. I was very sad and asked myself, why was this war necessary, could it not have been prevented by wisdom and dialogue? How can we help? In Germany I reported to our government, to journalists and of course to our IPPNW.

In August 1992 I travelled to Belgrade and met with Dr. Vuk Stambolovic. He organized for me conversations with the leaders of the political parties in Belgrade. Very informative was a rather long talk with the leader of the Social Democratic Party Mr. Djinjic, who asked for diplomatic support from the German government which so far he did not receive.

I had a two hour discussion with the President of Yugoslavia, Mr. Cosic. I urged him to use his influence to stop the bombardments of Sarajewo, but his power was reduced because the military responsibility was with the Serbian President Mr. Milosevic. I met with the Bishop of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the Bishop of the Catholic Church and with different peace groups, as e.g. “the women in black”, or the “Belgrade Circle”, in which intellectuals who were opposed to the war and to Milosevic met and discussed. They all were grateful for my visit. I even got the opportunity to speak in a free channel of Radio Belgrade. I explained that Germany and the West was not against the Serbian people, but against the government’s policy to use military force against the other Yugoslav nations and Kosovo. Finally the group of medical doctors around Dr. Vuk Stambolovic founded the “Physicians for Peace in Serbia”. They elected Prof. Milan Popovic as their president. He was a well-known Professor of Psychiatry and Psychology at the University of Belgrade. Dr. Vuk Stambolovic was a docent of Social Medicine. He was elected deputy and IPPNW- International Councillor.
Returned home I gave a detailed report to Foreign Minister Genscher and urged him to start dialogue with Mr. Djinjic and to support the peace movement in Serbia.

Again in December 1992 I visited the colleagues of the Croatian Physicians for Peace in Zagreb and also Bosnian refugee camps near Zagreb, to which I brought medications and hygiene articles and blankets. The situation was very sad, war continued.

In April 1993 I travelled for the second time to Belgrade. With Prof. Popovic I visited Serbian refugee camps, and with Dr. Vuk Stambolovic I travelled to Pristina in Kosovo. Prof. Popovic had organized for me to give a speech in the Lecture hall of the University hospital for Internal Medicine. I spoke about the responsibility of medical doctors to prevent hostility and war and cited the Hippocratic Oath and our medical ethics. I urged for cooperation and reconciliation with the doctors of Kosovo. They listened but after my speech they did not ask questions to the theme, but only about treatment of special diseases. Since Albanian speaking medical students and professors had been dismissed from the university by Milosevic, my audience consisted only of Serbs.

Thereafter I met with a group of 12 Kosovar professors and doctors who informed me about their absolutely intolerable situation. They built a group called “Physicians for Peace in Kosovo” and started contacts with IPPNW-Germany and international.

In December 1993 I visited our Croatian colleagues for the third time and continued my mission to Bosnia-Herzegovina. With an UNHCR special passport I was allowed to take a car to West-Mostar. The town had received many destructions during fighting the Serbian and lateron the Croatian army. The coalition of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina was broken. The Bosnian army was defeated and almost only Croats were now living here. Mostar was no longer the famous city in which people with three or more different religions had lived friendly together. The world famous bridge connecting West and East Mostar was destroyed. I visited the two hospitals. In the City Hospital the multi ethnic life was still vivid. The Chief Surgeon was still a Serbian, the Internist a Croatian, the Anesthetist a Jewish Croatian from Zagreb and the Head Nurse a Bosnian. This group was really a “candle in the night”. The other hospital, named “On the White Hill” was newly built before the war but not yet finished. Patients were lying in the front floor. Croatian and Bosnian people together.

I wanted to bring medications and food to the besieged and shelled East Mostar and to visit the doctors and see their situation. In an armoured car of UNHCR together with a British soldier and the local driver who knew which roads were free of mines, we reached after having passed military Croatian controls the city. We heard artillery and machine gun fire close to us. Fighting between Croatian and Bosnian soldiers was going on. East-Mostar and its infrastructure was almost totally destroyed. In two partially ruined private houses the Bosnian doctors had improvised a surgical hospital, where they performed all the operations, during fightings up to 60 per day. The operation room was in a cellar kitchen, lighted by a diesel generator. The operated patients had their beds in a deep dark cellar without any light. Only if urgently needed they were allowed to light one or two candles. This really was “candles in the night”!

The Bosnian Doctors were very desperate. I will not forget the sentence of the surgeon “Until May we were friends and now we have to be enemies”. Nationalism had won about conscience and humanity. I asked myself, what can our Medical Peace Movement IPPNW do except humanitarian support and solidarity with the men and women who also long for peace? Solidarity was a “candle in the night” to them. They were so grateful for my visit, I was the first visitor from Germany since outbreak of the war. It had been a dangerous trip, therefore I had been asked by the UNHCR officer before starting, “Are you really willing to dare the trip to East-Mostar?” My answer was a clear yes. I wanted to demonstrate that our Bosnian colleagues were not forgotten and that I wanted to dare what the doctors and people in East-Mostar had to live through every day. When I said good bye they asked me to inform the world about their desperate situation. That I did in many lectures and papers and reports to our German people and government.

In July 1994 doctors from Sarajevo who had been informed about my visit to Mostar asked me to come to their encircled, besieged and continuously shelled town. Together with a Bosnian Surgeon and an IPPNW-friend from Holland we drove in a car on small roads over the Mount Igman to reach finally Sarajevo. The trip really had been dangerous as several people had been killed by snipers or artillery the days before. Overnight we stayed in a Hotel with broken windows. The artillery and Machine gun fire was loudly heard. At first we visited the medical doctors of the partly destroyed
University Hospital who welcomed us cordially. We saw that the former Olympia field was now a grave yard with more than 500 crosses or stones. The next day we spoke with the Chief Surgeon of the City Hospital. The bullet hole in the wall besides his desk was shown to us. We were welcomed very gratefully. It meant so much to them that colleagues from Germany and Holland had come to see, how much the population suffered from the siege and artillery shelling from the surrounding mountains. Already 10.000 people of all ages and religions had been killed, among them 1.600 children. We visited also other professors of the Medical Faculty and the Peace Center of Sarajevo. Everybody blamed Europe for not helping Sarajevo since already more than three years.

Back in Germany I informed our government and IPPNW at national and international conferences, and held many speeches, and interviews.

On January 11th in 1994 I was invited to speak in the New University of Wuerzburg. The theme of my lecture was “Engagement of IPPNW in former Yugoslavia”. After the speech and discussion the Wuerzburg group and I sat down in Restaurant Dionysos, “in order to discuss what can be done regionally” as was printed on the flyer. The possibilities proposed were “medical support for hospitals, financial support for reconciliation work, partnerships with hospitals in Bosnia”. I proposed to invite medical students from different regions of former Yugoslavia in order to start with reconciliation. That was the beginning of “bridges of understanding” in Wuerzburg, with the generous help of the “Missionsaerztliche Klinik”.

When I recollect my experiences on my trips to war zones of former Yugoslavia I see in my inner eyes the operated patients in the dark cellar. They lightened 2 candles, and now we could see each other. These “candles in the night” and the sentence of the Surgeon, “until May we were friends and now we have to be enemies”, I will never forget. And I cannot forget the grateful faces of the doctors in the front hospitals near Tuzla on our way to Sarajewo and of the pediatric psychiatrist on the university campus, when we donated the necessary finances to restore the rooms and promised to remain in supportive contact. I believe, that our visits meant “candles in the night” to them. In the darkness of war, there was a light of hope for the future.

Our IPPNW and I personally are very grateful that you, dear friends from Wuerzburg, have built and kept strong the “bridges of understanding”. How wonderful that now the “Candles in the Night” give light and create happiness to friends from different nations of former Yugoslavia, who have promised to work for peace and reconciliation. For Peace and Reconciliation in West Balkan but also Peace and Reconciliation are urgently needed between Russia and the USA and on all spots, where war is being waged.

Yes, we are and want to be the “International Physicians for Peace and the Prevention of Nuclear War”. The commitment of the world wide civil society is absolutely necessary to reach that goal.

We shall not forget that war is being waged every year in 15 to 25 countries. From such wars a nuclear war can escalate. Therefore prevention of war is the precondition for prevention of nuclear war. So let us be “propagandists and pioneers” for a policy of early observing where risks of war start in order to immediately help and to prevent the outbreak of fighting.

In Germany we have a strong army and a Ministry of Defence but as in all other countries no Ministry of Peace. We can afford to buy the most expensive weapons but are told that we don’t have enough financial resources to treat causes of war. I ask again, why don’t we have a Ministry for Peace with specialised peace researchers, diplomats, economists, psychologist and historians. Why do the Western and Eastern wealthy countries not engage in early observing dangerous crises, why don’t they help immediately and see the causes of war. That would prevent death and wounds of hundred thousands of innocent women, men and children and thereby also prevent their need to escape from their suffering countries!

Dear friends, take these questions home and discuss them with your friends and co-students and politicians. We are not only doctors for single patients, we must feel our responsibility for humanity, for the “Respect for Life”, as Albert Schweitzer, medical doctor, theologian, great humanist, receiver of the Peace Nobel Prize, our great example lectured and published. We must carry our candle for peace further!