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AMBASSADOR WOLFGANG ISCHINGER

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Ambassador (ret.) Wolfgang Ischinger currently serves as President of the Munich Security Conference Foundation. He previously served as Chairman of the Munich Security Conference (2008-2022), State Secretary in the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador to the U.S., and Ambassador to the Court of St. James. From 1993 to 1995, he directed the policy planning staff and took part in the Dayton Peace Accords conference as the head of the German delegation. Mr. Ischinger is a career German foreign service officer with over five decades of diplomatic experience.

In the following conversation, Ambassador Ischinger and Fran Leskovar discuss the Ambassador's career, involvement in the Dayton Peace Accords negotiations, and lessons learned from the road to peace in the Balkans.

INTERVIEW

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Where did you grow up, and where did you go to school?

ISCHINGER: Sure. Well, I grew up in the southwest, southwestern part of West Germany. Born in 1946 near Stuttgart. My early memories included meeting with American troops, soldiers, and servicemen because Stuttgart was, of course, part of the area in Germany that was occupied in those early post-war years by the U.S. I went to school in that part of Germany and did apply when I was about sixteen for a scholarship to spend a year in the U.S., which I successfully got through the so-called American Field Service Organization. I spent one school year as a high school senior in a very small town in downstate Illinois, about two hours south of Chicago. So, I'm one of the few Germans who know the rules of baseball. I also went out for track, and I even tried out for football, but the coach said I wasn't qualified to play varsity football because I didn't have enough muscle packed on my neck, so I would get hurt if I played really seriously. I had a lot of fun. I enjoyed that, and that sparked my interest in international affairs and certainly my interest in transatlantic relations.

Q: And then you were back…you went to Fletcher, right?

ISCHINGER: Well, yes, yes, I did. First, I went to law school in Germany and Switzerland in Geneva. Graduated from law school in 1972 and then got again a scholarship for a year at the Fletcher School. In those days, the Fletcher School had an arrangement with Harvard University. So, I was allowed to take more than fifty percent of the classes that I attended, I attended at various centers or institutes at Harvard University. I had a wonderful year there and spent most of my time on international law, international relations, and 20th-century history.

Q: Wow. And then, you graduated from Fletcher, and you joined the Foreign Service? Or, you started working in international affairs, or diplomacy, or you were practicing as a lawyer?

ISCHINGER: Well, no, I've actually never practiced law at all. Something happened at the end of my year at Harvard. A rather famous, then-famous professor of international law, Professor Baxter, arranged for me to spend time at the legal department of the United Nations in New York to get a bit of exposure to the practicalities of practicing international law at an international institution. Well, what happened was that after just a week or two, I got a job offer from the UN, and I spent the next two or almost two and a half years, almost three years, as a special assistant to the Secretary General of the United Nations. So that, more or less by accident, drove me in the direction, not of continued academic work but in the direction of the practice of diplomacy. From the UN, I then went back to Germany in 1975 and joined the German Foreign Service in a very regular way through the usual application procedure.

Q: What were your initial diplomatic assignments, and where did you go after 1975?

ISCHINGER: All right, so I joined the diplomatic service in ‘75. After the initial two years that we had the time of training, I was assigned to the German Foreign Ministry's planning staff, where I spent the next almost three years, and from there, they sent me back to the U.S. That was actually not what I wanted because I thought I'd already spent enough time in the U.S., but that's what they offered me. So, I worked at our embassy, the German Embassy, in Washington, D.C., as a junior officer, mostly focusing on defense, arms control, and security issues, which has been, for the rest of my career, one of my primary fields of interest.

Well, and I should mention then—after three years in Washington, ending in 1982, after Ronald Reagan had been elected president in 1982—I returned to Bonn and was immediately assigned to be a special assistant to the foreign minister at the time, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, and I served in his office in various capacities, practically until 1990. So for eight years, with, of course, growing seniority, I started as a rather lower-level young diplomat, and I ended up being one of his principal assistants in 1990, which was, of course, the year of German unification. After that, I got a wonderful assignment as the head of the political department at our embassy in Paris. After that, in 1993, I returned to Bonn and was given, at a relatively young age, one of the principal jobs that the foreign ministry has at the senior level–I was appointed director of the policy planning staff. Then, in ‘95, with the Bosnian conflict, when the efforts to end the

Bosnian conflicts were seriously undertaken, I was appointed political director, and that's how I got into the Bosnian peace efforts and conflict resolution efforts.

Q: Let's now talk about the Balkans, primarily Bosnia. Do you remember when was the first time you visited the Balkans? What were your impressions?

ISCHINGER: Well, I first visited during my time as director of our planning staff; just like in Washington, D.C., the planning staff is supposed to think ahead and conceptualize longer-term policies. I went to the region twice, if I remember correctly, with a small team from my political staff, trying to figure out first what the chances were that this war might end at an early point of time and how we should or could then engage in an effort to bring the countries of the Western Balkans into a process that would bring them closer and closer eventually into membership with the European Union. So that started in '94, and then, of course, beginning in the early spring of '95, when my friend Dick Holbrooke started a serious effort to create a framework for the Contact Group to engage in a serious diplomatic effort to bring the parties together. From that time on, I was in Sarajevo and certainly in Belgrade and other capitals of the region all the time. At certain points in time, I think I knew the restaurants and hotels in Sarajevo better than those in Bonn or Berlin because I was spending a lot of time down there.

Q: Let's talk about that period '94-'95. Do you remember your priorities? What were your guidelines, guidance, from your ministry? And do you remember those conversations with people on the ground? What were some challenges?

ISCHINGER: Well, of course, we had a different challenge than the United States. The U.S., of course, did not really get fully engaged and involved until '95. Earlier, it was mostly a UN-driven effort, which—as we all know—did not lead to a successful conclusion. We had the Vance-Owen Plan, et cetera.

The specific German interest had to do with the increasingly large number of refugees from the region that ended up in Germany. So we had a refugee problem—just like we have a refugee problem today in Germany with the hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people from Afghanistan, Syria, and other areas of recent conflict. My mandate was to find out how this war can be ended and how we can create a situation that will allow these refugees to go back home. That was the principal German interest, the specific German interest at the time. And maybe I should add that our view at the time included, I think we were actually quite smart at the time, we thought that one of the problems that was going to grow in dimension and in importance, an increasingly dangerous problem, was the situation in Kosovo. So we thought that if we make an effort to end the war in Bosnia, we should include in this effort a specific mandate to figure out a way to prevent a bloody conflict in Kosovo. Quite frankly, when our negotiation process started seriously in the summer of '95, my instructions from Chancellor Kohl included demanding the inclusion of the Kosovo issue in our negotiation agenda. That attempt was flatly rejected by my American, British, French, and even Russian friends. They thought, "Bosnia is going to be tough enough. We don't even know how to get that out of the way. So let's focus on Kosovo later." So, these were sort of specific German

concerns at the time.

Q: Right. I know you were now working on the Balkan issues, but I know that the big thing for Bosnia was the recognition of Bosnia, and I know Germany already recognized Croatia and Slovenia. Did that create issues later on?

ISCHINGER: Yeah, of course, that was a problem that kept coming up in discussions among the Western elites before, during, and after the actual Dayton negotiations. I think the motives that drove the German government at the time to come out in favor of an earlier recognition of these countries was a very, very simple, maybe not totally correct interpretation. We thought we couldn't deploy the military—because, you know, this was a year or two after German unification. We knew there was no way that we could ever use the German military. This was far too early after unification; in other words, we need to find ways to prevent these conflicts from breaking out. And the very simplistic idea was if Slovenia, for example, is recognized by the international community, how dare the Serbs attack a sovereign country, which is no longer, you know, simply as the Serbs saw it, part of their country. So, we thought the legal implications of international recognition would actually create a kind of barrier to aggression by Serbia. That turned out to be, unfortunately, not entirely correct, but it was well intended. And then, I think we underestimated—a little bit when we came out in favor of the early recognition of Croatia and Slovenia—what effects that could have and would have and, actually, did have on political elites in Bosnia and Herzegovina and elsewhere. So, you know, good intentions, that's what I would conclude. Good intentions are not always good enough to create good diplomacy.

Q: Right. Let me ask you, do you remember when you were dealing with Milosevic, the Bosnian Serbs, and other actors in the region, but primarily with Milosevic? What were your impressions of him when you were talking to him?

ISCHINGER: Well, Milosevic was very proud of his ability to speak as he thought, good American English. In fact, his English was politically not always correct. He used, even in informal discussions, terms like "bullshit" all the time, and he thought that was okay. So he was, of course, a bully, but he was also—I have to say—courageous; I [will] give you an example. As I'm sure you are aware, the Bosnian Serbs, for various reasons, did not really fully participate in the negotiations at Dayton; there were sanctions, et cetera, et cetera. And the Serbs that were present didn't have a mandate to accept the outcome of our negotiations. So Milosevic simply decided that he would sign on their behalf. In other words, I thought that was a courageous thing for him to do because he certainly had no specific mandate from anyone to do that. But by doing that, he actually saved our negotiating process, the Dayton process, from falling apart because without somebody signing on behalf of the Bosnian Serbs, the result would have been sort of only half-baked, right? So I have to give him that compliment. He was courageous. He was cunning. But he was, in retrospect, of course, not really a great leader because he thought—and he repeated that mistake a few years after the Bosnian adventure—that he was going to always be protected by his Russian friends—and he overestimated the ability of Russia to offer him protection, especially in '98, '99, etc. during the Kosovo

conflict. He relied far too much on his—what he thought—close and harmonious relationship with Russia. And I think that was one reason why, in fact, he ended up in The Hague and will go down in history as a rather genocidal and murderous leader, certainly not a decent and not successful leader.

Q: That was a different time because the Russians were heavily involved and engaged in the process…

ISCHINGER: The Russians, the official Russians during the Bosnian peace process, were actually quite helpful. I personally had a really good and trustful relationship with Igor Ivanov, who became Foreign Minister of Russia later and who was the leader of the Russian delegation. In fact, the Russian delegation before Dayton, during Dayton, and after Dayton—in the second half of the 1990s—were really quite cooperative and worked with us. Looking back at those years, I could not say that Russia was the problem. Russia was not the problem. The problem was the Bosnian Serbs. The problem was Milosevic, to a certain extent, and a few other local leaders. But Russia played along, actually, quite well.

Q: So you said you worked with Dick Holbrooke. Can you describe Dick Holbrooke and your interactions with Dick Holbrooke? Various people have different opinions of Dick Holbrooke, but he was instrumental in achieving the Bosnian peace. Can you talk a little bit about Holbrooke?

ISCHINGER: Sure. I believe that I have not met—I've now spent more than fifty years in diplomacy, as I explained to you since 1973—I have never met anyone who comes even close to the capability to the art of diplomacy that Dick Holbrooke was able to exercise. He was extremely gifted. I know he alienated many; many in Washington hated him because he did not follow their instructions. But he was extremely successful, and he was not only a diplomat that carried out instructions from the home base, he was also, in a way, an actor who used tricks of the trade, which not many can actually use. I mean, he successfully broke through barriers—negotiating barriers, you could say—by presenting points that turned out to be not true. Maybe those who don't like Richard Holbrooke would say he lied to them. Well, I would say he used certain ways to bring about the necessary compromise result. And so I think of Richard Holbrooke—in my fifty years—as the most outstanding role model for diplomats. Sometimes he went too far, right? But I think going a little too far occasionally is less of a problem than never even trying to go as far as necessary. I would even go this far; I would say that without Richard Holbrooke's presence and leadership, we would not have concluded the Dayton process. At the same time, I would say that without the personal commitment and presence, at least part of the time of the then Secretary of State, we would also not have successfully concluded the Dayton negotiations. But the single most important individual during the entire twenty-one days of Dayton was surely Dick Holbrooke. No doubt about it. I teach master's students at a university here in Berlin, and when we talk about the art of diplomacy, I always refer to Richard Holbrooke and present episodes of our joint negotiating efforts during those years when he really broke the world record in getting things done.

Q: Let me ask you, now we're getting closer to Dayton. Do you remember the summer of '95, the Sarajevo marketplace attacks, Srebrenica, and Operation Storm, which started convincing Americans to get involved? What were your impressions? What was going on during that summer? Especially once you heard the news that Americans are getting involved, was there a sense of relief? Was there a sense of, "Oh, Europeans failed? Now it's up to America to resolve?" What was going through your head, and what was going on at the German Ministry?

ISCHINGER: Well, we had heard European leaders speak of the "hour of Europe." The "hour of Europe" never happened. The European community of those days was unable to play the necessary role to end this conflict. So yes, I mean, I knew, and most of my friends in Bonn at the time knew, that if we did not have proactive leadership from the U.S.—including the threat of the use of military force and eventually the use of military force—we would not get anywhere. So, there was a loud sigh of relief when it became clear that the United States was actually going to get involved.

We did have a moment of conflict when the American delegation proposed that we should identify Dayton, Ohio, as the venue for the future, for our planned negotiating process. I was not the only one who said, "This is a European conflict. It can't be so difficult to find a place in Europe to end this conflict." And the U.S. delegation said, "We are not going to get the president and the White House sufficiently involved if this process happens in Evian on Lake Geneva or somewhere. We need to do this in America." That was the only way to get President Clinton to be committed, to be fully committed with everything that the United States had to offer, including—I repeat myself—the use of force. And I think we understood that particular aspect and grudgingly accepted the proposal by the United States, and we should actually do this in the U.S. at this not-so-wonderful place. I mean, there's a much nicer golf course—I can tell you—on Lake Geneva at Evian, which was proposed by the French.

Q: Can you talk a bit about how the conference proceeded, how the negotiations were happening, and your role during the conference? What were some challenges? Maybe talk about those episodes with Holbrooke during the conference.

ISCHINGER: Alright, so I was the chief negotiator on the German side. I led a rather small team. My team was about the size of the French and British teams. The Russian team was slightly larger. But there was—because we were in the U.S. on the Air Force base—a huge American presence, including, of course, significant numbers of military people. So Richard Holbrooke had a much more numerous, much larger team than any of us did.

We had an opening session on the 1st of November with Milosevic, Tudjman, Izetbegovic, etc., the leaders of the three parties. But then, after that opening session, essentially, we did not negotiate sitting around a table, but we had separate meetings. We had a daily meeting of the heads of the delegations. Every morning, Richard Holbrooke, myself, the French, the British, the Russian people, plus the representatives of NATO and

the European community, spent an hour or so figuring out what might be the next steps. And then, of course, Holbrooke would engage in his own bilateral discussions. I would engage in my own bilateral discussions with my team. But through our daily consultation meetings, we were sufficiently well organized to make sure that we would not step into each other's trajectory, but we were talking from the same song sheet, more or less. The process was interesting and complicated because, of course, the parties didn't want to talk to each other. For example, I would spend an hour or two talking to the Bosnia delegation, to President Izetbegovic and his team. Then, in the afternoon, I would meet with the Serbs, trying to see where we could come closer. It was a complicated, really quite complicated procedure.

But the essential point is—and again, I have to give credit to the U.S. delegation and especially to Ambassador Holbrooke—everybody, including the Russians, accepted the idea that because we had created this "Contact Group," everybody should now only say to the parties what had been agreed, what had previously been agreed in the Contact Group. So we would not act on our own and try to do this in a German way or in the French way or in a Russian way, but in the way agreed within the Contact Group. That is why I actually believe that this contact group model developed before and during the Bosnian war in Dayton offers a model that's perfectly suited for the resolution of other conflicts.

And I'll make a point on the current situation. I am surprised that the Trump administration has not already created or suggested the creation of a similar kind of contract group in order to bring in the Europeans and maybe the Turks and maybe others whose cooperation will be needed at some point, especially when we go into implementation steps of whatever peace agreement may emerge. I am a strong believer in the contact group model developed in Dayton as a perfectly tested and proven model of how best to handle a negotiation that includes various members, not only two parties but three, and so on and so forth.

Q: I talked to people that were part of negotiations, and they said, "Oh, when we were going in, it was like, 'Oh, it's going to be hard to achieve peace.'" People were unsure whether peace would even be reached during the conference. And at a point when the agreement was signed, everybody was saying this was a really good achievement. Impossible peace became possible. What I heard also from the U.S. side was a conversation about whether delegations should return to Dayton at some point because Kosovo might be another issue—that eventually ended up being another issue. Can you talk about the Dayton Accords, their meaning, and whether they were a successful agreement? If they were successful, can you explain why?

ISCHINGER: Okay, well, the Dayton Accords ended the war. In that sense, there was a success. We were able to create and implement the position of the High Representative and his office, and Carl Bildt was installed, and so on. So, to that extent, success was reached. I got a lot of praise from my German leadership for our participation in this effort. But what is the lesson learned? The lesson learned is that after the Dayton process had ended, in other words, after the papers had been signed and with the photo session in

Paris by our leaders, I think at that moment, interest by our political leaders began to disappear because there was a general assumption that from now on the High Representative and his team would handle this and we could now focus on other issues.

My takeaway from the Dayton process is that if you have had a war with hundreds, literally hundreds, many tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of people killed, you need to accept the idea that there will be continued adversity, continued hatred, continued issues that will last much longer than your concrete negotiating process. In other words, I strongly believe that the mistake we made—we collectively, U.S., European allies, etc.—was that we did not seriously undertake to engage in a Dayton 2.0 series of negotiations, let's say two, three, four years after '95. Of course, things got complicated because of the Kosovo conflict, which stood in the way of that. But I think there is no excuse. This is one of the reasons why Bosnia, of course, remained stuck in this sort of incomplete set of rules created in Dayton. We were able to do in Dayton what we were capable of doing in Dayton. The result, which is in the Dayton Accords, of course, is a very incomplete result. It's not your ideal constitution for Bosnia. It's not your ideal peacekeeping arrangement. It was what was achieved, what was achievable at that time with parties that were difficult, of course, to manage at the time. And I mentioned to you earlier the difficulties we had with the non-representation of the Bosnian Serbs for which Slobodan Milosevic took responsibility at the time. And you will also be aware that two or three days before the 21st of November, we had reached a point where I was not the only one among the delegation heads who said, "We're going to pack our bags, we're going to go home because this is not going to end well." So, we were on the verge of failure.

I'll just share with you one little anecdote. Of course, we went to great lengths to convince the parties not to stop trying to reach an agreement. And I went to see President Izetbegovic, the Bosnian leader, at midnight, I think a day or two before the final signature was required. And I told him that I had just spoken to Chancellor Kohl and that Kohl had quoted Bismarck, you know, our 19th-century leader, who had said that if you have an important political issue at hand, you need to grab that issue by the coattails and hold on to it and don't let go. So I quoted that to him. I'm not even sure I had seriously had a phone call with Chancellor Kohl, but I pretended to a certain extent. Later on, Izetbegovic said to me, "When you explained to me this phone call from Chancellor Kohl, that convinced me that I should actually sign." So, in other words, personal things, psychology, of course, matters greatly in these matters. These people were less certain about where they wanted to go and how this would end. They were just as uncertain as we were, so it was our job. That's also a lesson that I have used often in later negotiations: you can assume that your opposite number, your adversary, is at least as uncertain of the outcome, of the achievement, than you are yourself. So, use his uncertainty and his doubts to your own advantage. I think that's one important takeaway, as far as I'm concerned.

Q: You were talking about many lessons learned from the process, but primarily now, we can talk about Bosnia, but we can also talk about Ukraine. What are some lessons learned for future diplomats that might be general and applicable to various other

conflicts, including Bosnia? What would be some lessons learned?

ISCHINGER: Well, I'll share two. I've actually just published a piece recently with 10 lessons for young diplomats, but I'll quote from memory two points from that. First is [to] learn to listen. Diplomats are often taught to speak and to speak effectively, and to speak on television and to make speeches, etc., which I don't deny that that is also important. But what they are not taught sufficiently is to listen. Listening means not only to listen to what is being said, but listening means you also need to understand what is not being said and why it is not being said. And listening, you know, professional listening requires the ability to understand why certain things are being said in a certain way and not in a different way and why certain things are not mentioned at all. So, listening is part of successful diplomacy. And I think that's been an underrated asset or part of successful diplomacy.

The other important lesson which I would offer to each and every young diplomat is [to] try to build trust. You're not going to get anywhere in any kind of negotiation if your adversary thinks that you're going to simply either bully him or make false promises. The first thing you want to achieve is to obtain, to create an atmosphere of mutual trust. The point I've been making many times to our young diplomats is this: I keep saying trust is the currency of diplomacy. And I think that is really true. The problem is that trust can be lost overnight. It just takes one wrong step in a personal relationship, but also in diplomacy. Rebuilding it after that one wrong step may require a huge effort, may take a long time. In other words, trust is precious. So I would leave these two points: listening and the ability to listen correctly, to understand what's being said, and the necessity to build relationships of mutual trust. Okay?

Q: Yeah. And let me ask you a final question. Do you think there are any lessons from the Dayton Accords that are applicable to Ukraine? Are there some general lessons, or how do you see it?

ISCHINGER: Yes, I think there are lessons. I'm afraid that as far as I can see today, whatever Dayton offers in terms of lessons has actually so far not really been applied, certainly not by the Trump administration. Building trust with allies and partners in Europe has not been a principal issue, it seems. Listening correctly to both sides, to the Russians and to the Ukrainians, is, I believe, very important, but I'm not so sure that the message which the Russians are sending is sufficiently well understood, and I'm not so sure that the message the Ukrainians are sending is sufficiently well understood. In other words, I believe that going back to this successful contact group arrangement would actually be a helpful element in building an atmosphere that would allow a resolution of this war that would be accepted not only by Moscow and Kyiv but also by the people of Ukraine and Russia and their neighbors and partners. So, I actually believe that Bosnia offers a huge number of useful lessons. Also, it was a very successful example of American leadership. But the American leadership exercised in 1994, ‘95, ‘96, if you wish, was to lead a collective effort, not just an American effort, but a collective effort, bringing everybody on board and making sure that no one would want to interfere with the outcome. I think that what we are risking currently in the Ukraine War is that there

may be parties which are not sitting at the table with either the Trump administration or the Russians or so, parties which might actually try to spoil or destroy an implementation process once it has started. This is always the risk. It's not good enough to write a piece of paper which will be signed by the parties. The difficulties are always in the implementation. That's also an important Dayton lesson.

End of interview