

'What we need are more encounters. Especially in Europe.'

Interview with Go Europe! founder Dr. Carsten Witt

Carsten, you reached retirement age years ago. People your age usually book cruises or buy big cars. Instead, you are planning a 5,000-kilometre hike for the sake of Europe and the construction of a European meeting place in Tallinn. Why are you doing all of this?

I don't have anything against cruises, in fact I once travelled to New York with 'Queen Mary 2' and enjoyed it very much! But I'm not at all interested in big cars, apart from cars that break new grounds. That is why I am currently driving an electric car from a South German manufacturer. So there we are. A 5,000 kilometre hike is, of course, a challenge, and I can't quite foresee what it's going to lead to in the end. Nevertheless, it seems very appealing to me. I have a fairly good level of fitness that I only started to take seriously in my late thirties, and which lead me to compete in three marathons. The experience was amazing! So I would indeed say that I have good physical awareness and know what to expect, even though I haven't set out for a 5,000 kilometre hike until now. A leading example and inspiration of mine is Hape Kerkeling, a German comedian and former self professed couch potato with no interest in sport, who managed The Way of St. James.

There are already official hiking trails across Europe. Some cover long distances and are full of people underway. They just don't make that much noise about it.

So why do you need this attention?

The thing is that we want to convert the former Patarei prison in Tallinn into a European meeting centre. This requires a lot of money, which we want to generate through sponsors, funding, and donations. The hike is not just intended to promote European understanding and cooperation in general, but also to kick off the financing of this construction project. The idea is to 'sell' every single metre I actually walk. If we're lucky, we'll raise 50 million euros on this basis alone. That would help immensely.

You've been around the world as a professional for many years. What did you gain from these experiences?

That's true. I've virtually been on every continent, except Australia. But since one of my sons spent a year there and wants to show me around, maybe i'll have the chance to go down under some day... So what did I make of it? I came to realise how different things are in comparison to home, especially in the Arab countries. But I did also comprehend that basic needs are quite similar all over the world. You will find people everywhere who have the same basic needs as you and I; they want to eat and sleep, they want to have something to wear, and have a roof over their heads. They want to participate, get noticed, and they want

to have fun and enjoy life. Whether you're in a small German town, Hamburg, or even Berlin, the summer brings life to the streets. I found the same in Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Buenos Aires, New York, and Charlotte in North Carolina - every single person wants to coexist in peace. As far as I can see, Malaysia is a good example of a functioning multicultural society. Various religions are to be found and there is mutual respect amongst people, despite political conflicts. On a humanitarian level, this basically works out wonderfully. That's why I believe that we need these kind of encounters in Europe more than ever before. The Polish and the French are just as estranged as we are to Laotians, Nigerians, or Mongolians. In the end, this has nothing to do with home towns or socialisation. Of course this is a bit different in social centres such as the banlieues in France. If someone feels completely dependent, it is enormously difficult from the outset to create something with mere encounters.

What is the origin of your political commitment? What has shaped you as a person?

As a child, that must have been around 1947, I often witnessed bitter disputes between my grandfather and his brother, my grand uncle. Both were teachers. My grandfather was a social democrat his whole life whilst my grand uncle Karl Witt played a rather inglorious role as a Hamburg school secretary during the Nazi period - all of this can be found on Wikipedia. In any case, the two old men almost got physical during their verbal duels. I was quite impressed and this ultimately shaped me from a young age. But as it happened, there were a lot of newspapers and magazines like "Der Spiegel" in the house that I had lived in since the age of four, and therefore, there were lots of readings and discussions about current political events. I remember the words of my aunt Grete, who said, 'We'll never have a phone and lights on the streets again.' That was way before 1949, when the future seemed largely uncertain and this was the general mood. This already shaped me and formed the basis for my life long political commitment, not within any political party, but in the context of discussions, demonstrations, petitions, and of course, elections. One of my greatest experiences was the 'Willy' election (the first social democratic Federal Chancellor). But because I lived in Algeria during this time, I was unfortunately unable to cast my vote but was indeed very happy when Willy Brandt remained in office as Chancellor. Of course, I was also concerned about the situation in Algeria which was still dominated by war, as well as the situation in Libya, where I also spent some time. But coming back to Europe, I have witnessed the development of post-war Europe right from the beginning: from the European Coal and Steel Community to the European Union. Even though throughout the decades it's always taken two steps forward and one back, some things really remained on track. For many years now we are experiencing a stagnation, to say the least. We have Orban in Hungary, Kaczyński in Poland, and Brexit. We have lived through the distress of and survived the elections in the Netherlands and France. In my opinion, this cannot carry on. We have to make Europe palpable again; through encounters, above all encounters amongst the European youth beyond the elite. You have the Erasmus Programme, however, it only applies to students. This is the basic idea of our Patarei project: to offer encounters on all social levels within Europe, to give Europe a new spirit, and to rejuvenate it.

So you had your heart set for Europe quite some time ago. But has there been a particular deciding moment in recent years?

This is most certainly to do with the fact that I made a career jump some years ago and taught mathematics and physics at a grammar school. I was then asked to take care of the coordination of the Comenius projects, which is similar to the Erasmus Programme, but rather for school pupils. Over a period of several years I supervised various projects that took place all over Europe. And I learned a great deal about the importance of this work, especially when it came to topics such as fear and prejudice. This was precisely the time when the first big cracks in the public perception of Europe started. But this gave me quite a boost. And coincidentally I was in Tallinn at that time where I discovered the Patarei complex and was immediately fascinated. I instantly developed the vision of a European meeting place. Two weeks later, with an invitation from the Estonian government, I flew back to Tallinn where I was guided through the premises on a Sunday.

Do you understand those who are dissatisfied with the work of the European Union and turn away?

Of course I do, especially since this dissatisfaction is self-inflicted. The EU has done little or nothing to raise interest or even enthusiasm for the community and its projects. And the national governments, with the German government forefront, still flag for their particular interests. We don't just observe this in Hungary or Poland: The EU is only part of the public discussion when it comes to tapping any funding pots to finance certain projects, especially in the agricultural sector. The EU is perceived as a monster which wants to reign over us, costs a lot of money, and doesn't give us anything in return. This image has certainly solidified the feelings about the EU, and the EU has done too little to clear its name - I can't emphasize this strongly enough. With every communal policy decision, it is always a question of bypassing EU directives and feathering one's own nest.

And how do you want to convince these people?

We are not just going on a march - we want to hold conversations, especially with opponents and doubters. My son Jakob has just done this by driving through Eastern Europe with an electric car, and has had the most wonderful encounters with young people. I think you have to listen to their worries and try to understand them. It is quite understandable that there are lots of people who say "don't come with this talk about Europe", so in the first place I have to get something on the table. Of course, we from Go Europe! can't solve these particular problems. But we can help strengthen the spirit of solidarity within the EU.

Which were the most serious mistakes within the European politics in the past?

The thing is that the Council of Europe is always able to intervene in favour of one member state in all important questions by saying 'no'. This is, of course, a faulty design if you like. It should be the other way round instead - by saying 'Europe first!'. And then, of course, it can not be denied that in the course of the many years, the Commission has not been given the reputation of being a compound for nationalised politicians - I am thinking of the considerable career of the former CDU Prime Minister Günther Oettinger. His career jump

was quite amazing. And the bad thing is that people judge the whole thing by the standard of individuals like him. And on top of that, the whole thing costs a fortune. But the public forgets that there are excellent people working within the parliament and the administration. But the biggest mistake of all was to not have clearly emphasised the values of the European Union clearly.

What do you expect from the EU for the future?

This is a personal question, since Go Europe! is a nonpartisan NGO and will not provide any concrete political statements - that is the area of politicians and professionals. I look very much forward to a true union beyond economic interests, a union, which is supported by the population. As far as I can see this requires a central government in a federal system.

Why do you think that you as an older man are the right person to send out an appeal for Europe?

Good question, especially as we have a Mr. Macron now, who, as a younger person, can frame this appeal as well. Nevertheless, it is surely no mistake if an older individual, who has experienced a World War and all the crises of the post-war period, the Cold War, the construction and fall of the Berlin Wall, and has also followed the long path of European unification, sends out a similar signal. In any case, I have received excellent feedback in regards to the whole project - both from young people and peers who support me. This could be a clear and important signal to the policy - and that is precisely my goal.