

Social democratic history in Wrocław

Address by Knut Dethlefsen, Director of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Warsaw, at a presentation of Willy Cohn's diaries

Wrocław – Willy Brandt once said, „**The best way to predict the future is by shaping it**“. Through more than 100 offices across the world the Friedrich Ebert Foundation seeks to contribute to this challenge of shaping the future to a social dimension through political dialogue and political education. An important part of our work is to analyse past events, to reflect on, and to discuss, the past. It is the past that provides the groundwork for the future. We have to come to terms with what happened, and to relive it through memory. It is only through such work on history that a foundation can be laid for the future. The entries Willy Cohn put down in his diaries render a **forceful and compelling testimony of history**. Cohn maintained his records for a period of 8 years, producing a detailed documentation of the horror and brutality of the Nazi regime, and so Cohn is **the most important chronicler** of German Jews. His diaries tell the story of the rock bottom point of German history, of the deprivation of rights, the persecution and the murder of Germany's Jews. His Seine comprehensive notes give deep insights into the life of the Jewish community in Wrocław.

What is it that links the Friedrich Ebert Foundation to Willy Cohn? First, it is the social democratic concept, the idea of social justice. Cohn joined the **SPD** in 1919. He considered Ferdinand **Lassalle**, a native of Wrocław like himself, as his first paragon and wrote biographies of him as well as August Bebel.

On the other hand, Willy Cohn, himself an important historian, made through his diaries a major contribution to an elementary component of the work of the foundation. For more than 40 years now, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation has worked to push the idea of reconciliation between **Germans, Poles and Jews**. We deem it important only to that history is anatomised but that responsibility is taken for it. Willy Cohn's writings constitute authentic evidence which makes such penetration and reflection on history possible in the first place. It is great news that the notes, originally, in German, are now available in Polish too. We

are keen to help spread the word about this important testimony and we wish the book many readers.

As the memorial plate is being unveiled and the synagogue consecrated here in Wrocław, a good passage of history is restored to the city. What pleases me in particular is that we can celebrate this event together with the relations of Willy Cohn. The Friedrich Ebert Foundation has for years seen to it that Willy Cohn is well remembered, and we are determined to do so in the future as well.

Let me finish with the words of Willy Cohn himself from his biography of Lassalle: **„The seed has sprouted, a new spring is dawning for mankind where no one ever will oppress another, be it lord or villain.”** The road Willy Cohn showed has not yet reached its end. We are still at a point where the primary call is to stand up against oppression and to fight for freedom and social justice. It is likewise important to keep memories of the past alive as a reminder to our cozy comfort, for us hopefully to build the future together.

