Halil Oztas is the Bürgermeister of Heusenstamm; he has kindly reproduced his speech from Sunday's Remembrance event for us.

"Remembrance Day"

My dear friends from Tonbridge,
ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to be visiting Tonbridge for the first time during my period of office. As you no doubt know, the towns of Heusenstamm and Tonbridge & Malling will be celebrating 35 years of active European twinning in 2019. Not only the official town representatives and delegations but also the citizens of both towns have become good friends and partners over the last few decades.

Ladies and gentlemen,
it is by no means an ordinary occurrence for former enemies to become true friends. The German and British people can be equally proud that we have together overcome the horrors of the last centuries and can meet at eye level. Today in particular, Remembrance Day, is a day of both remembrance and warning. Every year, this special day once again emphasises the importance of human dignity, mutual respect and tolerance, not only between individual people, but also between sovereign states. We Germans have a day of national mourning every year in November, which always takes place two Sundays before the first Sunday in Advent.

This year, there is no doubt that our thoughts will be turning to the end of World War I in November 2018. The most devastating war in human history at that time ended 100 years ago. Around 17 million people lost their lives in these battles of nations between 1914 and 1918. Numerous war cemeteries in many parts of Europe still bear witness to this slaughter. This war unleashed a violence that penetrated not only deep into the areas of conflict but also into all strata of society. For millions of people, it meant flight, famine and disease. It left behind death, grief and deep wounds in the soul.

As we now know, the calm after the storm was only the calm before the storm that blew up around 20 years later and cost many more human lives. Authoritarian and dictatorial regimes became established in many states, and it was not least the German Nazis and their invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939 who set off the next wave of violence and destruction, World War II. By the end of it, Europe lay in ruins and an Iron Curtain had fallen across the continent.

Ladies and gentlemen,
Remembrance Day and the national day of mourning commemorate all victims of war and violence. On this day, we remember the dead who lost their lives during both World Wars and the Nazi dictatorship, the victims of violence, all victims of war, and soldiers killed in action everywhere in the world. We also remember all the victims in many other countries for whom fights and violence have broken out close to home – something that is likely to continue. We must not close our eyes to the conflict not far from our own doorsteps: the hostilities in Ukraine, the civil war in Syria that has been going on for so many years, the military escalation in Gaza, the reign of terror in the Islamic State in the Middle Eastern countries, and the Rohingya genocide in Burma, to name just a few. War and peace are still burning issues, and all the world's conflicts are delivered free of charge into our living rooms every evening by the news. Streams of refugees are on the move all over the world and making one thing very clear: we are still a long way from peace.

History has shown us very clearly that freedom, democracy and peace do not come about by themselves and do not continue by themselves. Lasting peace requires openness, persistence and trust. It is also necessary to understand the causes of war, and to allocate and accept responsibility. In contrast, suppressing the past or declaring reconciliation by decree are doomed to failure. We need people who treasure our values, freedom and democracy every day, who fight for them, preserve them, protect them and strengthen them. It is they that form the basis of our society. Particularly on a day like today, let us remember our duty to work together and ensure that there is always enough good to counter the evil in this world.

After the end of World War II and the fall of the Nazi regime, people and politicians in Europe endeavoured to bring about rapprochement and reconciliation. This path was often not easy, yet it turned out to be passable and effective. It led to understanding and an increasing sense of unity, and it brought us the longest period of peace and the greatest prosperity in the history of our war-torn continent.

We can only keep the peace if we actively stand up for it – all together, each of us contributing the most effort and expertise of which we are capable. This applies to the wider perspective of world politics as well as on a small scale. This is our duty, a duty of which we are not least reminded by our days of remembrance.

Ladies and gentlemen,
I am proud that we have now been officially twinned with Tonbridge for nearly 35 years. The partnership between the towns and the relationships between the people are characterised by a feeling of friendship, friendliness, openness and affinity. These partnerships are a unique opportunity to learn and find out more about everyday life in other European countries at first hand, to talk to one another and to exchange ideas and experiences. Towns can be driving forces and links bringing the Europe of citizens to life through unofficial channels. They are essential to win Europe's citizens over to the European dream, particularly at regional level, and to assure peace and prosperity on our continent. I hope with all my heart that this partnership and affinity will continue to exist and to thrive without obstacle.

Thank you very much.
Halil Öztas

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