

# THE ROEPER SCHOOL ARCHIVES

“Reactions in Moscow and West Germany to President Kennedy’s Death”

November 1963

By George A. Roeper, Headmaster, City and Country School

© Roeper City and Country School, Inc.

The Roeper School Archives, Bloomfield Hills, MI

## ABSTRACT

George A. Roeper describes the grief and sympathy that Russians and Germans displayed while he and other American educators were staying in Russia at the time of President Kennedy’s assassination.

## REACTIONS IN MOSCOW AND WEST GERMANY TO PRESIDENT KENNEDY'S DEATH

*by George A. Roeper*

I was in Moscow in the Hotel Berlin when the shocking news of President Kennedy's death reached us. It was 10:45 P.M. (8 hours' time difference) Moscow time when a Russian in the hall said, "Kennedy assassinated." We did not speak Russian, neither did the Russian speak English. We felt helpless to find out what he meant. There must be a mistake, a misunderstanding, possibly a stupid joke. Then another Russian came down the hall, gesticulating and pretending to hold a rifle, pointing his forefinger to his temple, uttering "Kennedy." This was a confirmation of the first ominous "Kennedy assassinated." We were incredulous, we wanted to know for sure. There was a radio in the hotel hall, a Russian tuned in "Voice of America" which puzzled us, because this was most unusual for a Russian to do publicly. From a far distant voice we barely heard: "President Kennedy was killed by a rifle shot. He died in the arms of his wife." A call from the embassy gave final confirmation. Our group of 90 American educators was stunned in silence. Somebody of our group said, "Regardless how we feel about the President, this is a terrible tragedy." Other Americans said "I want to go home," "It can't be true." "I am afraid," a woman said. Some of the group could not hold back their tears, everybody had a choking feeling, a heaviness of heart. The last trace of doubt about the truth was gone.

Then came the news flash that the alleged murderer Lee Oswald was supposedly a member of the Communist Party. This news came over the "Voice of America" and was not given to the Russian population over the Russian stations. Yet, if this was true, what attitude will the Russians take to us Americans who are in the midst of a communist country? We had no reason to worry. What unfolded now among the people in Moscow, Leningrad, Helsinki, Copenhagen, Berlin and Hamburg was a universal expression of overwhelming sympathy for the American people. Russians on the street said, "Kennedy, good man." A Russian woman who spoke English shook our hand saying: "We are terribly upset, our hopes for peaceful understanding were never as high. We knew Kennedy worked for peace." "We are terribly upset, we are terribly upset, we are sorry," was repeated again and again by Russians when we met on the street. Anybody who noticed us as Americans came up to express condolence. Most of the time they just shook our hands since they could not speak English.

For the next day, Saturday, the Teachers Union of the Soviet Republics had previously scheduled a reception for our group with children performing. They eliminated the gay parts of it and made it a subdued, restrained occasion in which Russian children, Russian teachers and American educators joined in a minute of silence in memory of President Kennedy. This ceremonial repeated itself at all the following meetings with the Russians. Meetings opened with a brief statement of condolence by the Russian host in charge and everybody again joined in a minute of silence.

The common Russian seemed to be just as bewildered as we were and their expressions of sympathy seemed to be genuine.

The next day, Saturday evening, we arrived in Hamburg. A friend from West Berlin came over and told us his story. At 8:00 P.M. Friday, the tragic news flash reached West Berlin. Within two hours 70,000 young men and women marched from the Free Berlin University to the City Hall asking for the Mayor, Willie Brandt, to speak. Berlin never before saw a more spontaneous reaction. The urge to express sympathy, sorrow and grief was immediate. They did not want to stay home and listen to news, they wanted to go out, demonstrate their feelings of brotherhood for a "lost friend," for the American people. Candlelights were placed into the windows all over the city. At midnight of Friday, Willie Brandt spoke, with a choking voice, the moving words: "With the first citizen of the world, Berlin lost her best friend." Everything came to a stop: ice revues, dance parties, theater and opera performances.

On Monday, the day of the funeral of President Kennedy, 270,000 people came to the renamed John F. Kennedy Square in West Berlin for the memorial service. Only three days before, a quarter million West German youths gathered in deep sorrow and fright to mourn this same American citizen as if he was one of their own. I never felt the brotherhood of people all over the world as strongly as at this moment. Nobody was told to go to the services. Everyone went on his own free will, urged only by his wish to seek comfort in sharing the sorrow with other Berliners who felt the same way. To us Americans this was so moving, so touching that we could hardly bear the double emotional strain of the tragedy itself as well as this demonstration of warm, genuine, heart-felt sympathy by foreigners who felt like we did.

Hamburg showed the same picture. Schools closed early Monday morning. In the evening 80,000 young people, most students from secondary schools and the University, assembled before the City Hall of Hamburg to march together with torches raised high and voices kept low to the American Consulate at the *Alsterufer*. I watched them pass by with faces worried, still having the expression of shock. Many carried large signs: "We lost a friend," or "We lost a friend for peace." We heard young students say: "Not only America lost a great citizen, the whole world lost him." "It is terrible that there are fanatics in free America who are ready to kill their President." "He died for freedom," other passers-by said.

We walk by the "Hamburger Dom" the annual traveling amusement park, opening its gates just for the few weeks before Christmas. The merry-go-rounds stand still, all is empty, no crowds. The owner of the shooting gallery shouts for attraction: "Want to shoot, sir?" A chill went down my spine.

Other cities in Europe showed a similar picture. The deep sorrow, the immense shock, made the people of the world for a moment forget their differences on both sides of the Iron Curtain. What bound them together was a feeling of immeasurable loss.

It appears that youth in Europe reacted more strongly to the death of President Kennedy than the older generation. Could the reason be that they saw in President Kennedy a father figure whom they mourned? I do not think so. President Kennedy himself was young and the youth of the European capitals looked upon him as one of their own. He was rather a model than a father figure. A model which represented to the youth the virtues they themselves were striving for: courage, imagination, brilliance. They felt he spoke their language. President Kennedy was an image they could identify with. Other European leaders are old, Adenauer is old, De Gaulle is old, Winston Churchill is old. They belong to another generation, but President Kennedy belonged to their generation and he represented the virtues and the beliefs they were striving for. This is the reason why most of the signs carried the line "We lost a friend."