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Honoring Those Who Steer *This year's Transatlantic Bridge Award echoes in a united Germany – By Walter Pfaeffle*

American diplomat Robert Zoellick is being honored this year for his role in bringing about German reunification.

The freshman class of Berlin's Free University wasn't born yet when their country was unified in 1990. But many of the 300 guests at an awards ceremony held by Friends of Free University in Berlin (FFUB) in late April have vivid memories of this epochal event.

Some can even boast first-hand experience. Thomas Matussek, Germany's ambassador to the UN, was a young aide to former German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher during the period leading up to reunification. Another, Klaus Scharioth, the current German ambassador in Washington, served on the German legal team.

And one of the rising political stars on the American side was Robert P. Zoellick. The then-US Secretary of State James A. Baker credited Zoellick and another colleague with proposing the "Two-plus-Four" plan that ultimately united East and West Germany. "It was an ingenious strategy that played a vital role in the peaceful conclusion of the Cold War," Baker said in a message.

So it was most appropriate for the FFUB to honor Zoellick as this year's recipient of the prestigious 'Transatlantic Bridge Award.' In his remarks, Scharioth spoke of Zoellick's vital role in the unification process. "To this day, he has continued to steer the transatlantic relationship through new, uncharted territory," he said.

And Berlin Mayor Klaus Wowereit said in a message: "The Transatlantic Bridge Award connects him both to a city that owes a great deal to his work and to a university especially committed to Western ideals, political freedom and intellectual independence."

Representing the university, the school's incoming Vice President Ursula Lehmkuhl, an expert in North American history, recalled how the university, with the help of the United States, became "a symbol of the free world in the divided city of Berlin" at its founding in 1948. "As an institution and its philosophy, the university stands for close cooperation with the United States," she said.



FRIENDS OF FREE UNIVERSITY IN BERLIN

This relationship has been strained at times. During the late 1960's, FU was the hotbed of left-wing student activity, similar to what was happening at Columbia University in New York and the University of California at Berkeley. Since then, the relationship with the U.S. has changed for the better, Lehmkuhl says. "The new generation of students and teachers are pragmatic and performance-oriented. The ratings show it."

Born in Naples, Illinois with German ancestry, Zoellick's last government position was deputy secretary of state under President George W. Bush. He resigned in June 2006 after one year in office. From 2001 to 2005, he served as a U.S. trade representative. Currently, Zoellick is managing director at Goldman Sachs and chairman of the company's international advisors group. In addition, he is a regular contributor to the Wall Street Journal newspaper, whose parent, the Dow Jones Company, is among the FFUB 's supporters.

Hélène Sostarich-Barsamian, the FFUB's Executive Director, already has next year's winner in mind but wouldn't say more. Barsemian runs what she calls a "two-man-operation" in a high-rise building that is owned by the German government. Both she and her colleague, Katherine Millen, are highly educated and have become savvy fundraisers. FU has targeted about 3000 alumni in the United States. So far, Barsamian and Millen have tracked down 750.

The gala was held at the Capitale, a Stanford White-designed Beaux Arts landmark that once housed the former Bowery Savings Bank.

The two previous recipients of the award were Klaus Schwab (2005), founder and chairman of the World Economic Forum for what FFUB said was his "dedication ... to improving the state of the world," and Lord Foster of Thames Bank (2004) in recognition of "Britain's most celebrated architect."

– Walter Pfaeffle is a German-born journalist who lives in New York.