



Speech by Mrs Ewa Ośniecka-Tamecka
Vice-Rector College of Europe
Official Opening of the Academic Year 2017-2018
Simone Veil Promotion

Panie Prezydencie,
Mr President, Minister Kolarski,
Ministers,
Excellencies,
Professors,
Dear Students,
Honoured Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen

I would like to welcome you very warmly on this day when, for the twenty-fifth time, the College of Europe inaugurates its academic year in Poland. The College of Europe is not only a mature higher education institution, but also a place that has given the world whole generations of young people prepared for working towards a Europe without divisions into East and West, North and South. Our graduates are prepared for building a European Union that respects not only its citizens, but also its neighbours.

After the Hague Congress of 1948, the College of Europe was established in Bruges, opening its doors in 1949. Let us imagine those times. Only a few years after the slaughter and destruction of World War Two, young Europeans were living and learning together, imagining a Europe of peaceful cooperation, when – only a few years before – Europeans had been trained to kill one another. A visionary project; or some could say: ‘a risky experiment’, but it succeeded.

The first group of students in 1949-1950 included Austrians, Belgians, British, Bulgarians, Dutch, French, Germans, Greeks, Hungarians, Polish, and Americans. However, within a few years, the nationalities of Central and Eastern Europe had all but disappeared from the roll call of the College. Despite its original vision, in one way, the College was forced – by the course of history- to reflect the very division of Europe.

After the long tenure of the College’s first Rector, the visionary pioneer of European education, Hendrik Brugmans, the College of Europe in Bruges was entrusted to a Polish émigré, Jerzy Łukaszewski, who served as Rector for 18 years. It had always been his dream to see the College expand to the whole of Europe, and thereby return to its original vision. This dream could only be realised after the momentous changes of 1989, that is: the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe.

And so it was, with this renewed mission, that the College of Europe in Natolin was created in 1992 to break down the iron divisions of over 40 years of the Cold War and of communism. Another bold experiment! Thanks to this brave decision of the Government of Poland and the College of Europe in 1991, the new campus was created in this part of the continent.



Its role was none other than to bring young people together, this time from all parts of Europe, to prepare for the reintegration of the unnaturally divided continent - and most of all, to bridge the divisions in people's hearts and minds. Natolin played its part in the successful enlargements of 2004, 2007 and 2013. Many of its graduates played leading roles in these processes, applying the knowledge they had learnt here and drawing on the spirit of community they had forged here.

Dear Guests,

The same spirit of openness guides us now. Since 2008, we have opened towards the European Union's nearest neighbours in the East and in the South. Students from these countries now form a significant part of our student body. At the same time, whilst maintaining a focus on European Union studies, we have placed these in a broader geographical and longer historical context.

However, we are also aware that the European adventure is as yet unfinished, and there are serious challenges still to be faced. So, building on our accumulated experience, our mission is to continue: we should go on being brave, bold, and experimental.

*Mr President,
Dear Guests,*

At the College of Europe, we strive to encourage our students to engage in an in-depth and open exchange of ideas. We strive to teach the students unconventional ways of thinking about the realities that they are bound to face in their future professional lives. We want to teach them courage to express their opinions, but based on the solid foundation of their studies and own research. At the same time, we want to prompt them to be brave enough to go against the tide of already established patterns or common opinions. To show them that, in any domain, breakthroughs will never be possible if we all think in the same way.

Dear Guests,

I am proud to say that this bold experiment at Natolin has also been successful. We started in 1992 with only 34 students. Now, every year, over 120 students from about 30 countries live and study together in Natolin. For one year, they study a demanding advanced master's degree, which cuts across disciplinary boundaries and permits them tremendous freedom to shape their studies to fit their professional objectives.

After 25 years, hundreds of Natolin campus graduates are now employed not only in the European Union institutions, national administrations, and international organisations, but also in the private sector and NGOs.

Our graduates are bound to one another through the shared experiences of living together – literally, under one roof – in a multi-cultural community; through studying and working together, sharing meals together, or sharing personal joys and sorrows. This old academic tradition, I think, cannot be replaced by modern fashions. Fortunately! Fortunately for all of us, and for all those with whom you, dear students, will cooperate in the future.



*Mr President,
Dear Guests,*

It is also a part of the College of Europe tradition that each academic year (or 'promotion', as we call them) has its own patron. Usually, it is a person who has made a significant contribution to Europe and European values, as well as to the development of civilisation, science, culture, and arts on the global stage. The patron of the previous promotion was John Maynard Keynes, the co-founder of one of the two main schools of 20th century macroeconomics. Among the earlier Patrons, you will find, *inter alia*, Fryderyk Chopin, Stefan Zweig, Vaclav Havel, Maria Skłodowska-Curie, Albert Einstein, Anna Politkovskaya, and Robert Schumann. They were people of various professions, they lived in different times, and they made their respective marks in history in different ways.

The Patron of the academic year that we are officially opening today is Simone Veil, who passed away on 30 June 2017. She was one of the leading French politicians of her generation, marking French political life for more than four decades. In both the 1970s and 1990s, she was a minister in various French governments. She was a member of the French Constitutional Council from 1998 to 2007. Perhaps most importantly for us here, she was also a European political figure, serving from 1979 to 1982 as President of the first directly elected European Parliament.

This is an impressive career and serves as an example in itself. But the full significance of her importance to us as Patron of this year's Promotion is only completed by her life experience as a survivor of the great evil which has become a synonym for monstrous and inhuman crime – the Holocaust.

This marked her until her last breath and influenced every aspect of her life. It is crystallised in her long commitment to explaining the truth of these horrendous acts and their significance for every human being.

In March 1944, 5 months before her home town in France was liberated, and days after she had passed her baccalaureate exams, Simone was detained by Gestapo agents. She was deported, together with her mother and sister, to Auschwitz-Birkenau, a German concentration and death camp situated in occupied Poland. At that point, the extermination machine had already been developed, and was working fast.

Imagine: a beautiful girl, at the age of 16, who found herself in a man-made hell, not realising what horrors awaited her.

The Holocaust erased words such as 'murder', 'killing', 'death', 'people' from the language of those involved, whatever their role. These words were replaced by words such as 'liquidation', 'utilisation', 'neutralisation', 'final solution', 'commodity'. Simone Veil herself said that camp inmates, were treated "not even as slaves, but as cuts of meat".

The boundary between Good and Evil was completely erased.



Why am I talking about these tragic events at this joyous opening ceremony? First and foremost, because they form part of our common European history and have shaped our common European identity. It is important to remember that part, too. After all, our community is based not only on common experiences that are joyful, beautiful or noble, but also those experiences that are sorrowful, tragic and terrifying. Our European heritage does not rest only on architecture, painting, sculpture, music or literature. It is also the history of nations and of individuals. This is impossible to forget because it is woven into the most personal, private, family history.

The nightmare of war, and the immediate post-war reluctance to speak about the Shoah and to hear about it from the survivors – all these were Simone Veil's experiences. But they did not draw her into a spiral of hatred and a desire to retaliate.

Even though, as she stated herself, *"Not a single day passes when the survivors would not think about what they have seen and what they have gone through"*, she managed to prove with her whole life that forgiveness is also the essence of humanity.

Dear Students,

I think that we cannot build any future together, or, indeed, pursue a mission like ours here at Natolin, without forgiveness and reconciliation. We cannot succeed, if we remain closed to others through hatred or lack of respect for them.

All Simone Veil's life, and especially as President of the Foundation of the Memory of the Shoah from 2000 to 2007, she worked tirelessly not to 'banalise' the truth, to bring her testimony and message to new generations.

In a speech delivered in April 2004 at the University of Warsaw she said:

I bestow my trust upon you. When I say: "Do not forget the past", it is you, young Europeans that I have in mind. Starting now, it is you who will be responsible for the future of Europe: Europe that is the emissary of freedom and of respect for human dignity.

Mr President,

Ministers,

Excellencies,

Professors,

Dear Students,

Honoured Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The special guest of today's celebrations is the President of the Republic of Poland, the country that has hosted the College of Europe Natolin from its inception, Mr. Andrzej Duda.



Panie Prezydencie,

To wielki zaszczyt gościć Pana na ceremonii rozpoczęcia roku akademickiego w Natolinie. Jesteśmy ogromnie wdzięczni, że zechciał Pan przyjąć nasze zaproszenie i mamy nadzieję, że ten dzień trwale zapisze się w Pańskiej pamięci.

Mr President,

Dear Students,

Dear Guests,

Dear Colleagues,

Today, we have an important occasion: it is the day when we officially open the academic year. At the same time, it is the day when we begin the celebrations of the 25th anniversary of the College of Europe's presence in Poland. That is why it is a particular honour to have you, Mr President, here today.

The President's presence here underlines the importance that Poland attaches to the European construction, based not only on economic and political cooperation, but also on building the future despite a difficult past, with hopes for the European cooperation for the benefit of our citizens, so important to all of us.

Mr President,

Dear Students,

Dear Guests,

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you.