

Speech at National Museum Zurich

Wars and us: how war shapes who we are

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to you today at the launch event of the 'Wars and us' exhibition.

I wish there were no need for me to be giving this speech.

I wish that neither the National Museum Zurich, nor you, nor I – were forced to engage with the subject of war.

But war is a reality.

A reality for millions of people.

Wanting to shy away from reality

is understandable,

is human.

You might even say it is rational.

In light of the fact that you and I – can do nothing to materially alter the reality of war for millions of people.

Being able to ignore the reality of war

is a privilege.

A privilege

that millions of people don't have.

Being able to live in peace

is a privilege.

Sadly.

Being able to live in peace
is not something that can be taken for granted.
Sadly.

Being able to live in peace in Europe
is not something that can be taken for granted.
Sadly.

I wish for me,
I wish for you,
but above all for all those people directly affected by war
that this weren't true.

But wishful thinking alone will not make wars vanish into thin air.
My own desire for peace
should not lead me to believe that others desire peace.
This is a lesson I have now learned.

War was a reality.
War *is* a reality.
And war will remain a reality.
Sadly.

Us: you and I.
We don't have to live with the shadow of war hanging over us.
Thankfully.

Wars and us

Wars and you

Wars and me

In times of war, you and I become: us.

Shortly after war has broken out, at least in my experience,
there is great solidarity among people.

Wars bring out the best, but also the darkest, sides of people in general.

Complete strangers help one another during wartime.

The fear. The uncertainty. The unpredictability: they unite us.

Will we still be alive tomorrow?

200 is the number for wounded soldiers.

300 is the number for fallen soldiers.

If you or I – if we – might be dead tomorrow,

then every cup of coffee,

at any petrol station,

at any time of day,

tastes like the finest cup of coffee.

Ukrainians answer with two plus signs

when you text them asking: Everything ok?

In military slang this double plus means: All good. Everything's fine.

The language of war in conversation with you – with me. With us.

All good. We're alive, you're alive, I'm alive. Isn't that all that matters?

When someone claims they don't feel afraid, my advice would be:

be on your guard.

If someone far from old age is not afraid of dying
they possibly do not value their own life enough.

You and I become we/us.

You and I: We sit in the same air-raid shelter.

You and I: The same thoughts go through our head:
how do we get from A to B?

In times of war, moving around becomes a juggling act.

The trick is to keep as many balls as possible in the air at the same time.

We ourselves can no longer take to the air in any case.

The airspace is closed.

Even though Swiss politicians occasionally ask me:

Did you fly to Ukraine by helicopter?

No, flying is something that you and I – that we – can forget during wartime.

Flying is the preserve of a small few.

A couple of ministers or pilots in the armed forces.

For you and me, for us, flying becomes a vague memory of life as it used to be.

Do you remember how you picked me up from the airport in Kyiv?

Ten days before the full-scale war.

The airport terminal, yes, it's still standing.

At the exit on the motorway, the sign still indicates you should turn right. A tiny airplane as a symbol.

The large aircraft have all been grounded. The full-scale war has worn on for four years already.

You and I: we've spent four years travelling overland.

Always the same roads. Year in – and year out.

You and I: We're stuck in a traffic jam.

You and I: We can't drive any further along a road.

You and I: We can't cross a river

because the bridge spanning it has been blown up.

Bumpy paths through forests,

rough paths over fields,

become my, your, our paths.

Did someone else take this route shortly before us?

Are the tracks still fresh?

If not, then we can't drive any further.

Because, who knows, there may well be mines.

Above your head, above mine, above us: nets have been hung.

Against the drones.

These constant drones.

The nets are supposed to keep whirring death at bay.

Can you hear the sound of the drones over the sound of the engine?

You and I: We open the windows, both left and right.

The alternative for us. The worst one.

But the rule is to always have an alternative.

Including when travelling by train.

Perhaps you came here today by train?

Did you give any thought to which carriage you sat in?

If we were in Kyiv and not Zurich, I would advise you:

Choose a carriage in the middle of the train.

Not because of the on-board restaurant.

The Russian army tends to attack locomotives.

Choose a carriage in the middle of the train.

Then it's much more likely that you'll be sitting as far away as possible from the point of impact.

No, a carriage at the end of the train is not the safest place.

The distances covered in Ukraine are long.

The carriage right at the back of the train can become the carriage right at the front overnight.

By then, you can no longer change seats.

You can mentally collect your thoughts.

You can come up with rational reasons

why this train will not be hit today.

You can try to locate a fire extinguisher.

You can look for emergency exits.

You can pretend

you have an emergency plan.

You can pretend

you would know what to do. Should worse come to worst.

Which will hopefully never happen.

Hope. Ultimately, that is all we have left.

Please.

Not today.

Not this train.

Not me.

Not you.

Not us.

Please. Please no.

War can only overwhelm.

You. Me. Us.

Fear. It unites.

But only for a short while.

Temporarily.

Strangers help one another – for a short while.

And those you hope you can count on
cannot always be relied on.

Friends leave each other in the lurch.

You can only guess who will stay by your side.

You won't actually find out until the time comes.

You and I: We sit in the same air-raid shelter.

You and I: We all start to pray

when that's all that's left for us to do.

Belief in a higher power.

A power that might protect
you and me, us, from evil:
from the war.

This belief, that our peace is granted to us by a higher power,
is an illusion.

An illusion that we here in this country are all too happy to embrace.

Europe has fallen several times before.

Without us.

War.

Is the war of others. Not our war.

The war. Whose war?

Not our war.

Our peace: our greatest privilege.

But any kind of privilege can slip away from me, from you, from us.

Through no fault of our own.

Thank you.