

70TH ANNIVERSARY, BURY-COLOGNE EXCHANGE

I have one enduring memory of the football exchange as it then was – I must add that I was very much a hanger-on, not a player, far from it. We were travelling by coach down to Stratford to see a Shakespeare play. The teams and staff were on board, along with, presumably my father who was keeping his distance from me. The coach resounded with various lewd ditties, and I particularly remember the large, bearded Germans lustily singing drinking songs and subversive songs denouncing military service. The play was long and confusing, as much for us as it was for the German guests. I think I learned more on the coach journey.

I am pleased to be here today for two main reasons. One is that the exchange started by my father 70 years ago is still going and the other is that, like my father, I also became a French and German teacher and recognise the value, pleasures and lasting friendships that these links bring with them.

My father Arnold Meier was a language teacher here. He came from a German Jewish refugee background. In 1955 he decided to re-establish ties with his old school in Cologne, the Deutz Gymnasium, a school where he had been a happy pupil; He admired his teachers. They had given him so much and had instilled in him a love and knowledge of German culture, especially its great literature. The Nazi terror of the 1930s disrupted his studies and career plans. His German professors had advised him to continue his academic studies in England and not to return to Germany. He felt a sense of loss, regret, torn from those cultural roots he loved so much. And so, when the opportunity arose in 1955, he was keen to re-establish those ties with his old school. This was just 10 years after the war. Germany was in ruins, trust shattered and reputations damaged. He saw the exchange as an opportunity for reconciliation, a chance to rebuild those bridges. And he recognised the value of exchanges as a way of bringing the two countries together, heal wounds, bringing young people closer, and foster friendships. Getting to know people from other countries and cultures really does help to bring peace and dispel prejudice and mistrust.

And what better way to do it than through sport. This was a northern grammar school, in a region with football at its core. My father wasn't a sportsman, but he certainly understood the power of sport to bring young people together. Coincidentally the First 11 footballers had been asking the staff if they could play against teams from a bit further away than just the local area - they suggested they could go as far afield as ...Blackpool. My half-brother David, a keen and talented footballer, told his friends he would have a word with our dad to see if he could help to get something off the ground. Brighton was also mentioned as my father had connections there. And then, to everyone's surprise, the Cologne exchange was born.

And so here we are seventy years later - a remarkable achievement. And this brings me to my second reason for being so pleased to be here today. As a retired languages teacher myself it is wonderful to see that the exchange is now a fully-fledged language and cultural exchange. German is becoming an increasingly rare language in British schools, and it is wonderful to see that the exchange is a way of keeping German studies alive, cementing links between the two countries, not to mention consolidating those ties between the boys' and the girls' schools, - something that many of us here tonight would never have thought possible.

My father would also have been delighted – and relieved to see an end to the muddy scrambles on the pitch, the possibility of nasty injuries and international incidents on the football field, tempers fuelled by the aftermath of those inevitable visits to local hostelrys. The German players were always taller and stronger than our boys anyway, mainly because they were mainly older, had done or were about to do military service and even played for semi-professional clubs.

I'd like to thank the teachers on both sides, the organisers, admin staff, the participants and their families who keep it all going. And of course, Jo Anderson, the Principal, who I know is committed to the link. Teachers have a lot on their hands but so much depends on the time and commitment of a few dedicated individuals to keep these initiatives going.

Thank you for inviting me – it's an honour to be here and in some way to be able to keep my father's legacy alive. Good luck to everyone involved and I wish you all and the exchange continued success in the coming years.

Jon Meier
November 2025