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Organización
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

**Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of the opening ceremony
of an exhibition marking 35 years
of the Polish-German Textbook Commission**

Wroclaw, Poland, 4 June 2007

Mayor of the City of Wroclaw,
Rector of the University of Wroclaw,
President of the Polish National Commission for UNESCO,
Madam Ambassador of Poland to UNESCO,
General Consul of Germany in Wroclaw,
Members of the German National Commission for UNESCO,
Distinguished Scholars,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here today, for the opening of this exhibition marking 35 years of the German-Polish Textbook Commission.

This is my third official visit to Poland, but the first time I have had the pleasure to visit the historic city of Wroclaw. I wish to thank the Mayor for his warm hospitality, and also applaud his work to preserve and promote the city's heritage. It is in part thanks to his efforts that I can look forward later this evening to the ceremony celebrating the inscription last year of Wroclaw Centennial Hall on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Rich in historical memories, Wroclaw is a most fitting location for this exhibition devoted to the role of history teaching in fostering international understanding and peace.

I would like to congratulate the George Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research and the Willy Brandt Centre for German and European Studies at the University of Wrocław for organizing this important exhibit.

I also wish to highlight the pioneering work of the Polish and German National Commissions for UNESCO, who in 1972 formally agreed to establish the joint Textbook Commission. The Commission's purpose was – and remains – that of promoting dialogue on the teaching of history and geography, with a view to transforming textbooks into instruments of peace and reconciliation.

We witness here today the extraordinary achievements of this collaborative work. The Polish-German Textbook Commission has proved one of the most successful initiatives of its kind. It serves as an exemplary model, especially for societies in the process of recovering from conflict and war.

Over the last 35 years, more than 300 scholars have participated in the work of the Commission. The publication of the Commission's Recommendations for School Textbooks in History and Geography in 1976 – widely distributed in both languages – was the first of several practical manuals that have helped to overcome prejudice and stereotype, not only in central Europe, but throughout the world.

The new era in Polish-German relations, precipitated by the break-up of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany, brought with it new challenges to the Textbook Commission. But it also opened up possibilities for closer collaboration and more open dialogue on sensitive points of common history.

The determination, professionalism and creativity of the Polish-German Textbook Commission in addressing these issues have won it international acclaim. In 1985, the Commission was awarded the UNESCO Peace Prize, and in 2002 the Polish-German Prize for special contributions to Polish-German relations. Both awards give testimony to the Commission's importance as a forum for exchanging views and discussing questions of historiography in an open and pluralist way.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In closing, I would like to express my hope that the international community will continue to draw inspiration from the work of the Polish-German Textbook Commission. For its part, UNESCO remains committed to assisting Member States in shaping policies for textbooks and learning media that combine the principles of pedagogical quality with those inherent to building peaceful and prosperous societies.

Today, we have indeed arrived at a crossroads, where we face complex challenges in terms of intercultural dialogue, but also unprecedented opportunities for fostering better communication and understanding.

As we celebrate the work of the Commission, let us learn from these lessons of the past. For as this exhibition shows, while history can be a force of division, it may also be an instrument for overcoming the barriers of ignorance and prejudice – an instrument for peace, understanding and reconciliation.

Thank you.